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**Benjamin Britten:
Text Setting as Cultural Custodian in Art Song**

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Britten: Text Setting as Cultural Custodian in Art Song

Proposing the thesis that, for Benjamin Britten, text-setting analysis is analogous to song analysis; this dissertation cautions that non-engagement in text-setting is to approach song as if it were instrumental music; likewise, to consider inadequately the wide-ranging musical implications of music-text relations is to limit the interpretive possibilities of song. This research approaches the analysis of song through an engagement with songs composed by Britten in the 1930s from texts by W. H. Auden. Blending insights from literary and linguistic studies with rhythmic analysis, this necessarily interdisciplinary research places song analysis in cultural context; text (poetic and musical) requires social context. Setting out with this rationale and these aims, this dissertation offers new perspectives for song interpretation, song classification and the social function of song.

Poetic analysis is presented as central to an understanding of Britten's song text setting. The mimetic possibility of song to present word and mood painting receives widespread support. This dissertation goes beyond this often considered diminutive fundamental capacity of song to represent text, and recognises a more complete representation of poetic form, the effect of individual words and word units and poetic meaning, in song. Musical language is repeatedly and consistently shown to highlight, to reinforce, to accentuate, to stress, to correlate and align with text; essentially song complements or contests verbal language. These musical equivalences are shown to be derivative of text but also become independent of text in song. Text setting is proposed not as one possible component of song analysis; rather text setting is the ultimate consolidating focus of song interpretation.

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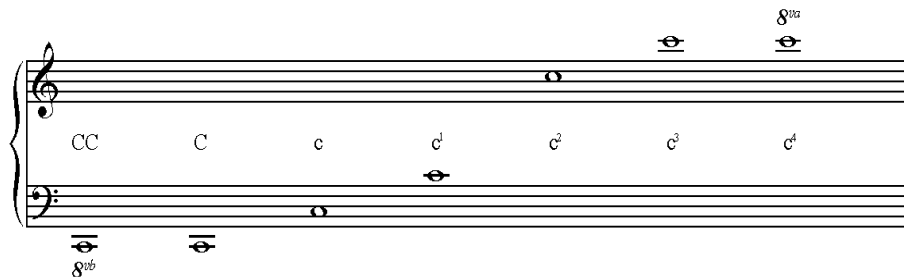
ABBREVIATIONS

A. Abbreviations in footnotes, tables, bibliography, and discography:

B	Bass (voice)	Bar.	Baritone (voice)
bn	Bassoon	cl.	Clarinet
Ct	Countertenor	Eng. hn	English horn
fl.	Flute	gui.	Guitar
hn	Horn	Hp	Harp
Mez.	Mezzo-soprano	pf	Piano
S	Soprano (voice)	T	Tenor (voice)
timp.	Timpani	Tr.	Treble (voice)

B. Pitch notation abbreviations:

The following system of notation is used when register is specified; in all other cases capitals are used to denote pitch.



C. Abbreviations in Part 2 musical examples and song tables:

- ↑ Ascending melodic line ↓ Descending melodic line
 / Refers to an upbeat: for example, bar /2 means upbeat to bar 2

D. Poetic accentual abbreviations:

- S (Stressed syllable) u (Unstressed syllable)

E. Library sigla:

- GB-*Alb* Aldeburgh, Britten-Pears Foundation-Archive

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INTRODUCTION

I. BACKGROUND TO THIS RESEARCH

The musical environment, into which a young European composer was born, in the early years of the twentieth century, was characterised by a growing rejection of tonality with a concomitant, if temporary, alienation of audience, and a like rejection of textual lyricism in poetry and its realisation in song. Within the context of these primarily European innovations Benjamin Britten's song repertoire was initially perceived as a challenge to domestic audiences, his orchestral song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8 (1936) being a case in point. This does not amount to a *rejection* of his audience; commission, human resources and acoustics feature prominently among formative influences on Britten as a composer. Britten's twentieth-century musical language and selective engagement with the twelve-tone practices of the Second Viennese School do not amount to a rejection of tonality. Texts by W. H. Auden (poetry and adapted texts from theatrical works) which Britten set in the 1930s are caustic and satirical—always politically, sexually and culturally aware—do not constitute a rejection of textual lyricism. Consequently Britten occupies a unique, perhaps isolated, position in twentieth-century song. His engagement with this marginalised musical form is further accentuated by the depth and clarity of his text-setting practices.

Britten's international reputation is built upon the success of his writing for the voice. In a 1957 BBC interview for the radio series *The Composer Speaks* Britten reveals that it is his love of English poetry which attracted him towards writing vocal

music.¹ Britten's composition of one hundred and fifty-eight published songs is summarised and contextualised in Tables I–III, and the songs engaged within this dissertation are summarised in Table IV (see also Tables 4.1 and 5.1). Song therefore represents a significant and ever-present component of his compositional oeuvre. The quality and variety of the poets he set and the variety of poetry anthologies among his personal library² bear testimony to Britten's wide-ranging literary knowledge. Yet of greater significance for song is the consistency with which he selected poems of exceptional quality; from this it is clear that Britten was both well-read and poetically discerning.

II. RATIONALE FOR THIS RESEARCH

The clarity of verbal expression evident throughout Benjamin Britten's art-song repertoire serves to highlight the central role which the setting of lyrical poetic texts occupies in his compositional process and in the aesthetic appreciation of his musical interpretation of text. The audible element of Britten's song demands a text-setting analysis which in turn calls for textual analysis. This hypothesis provided the initial focus of this dissertation and sustained the direction of my thesis throughout the research project: in the course of the analysis of Britten's songs, intuition has become evidenced knowledge.

Text acts initially, for Britten, as a source of musical imagination, but it also provides the composer with a framework with which to express musically his selected literary-based ideas. The need for this dissertation is founded on the lack of culturally

¹ Joseph Cooper's interview with Benjamin Britten (first broadcast BBC General Overseas Service, 7 July 1957; pre-recorded 30 May 1957). Paul Kildea, ed., *Britten: On Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 223–32.

² Ford lists the poetry anthologies in Britten's library. Boris Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets: An Anthology of the Poems He Set to Music*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), pp. 287–88. Hereafter referred to as Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets*.

focused scholarly research into Britten's song repertoire and on the musical significance of the composer's literary discernment. The preliminary-literary efforts of Boris Ford, in his compilation of texts³ (albeit uninterrupted) set by Britten, have not, heretofore, been pursued. Likewise, Graham Johnson's seminal if brief analysis of Britten song, which highlights the importance of continental musical (Schubert particularly) and literary (German lyricism) influences, has not previously been taken up in scholarly research.⁴ These research lacunae in Britten studies call for interdisciplinary inter-textual research.

My motivation for this research, as a musicologist and as a singer, has been and remains an enthusiasm for an understanding of song, one which penetrates the essence of what happens in song in the musical space inhabited by voice and accompaniment, a space fully occupied by Britten in song as composer and performer.

The criteria for the selection of songs for solo voice and piano as the subject of this research resulted from a desire to engage with the origins of art song; Table III reveals that Britten uses these traditional musical forces in ninety-seven (approximately 60 percent) of his one hundred and fifty-eight published song repertoire.

III. AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH

The primary goals of this research are (i) to achieve an understanding of Britten's 1930s text setting in his song settings of Auden's poetry by way of original research, (ii) to identify deficits in extant musicological and other research engaging with these musical works, (iii) to address these research deficiencies by way of recognition and critique, and ultimately (iv) to contribute to Britten song studies, text-setting studies and

³ Ford's anthology does not analyse or provide a commentary on the texts set by Britten. Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets*.

⁴ Graham Johnson, *Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

interdisciplinary-textual studies by way of original song analysis (which is justifiably sensitive to text).

Table I. Summary of Benjamin Britten's art-song repertoire by year of composition⁵

Year of Composition	Total no. of songs	No. of single songs	No. of songs in cycles	No. of cycles /collections
Pre-1945				
1926	3		3	1
1928	4		4	1
1931	5		5	1
1934	1	1		
1935	1	1		
1936	8	3	5	1
1937	11	6	5	1
1938	4	4		
1939	11	1	10	1
1940	7		7	1
1941	2	2		
1942	3	3		
1943	9	1	8	1
	69	22	47	8
Post-1945				
1945	11	2	9	1
1947	6	1	5	1
1952	1	1		
1953	8		8	1
1954	1	1		
1955	1	1		
1956	3		3	1
1957	6		6	1
1958	14		14	2
1960	1	1		
1961	1	1		
1963	1	1		
1965	13		13	2
1969	12		12	1
1971	1	1		
1974	1	1		
1975	8		8	2
	89	11	78	12
Total	158	33	125	20

⁵ The data for Tables 1–3 has been compiled from the most recent comprehensive study of Britten's repertoire. Paul Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works* (Aldeburgh: Britten-Pears Library, 1999) and from the works listing contained in Jennifer Doctor, Judith LeGrove and Paul Banks, 'Britten, (Edward) Benjamin: works', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), iv, pp. 389–97. This information has been verified with Donald Mitchell, *Britten Complete Catalogue* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1973). This data excludes unpublished juvenilia.

Table II. Summary of Britten's art-song repertoire (expressed as a percentage)⁶

Period	Single songs	Songs in cycles/collections
Pre-1945	67%	38%
Post-1945	33%	62%

Table III. Summary of Britten's art-song repertoire categorised by vocal and instrumental forces

Musical forces	Total no. of songs	No. of single songs	No. of songs in cycles	No. of cycles /collections
Orchestral song	37	2	35	5
Duets	4	4		
Trio	1	1		
Harp accomp.	9	2	7	1
Horn/pf. accomp.	4	1	3	1
Guitar accomp.	6		6	1
Solo voice & pf.	97	23	74	12
Total	158	33	125	20

Table IV. Summary of songs for solo voice and piano analysed in this dissertation

Dissertation Reference	Total no. of songs	No. of single songs	No. of songs in cycles	No. of cycles /collections
Hölderlin: Chapter One	6		6	1
Auden: Chapter Four	5		5	1
Chapter Five	6	6		
Total	17	6	11	2
% of solo voice and pf.	18%	26%	15%	17%

Heretofore, studies of Britten's vocal works have tended to focus on his operatic works rather than on his songs. Analysis of his song repertoire tends to present an emic

⁶ This data supports the statement that a significant relative shift occurred in Britten's output after 1945 (the year of his operatic success with *Peter Grimes* op.33), whereby song cycles and collections replaced individual songs as his preferred form of art-song composition.

view of Britten's English-language songs with insufficiently contextualise of these works within English song, excepting the contributions of Graham Johnson. In addition to this pervasive yet inadequate emic view of song I propose an etic approach and will return in future research to this internal linguist and nationalistic aspect informed by external considerations. This approach does not seek to place Britten song in a German song tradition independent of his English-language song tradition: to do so would be to ignore the enormous impact English poetry displayed in his art songs; rather this dissertation seeks to recognise and acknowledge the influence of external poetic lyricism on the musical development of song.

This thesis seeks to contextualise Britten's art song in its European environment, in order to give a more global understanding of his achievements in this realm. Even within English song there is need for significant further textual research which is required to understand the composer's musical-literary achievements in song within this marginalised English and European genre. Rightly, Stephen Banfield considers that it is not sufficient to consider Britten's song achievements in the thirties as having merely 'kicked a whole era of English song sensibility into sudden, unanswerable irrelevance'.⁷ Such a dated and unquestioning view—that with Britten the mould was broken—speaks also of the need for a scholarly contextualisation of Britten song even within English song.

Auden's 1930s writings contributed much to the justification for the coinage of the informal term 'the Auden generation'.⁸ Britten through his song composition engaged with and helped to shape that time and contributed to that culturally loaded statement. The interdisciplinary study presented in Part 2 of this dissertation proposes cultural

⁷ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song, Critical Studies of the Early 20th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), ii, p. 382.

⁸ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976).

contexts for the analysis of Britten's songs: socio-political in relation to *On This Island* in Chapter 4 and socio-sexual in relation to the six songs in Chapter 5. These interrelated-cultural issues will be shown to provide more than information concerning the 'geneses' of these works and likewise are not 'ad hoc', within Kofi Agawu's terms.⁹ These factors function as social document, whose contemporary topicality and confessional biographical relevance are shown to contribute to, rather than detract from, the aesthetic value of these musical works; this song repertoire functions as cultural custodian.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RELATED QUESTIONS POSED BY THIS DISSERTATIO

Question I How and to what extent do Britten's song text-setting practices respond to Auden's poetry?

Question II (a) What were the conditions of the art-song environment in the 1930s? (b) What is the nature of Britten's exposure to the German Lied tradition? (c) What did he learn from these experiences about the relationship of text and music? (d) What does Britten reveal of this acquired musical knowledge in his German-language song compositions?

Question III (a) What literature is available relating to theories of text setting? (b) How can this literature be synthesised and accessed for the analysis of Britten's songs? (c) What are the elements of text setting? (d) How is the analysis of song different to that of instrumental music? (e) What analytic models and tools are available for a text-setting analysis of song?

⁹ Kofi Agawu, 'Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied', *Music Analysis*, 11/1, 1992, 8–9.

Question IV (a) What was the nature of Britten's relationship with the poet W. H. Auden in the 1930s? (b) How did this relationship influence Britten's composition of song? (c) How is Auden's impact on Britten's literary development and poetic discernment revealed in song?

Question V (a) How do cultural aspects permeate and shape Britten's 'song cycle' *On This Island*? (b) How do cultural aspects permeate and shape Britten's six 'songs of sexuality'?

Question VI (a) How does the classification of song as song cycle affect our interpretation of a collection of songs? (b) Is *On This Island* a song cycle? (Chapter 4)

Question VII (a) Can sexuality impact and be reflected in song? (b) What are the musicological models for such an interpretation? (c) Do topicality and biographical context diminish the aesthetic value of song? (d) How did Britten's contemporary social environment affect his publication of song? (e) How did Auden and his poetry seek to effect change in Britten and how is this evidenced in his composition of song?

V. DELIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Within Britten's extensive vocal repertoire this interdisciplinary study engages with art song, for solo voice and piano accompaniment, from texts by Auden. It therefore does not engage with orchestral song, solo song with accompaniment other than piano (including harp, horn and guitar), vocal duets or trios. Dramatic cantata and canticles are also excluded from this research. Even within Britten's settings of Auden in song this necessitated the exclusion of Britten's setting of Auden's cabaret lyrics; although these settings would provide surface-level contributions to the socio-political and social-sexual context of the cultural discourse which underscores Part 2 of this dissertation, there is neither space for their analysis, nor does the intentional consistent focus on the

cabaret theatrical audience and performance context of these settings provide the musical depth and variety which is otherwise abundant in the other Britten settings of Auden considered here.

This dissertation does not purport to provide an extensive performance analysis of art song, although the consistent framework of poetic source and analysis of Britten's songs in Part 2 will inform performers' sensitivities to lyrical-textual significance with resultant interpretative benefit. Likewise the relationship between singer and accompanist is not considered. The significance of Britten's almost life-long relationship with Peter Pears is not considered as formative to the composer's setting of Auden as the composition of these songs predates the establishment of their professional and personal-emotional relationship (that relationship had significant import to subsequent song compositions). Similarly, this research does not present an exclusively gender-based study of Britten's songs; however, issues of sexuality in music are recurrent throughout the music explored here and dominate the final song analysis chapter.

Reference is made in Part 2 of this dissertation to the expressive harmonic capacity of Britten's text and music relations, but this thesis does not seek to provide an exclusive or comprehensive harmonic analysis of the songs explored here. Such an analysis is warranted and would enhance a more complete view of Britten's text-setting practices. Theories pertaining to the relative weighting of harmonic, rhythmic and literary-based approaches to song analysis are expanded upon in Chapter 2.

The song cycle *Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente* op.61, from 1958, is presented in Chapter 1 as Britten's unique contribution to and reflection on Lieder. This presentation is intentionally included in the formative theoretical section of this dissertation, and as such does not seek to present the same level of detailed text setting of a German text as

is provided in Britten's English-language settings of Auden in Part 2. Rather, this German song cycle is engaged with to illustrate Britten's responses to the poetic lyricism of this recognised literary-based song tradition. The brief treatment of this cycle does, however, highlight themes and subject matter which possess a lasting artistic resonance for the composer and connections are made between this work and the sundry 'songs of sexuality' (1936–1941) to texts by Auden in Chapter 5.

As alluded to this research does not seek to present a comparative study of Britten's twentieth-century English-language song text-setting practices with those of his contemporaries.

VI. METHODOLOGIES

VI.a DISSERTATION METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is divided structurally into two parts: Part 1 provides the theoretical basis which underscores this research project, in relation to certain aspects of song genre and text-setting parameters within the context of lyrical poetry; Part 2 presents an interdisciplinary study of Britten's text-setting practices evidenced in songs set to texts by W. H. Auden for solo voice and piano within their cultural contexts.

As a guiding principle text is considered and critiqued, initially, as a self-evident art work to provide a context for song composition. Therefore, Part 1 of this thesis commences with an engagement with German song primarily as a formative literary-based genre for Britten. Chapter 1 establishes the composer's intensive and enduring interaction with German lyrical song as performer and composer. Theories of text setting follow on logically in Chapter 2 as many of these musicological and analytic contributions emanate directly from research into the Lieder tradition, particularly in response to nineteenth-century German song.

Part 2 of this dissertation commences with a historical contextualisation of the nature of the collaborative relationship between Britten and Auden in the 1930s (Chapter 3); the focus of this research is to present an understanding of the diversity of the relationship between poet and composer as a backdrop for song composition, and to highlight the particular importance of text, initially lyrical and finally un-settable, in this intense if relatively short-lived interaction (1935–1942). Britten’s exposure to the artistic, literary, political, social and sexual influences of Auden provide context for the subsequent body of song analysis contained in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Social and political textual connectives bind the former chapter’s analysis of Britten’s song cycle *On This Island*. While a social and sexual textual discourse provides a constant presence in the analysis of Britten’s sundry songs of sexuality contained in Chapter 5, heretofore these works have received scant research attention. The sequential ordering of these two core analytic chapters presents Britten’s published songs first, followed by the largely posthumous publication of the songs analysed in Chapter 5.

The opening chapter seeks to assess Britten’s intense and lasting engagement with Lieder as formative, by means of an overview of his German compositional repertory and certain aspects of his Lieder performance; poetic lyricism provides a constant backdrop in this discourse. The structure of the theoretical chapter on text setting is based primarily on a framework derived from David Lewin’s study of song which is extended by means of a consideration of definitions of text setting and additional unique ideas developed exclusively for song.

The opening chapter in Part 2 of this interdisciplinary research seeks to reveal the diverse effects of Britten’s artistic collaborations with Auden through an evaluation of literary, political, social and sexual aspects of their personal and professional relationship. The text-setting analysis of Britten’s English song commences in Chapter 4

with the cycle *On This Island* op.11 (texts by or devised by Auden) which engages sequentially with each song and proposes cyclicity for this work as a consequence of musically-supported cultural and political textual connectives; this argument is strengthened by an exploration of Walter Bernhart's definitions of the properties of song cycles, but disagrees with the classificatory conclusions of that author, again based on inter-textual rather than narrative continuity. By contrast the final analytic chapter of this dissertation presents six individual songs, which were largely unpublished during Britten's lifetime, essentially as expressions of sexual awakening and realisation in the context of their contemporary cultural environments: legal, artistic and social. This hypothesis is proposed and challenged consistently throughout the analysis of these songs; the resultant findings justify this focused interpretative approach to song.

At a structural level the layout of this dissertation presents sectional number referencing (modelled on the style of Steven Jan)¹⁰ which allows for beneficial cross-referencing and avoids repetition of previous evidence presented in support of an earlier argument (factual evidence has been shown to have multiple corroborating application); my comprehensive listing, in the contents pages, of these numbered section and subsection headings presents a structured overview of the arguments proposed and facilitates the reader's access to pertinent material detail. The consistent use of sectional headings assists in the achievement of clarity of individual ideas and in the accumulation of compound complex arguments. Data tables are used throughout this research where the volume and complexity of information warrant the clarifying tabulation of evidence in support of written argument.

¹⁰ Steven Jan, *The Mimetics of Music: A Neo-Darwinian View of Musical Structure and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

VI.b SONG ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY

This dissertation presents a musico-poetic analytic methodology to text setting in Britten song. This interdisciplinary approach to song analysis is founded on poetic analysis and the subsequent realisation of text in song. Central to this research is the formative analysis of poetic text: form, word, phrase and meaning. Britten's crucial preliminary interdisciplinary activity then forms the basis of much of the subsequent text-setting discourse of song. Structurally, analysis leads to interpretation — poetic analysis precedes musical interpretation — joint textual and musical analysis in turn inform song interpretation. In light of the debate, contained in Chapter 2, as to the relative emphasis of textual and musical analysis appropriate to song analysis, it is the intention of this author to attribute, in the case of Britten song studies, significant emphasis to lyrical textual source; this observation produces a wealth of textually-based musical ideas and possibilities. Consequently poetic/textual art works are discussed separately in advance of song analysis.

A consistent approach is taken to textual analysis: poetic form and syntax, key words and meaning are identified, discussed and highlighted in a table of poetic detail which accompanies each textual analysis. These tables focus attention on text, metric count, line-ending rhyming scheme, and significant ideas and images which are explicit or implied in the text. Poetic tables are derived from Robert Hatten's similar usage in his seminal analysis of song.¹¹ Likewise the individual text-setting analysis of song follows the sectional progression of that song, paying particular attention to correspondences between Britten's text-setting practices and previously analysed textual form, wording, mood and meaning. Again, tables of musical analytic detail are used

¹¹ Robert S. Hatten, 'A Surfeit of Musics: What Goethe's Lyrics Concede When Set to Schubert's Music', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 5/2 (2008), 7–18.

consistently, in each song, to correlate source text with musical phrase and motif, and to highlight Britten's expansions and alterations of text.

The exposition of text-setting theories in Chapter 2 is presented with a constant regard for the identification and postulation of Britten's approach to text setting so as to inform an approach, which if not sympathetic, is cognisant of the composer's individual practices.

VII. LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Given the diversity of the subject areas considered throughout this dissertation: genre based in the opening chapter, theoretically based in the following chapter, historically focused in the central chapter, and analytic and socially contextual in the penultimate and final chapters, the consolidation of this extant body of diverse literature would, however, not achieve the aims of this research. Consequently the review of core literature which is engaged with, in the course of this research, is provided separately in each of these chapters. In the case of Chapter 5 a literature review functions as an introductory preamble to the subsequent analysis of Britten's sundry songs of sexuality by Auden. Whereas literature review assumes a constant element of the discourse in Chapter 1, due to its consistent reference to the Lied tradition, and particularly in Chapter 2, due to its broad synthesis of theories of text setting. Ultimately, the historical focus of the engagement in Chapter 3 with the diverse nature of Britten's collaborations with the poet Auden in the 1930s provides much of the formative literature for the subsequent analysis of Britten's song cycle *On This Island* op.11 in Chapter 4. While Chapter 5 also engages in a cultural focused analysis of text setting in song, literature pertaining to gender and especially sexuality is specific to and reserved for this chapter. A review of footnotes in this dissertation reveals, not surprisingly, that literature is

specific to topic and supports the authorial decision taken here. Warranting specific mention is the interdisciplinary and inter-textual focus of the conferences of the International Association of Word and Music Studies and their seminal series of publications *Word and Music*; rightly, textual studies of Britten song repertory remain vital in these publications.¹²

VIII. CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED DURING THIS RESEARCH

This dissertation highlights the lack of comprehensive literature pertaining to twentieth-century English song. Banfield's survey contribution¹³ covers to mid-century; therefore, Britten's complex contextualisation in English song awaits publication. There is also no comprehensive history of Lieder in the twentieth century; for example it is incorporated in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied* in chapters by Parsons¹⁴ and Zychowicz,¹⁵ which in addition to Kravitt¹⁶ likewise do not engage with mid- to late-twentieth-century Lieder. The contextualisation of Britten within 'song' therefore also requires extensive research. Chapter 1 of this dissertation presents Britten's engagement with Lieder primarily as a backdrop to a discussion of his lyrical literary and musical discernment.

The lacuna identified in Chapter 2 regarding the absence of comprehensive musicological literature pertaining to the core song activity of text setting provided significant initial challenge in devising a structured approach to analysing the selected

¹² Chapter 1 engages with Harry E. Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as a "Literary Song Cycle"', in *Word and Music Studies 4*, ed. by Lodato, Aspden and Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 101–22 and Chapter 4 benefits from the debate presented in Walter Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles. The Variety of Britten's "Charms"', in *Word and Music Studies 3: Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field*, ed. by Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 211–26.

¹³ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song: Critical Studies of the Early 20th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), ii.

¹⁴ James Parsons, 'The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. by James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 273–97.

¹⁵ James L. Zychowicz, 'The Lied of Mahler and Richard Strauss', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. by James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 245–72.

¹⁶ Edward F. Kravitt, *The Lied: Mirror of Late Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Britten songs. This chapter dealing with theories of text setting seeks to go some way towards bridging that research gap. It is only in the course of this engagement with the extant theoretical debate that the complexity and variety of approaches taken by individual composers became visible; the identification of this challenge, in itself, provided a secondary unexpected beneficial result of this theoretically focused research.

In instrumental music the models and theories presented by Heinrich Schenker were proposed for music composed from Bach to Brahms and no further. Schenkerian reception in the United States has adapted these models to deal with subsequent atonal music. In song studies, there is a profusion of articles and monographs addressing nineteenth-century song but a dearth of analytic models for nineteenth-century song; therefore there is no extant model, apart from the adaptation of Schenkerian analysis to song studies, no method of song analysis which can be adapted to address twentieth-century song. This analytic lacuna is engaged with in Chapter 2 of this research.

IX. DISSERTATION AUDIENCE

This author, while directed primarily at fulfilling the requirements of this doctoral dissertation, wishes to address the following additional target audiences through his research. Firstly, it is also directed to Britten studies, which are thriving, based on the diversity and quality of the scholarly contributions evident at the recent ‘Britten in Context’ conference at Liverpool Hope University. In line with previous practice, the publication of the fifth volume of the Britten series *Letters from a Life*,¹⁷ due for release in the week of this submission, is likely to also reflect contemporary Britten studies. Secondly, this dissertation is directed towards scholars of inter-textual studies and gender studies who are interested in the possibilities which arise from the direct and

¹⁷ Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976, 1958–1965* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press/Britten-Pears Library, 2010), v.

indirect relationships which exist between song and its poetic source and who wish to explore the nature and extent of these interconnections in twentieth-century song. It is also directed at performance studies, both for singers and accompanists, who seek to inform their joint performance with a historical contextualisation of song's poetic source and consider the exploration of the musico-poetic hermeneutic contained in the musical work. Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of this research has beneficial relevance for a broad musicological audience which seeks a socio-political and sexually-informed contextual analysis and interpretation of song. The interdisciplinary approach of this current research is seen as relevant and topical for the contemporary scholarly development of interest in text setting in song; the forthcoming conference 'Literary Britten' being organised by The Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, based at the University of Cambridge (September 2011), places this timely dissertation within a vibrant contemporary scholarly context.

X. NOTE TO THE READER

This dissertation conforms to the house style guide of the Music Department, National University of Ireland Maynooth which complies with the Modern Humanities Research Association *Style Guide*.¹⁸

Paul Higgins
27 October 2010

¹⁸ *MHRA Style Guide* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008).

—PART 1—

**ART SONG: LYRIC POETICS AND MUSIC-TEXT
RELATIONS**

CHAPTER 1

BRITTEN'S ART SONG: A DIRECT ENGAGEMENT WITH THE LYRIC ORIGINS OF LIEDER

Froh kehrt der Schiffer heim an den stillen Strom
Von fernen Inseln, wo er geerntet hat.¹

To quiet waters homewards the boatman turns
From distant islands, where he has harvested;²

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Does language alone indicate genre? What are the constituent elements required when considering Benjamin Britten's 1958 song cycle, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61 for high voice and piano, as an individual contribution to German Lieder? This specific art-song genre is explored in this chapter in the context of Britten's limited, yet significant, direct compositional engagement, through this song cycle with the German language and its literature, and also with the tradition of German song. By reference to primary poetic, musical and other source material, this chapter also explores the exposure to and extended impact of this song tradition on Britten as a mature eclectic artist and thereby permits an assessment of his contribution to this genre. This engagement is shown to reflect upon considerable literary and musical experience and absorption and to present text setting which consistently responds imaginatively to poetic stimulus.

From an early age Britten was exposed to the Lieder of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, and often accompanied his mother in their home when she sang these songs.³

¹ The first two lines of the first verse of Hölderlin's poem *Die Heimat*. See Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61, for High Voice and Piano (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962) pp. 5–6. Hereafter referred to as Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61.

² Michael Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Harvill Press, 1952), pp. 104–5. Hereafter referred to as Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*.

These initially domestic formative experiences of song were to become a significant feature of his concert-performance career and provided, during his close professional collaboration with the tenor Peter Pears, his life-long partner, an ever-present component of their joint-concert repertory. For Britten, this early identification of a rich art-song tradition highlighted to him the musical possibilities that can arise when an aesthetic tension exists between the complementary arts of music and poetry. Richard Stokes notes the ‘intense and long-lasting’ impact which the Lieder tradition had on Britten’s output.⁴ Britten sought not only to absorb the musical and literary wealth of this heritage but also to popularise this genre in an anti-Germanic, post-World War II environment; these influences are considered in addition to his early exposure to English song in composition and performance. For Britten, this eclectic approach resulted in art song which expanded the possibilities for music and text relations of these two related but distinct song traditions.

1.2 ENGLISH ART SONG IN THE 1930s

In her article ‘English Song and the German Lied 1904–34’, Barbara Docherty surveys the state and development of art song in England, thereby setting the stage onto which Britten was to launch his repertory of individual art songs and song cycles.⁵ Docherty considers the early twentieth century as a time of rapid growth in which an ‘aesthetic tension [existed] between poetry and music’, that had not existed before.⁶ She characterises the earlier development of the German Lied in the period 1790 to 1910 as a progression from settings in which the simplicity of the voice and piano parts is

³ Carpenter identifies Schubert’s *Ständchen* D889 and *An Sylvia* D891 as two of Britten’s mother’s favourite Lieder. Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 5. Hereafter referred to as Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. Both are German settings of Shakespeare as translated by A. W. von Schegel, Eduard von Bauernfeld and Ferdinand Mayerhofer. See John Reed, *The Schubert Song Companion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 49, 394.

⁴ Richard Stokes, *The Book of Lieder* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. xiv.

⁵ Barbara Docherty, ‘English Song and the German Lied 1904–34’, *Tempo* 161/162 (1987), 75–83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

dependent on the ballad tradition, through strophic and modified strophic forms, to the ‘*durchkomponiert* (through-composed) independence’ of voice and piano. The particular value of Docherty’s musicological contribution is that she also identifies the likelihood that art song in England during the period 1904 to 1934 telescoped the earlier expansion of German song, that developed over the course of more than a century, whereby ‘[the English] response paralleled at every step the evolution of the German Lied from Zelter’s strophic simplicity to Mahler’s free-composed refraction of his poets’ subtlest demands’.⁷ To this should be added the expansion of voice and piano art song into orchestral song, for either full or reduced orchestra or other instrumental ensembles, with the resultant necessity for a change of Lied and English song performance contexts from the drawing room to the concert hall.

Docherty does not, however, specifically address a consequence of her argument, that, as it had taken art song in England until the 1930s to achieve a similar state of development which the German Lied tradition had reached by the 1910s, English song was therefore replicating a system which had already progressed further. This musical and cultural delay initially encouraged Britten to look beyond English art song but it also allowed him an artistic space in which to compose lyrical song settings long after the intense lyricism of nineteenth-century Lied had gone into decline. Britten’s grounding in the Austro-Germanic tradition allowed him to contribute to this lineage in song, through his identification with the core aspect of nineteenth-century German song—namely an intense engagement with a lyrical literary tradition which was being rejected and discontinued by many of his contemporary German composers. The resistance of the English musical establishment to the early twentieth-century musical experimentation of Schoenberg and others was evident to Britten, when he expressed

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

concern at the non-availability of the score of *Pierrot lunaire* in the music library of the Royal College of Music some years after its premiere, and the reluctance of the College, without justification, to support his post-graduation intention to study with Alban Berg.⁸ This musical conservatism was also reflected in the lack of performances of European contemporary art song in Britain at this time.

Stephen Banfield also describes the English art song scene before the influence of Britten, whereby many of his predecessors' and contemporaries' literary focus was on 'ephemeral beauty', characterised as a 'Georgian encapsulation of nature and love'⁹ and on a 'British miniaturist predilection'.¹⁰ Banfield rightly identifies the aesthetic motivations of the source literature thus:

Its poetic sensibility was essentially still romantic and manifested itself in settings of Housman, Hardy, de la Mare and early Yeats...and Celtic Revival poets such as Fiona Macleod, Padraic Colum, Seumas O'Sullivan [*sic*] and James Stephens.¹¹

Although not a word of A. E. Housman's verse is set by the mature Britten, his initial response was a rejection of these established literary trends in favour of the contemporary verse of W. H. Auden. This breaking of a mould is related directly to Britten's poetic discernment and his forging of an individual response to the relationship of text and music. The satirical and politically hard-hitting subject matter of the five poems, two written by and three modernised by Auden, in close collaboration with Britten, and their resultant musically ironic setting in the song cycle *Our Hunting*

⁸ Donald Mitchell, and Philip Reed, eds, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976, 1923–39* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), i, p. 128. Hereafter referred to as Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i.

⁹ Stephen Banfield, 'Vocal Music', in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain – The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Stephen Banfield and Ian Spink (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 466. Hereafter referred to as Banfield, 'Vocal Music', in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain – The Twentieth Century*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

Fathers op.8 (1936),¹² for high voice and orchestra, shocked its audience and critics alike, revealing as it did the musical response of a young politically-aware composer to the inspiration of a young, politically-engaged poet. Banfield describes the reception of this work as ‘unmediated’ for its English audience with regard to the tonal dissonance and ‘eye-opening confrontativeness’ of its socially unsettling text, such as the ‘celebrated juxtaposition of the dogs’ names “German” and “Jew” after the moment of death’ in the hunting chase of the fourth song ‘Dance of Death’.¹³ Banfield’s reading of the listing of names as being the hounds involved in the hunt is much reiterated;¹⁴ however, Britten in his programme notes for this work’s premiere makes specific reference that ‘the soprano runs through the names of most of the birds concerned in this hunt’.¹⁵

As a young art-song composer in the 1930s, Britten will be shown to exhibit, from the outset, to build upon the achievements of his predecessors and abandon the perceived ‘British miniaturist predilection’,¹⁶ in favour of literary and musically cohesive song cycles as evidenced in both *On This Island* op.11 from 1937,¹⁷ for high voice and piano and in his orchestral song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers*. The inventive chamber-like quality of the instrumentation of this latter orchestral setting reveals a respect for the nature of the intimacy of the voice and piano origins of the Lied. This

¹² *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8, Symphonic Cycle for High Voice and Orchestra (London: Hawkes and Son, 1936). Hereafter referred to as Britten, *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8.

¹³ Stephen Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song: Critical Studies of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 382. Hereafter referred to as Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*.

¹⁴ Lloyd Moore also makes reference in his CD programme notes to the soprano, in ‘Dance of Death’, as ‘excitedly reciting the names of the hounds participating in the hunt’. Britten, *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8 (W. H. Auden), Phyllis Bryn-Julson (S), English Chamber Orchestra/Steuart Bedford (CD Naxos 8.557206, 2004 [1990]), p. 3.

¹⁵ Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, pp. 444–45.

¹⁶ Banfield, ‘Vocal Music’, in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain – The Twentieth Century*, p. 469.

¹⁷ Britten, *On This Island* op.11, for High Voice and Piano (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1938). Hereafter referred to as Britten, *On This Island* op.11.

aspect is also evident in the direct relationship which exists between the poetic text and the selection of solo instruments in *Nocturne* op.60 (1958),¹⁸ a contemporary work to the Hölderlin cycle (1958). These musical decisions by Britten reveal particular sensitivity to poetic texts.

1.3 THE CONDITION OF LIEDER BY MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

‘What now is the point of singing here and in solitude, when all have departed from us who took pleasure in our song?’¹⁹

James Parsons surveys the development of the composition of Lieder in the first half of the twentieth century and concurs with sentiments contained in the above quotation: the Lied had indeed become a minor musical form. He contends that Richard Strauss’ significant work *Vier letzte Lieder* (1948) should be considered more as a personal, nostalgic farewell to this musical form, rather than a measure of the position of contemporary Lieder or as a signpost towards the future of this genre.²⁰ Donald Ivey identifies the pervasive element of an ‘all-embracing’ experimentation which characterises both much of the music of the early twentieth century and beyond, and indeed its source poetry.²¹ The Lieder and other works of the Second Viennese School questioned the dominance of tonality, and responded to a new type of textual source. Specifically, in the realm of song, this took the form of a move away from nineteenth-

¹⁸ For example, Britten’s use of the solo bassoon in his setting of Tennyson’s *The Kraken* which includes the following: ‘below the thunders of the deep’, and his similarly illustrative use of solo English horn in his setting of Owen’s *The Kind*, which includes the text ‘she sleeps on soft, last breath’. Britten, *Nocturne* op.60, for Tenor Solo, Seven Obbligato Instruments and String Orchestra (London: Hawkes and Son, 1959), pp. 8 and 44 respectively.

¹⁹ This quotation is from the central strophe of Othmar Schoeck’s *Lieder nach Gedichten von Uhland und Eichendorff* op.20 (1910), a setting of Eichendorff’s *Nachruf* (Obituary). James Parsons, ‘The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid-Century’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. by James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 292. Hereafter referred to as Parsons, ‘The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid-Century’.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

²¹ Donald Ivey, ‘The Twentieth Century’ in *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Style* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 232. Hereafter referred to as Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Style*.

century Romantic German lyric poetry, with a resultant abandonment of vocal lyricism.²² Parsons also remarks that the cramped social density of newly expanded urban centres was reflected in an abundance of imagery contained in this contemporary poetry and poetic prose that was being set, for example, by Schoenberg.²³ Griffiths identifies the significance of the contribution which the poetry of Dehmel and later Stefan George had on the birth of atonality in Schoenberg's song cycle *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* op.15 (1908–9) and Webern's opp.3–4 (1908–9), works which are written for voice and piano.²⁴ This poetry provided a textual source in which the sound of the text had a heightened significance quite apart from its semantic connotations; this had its artistic parallel in demanding non-tonal vocalisations and piano writings which explored the 'orchestral' sonorities of the piano, thereby moving away from the Lied's formerly intimate character.

The developments of these innovators put into relief the Lieder composed by a number of composers who could be regarded as relative traditionalists, such as: Max Reger (1873–1916), Hans Pfitzner (1869–1949), and the Swiss-born Othmar Schoeck (1886–1957). Griffiths terms these and others as 'specialist composers' and considers them, together with those who composed Lieder by commission for a small number of Lieder performers, to constitute the majority of new works;²⁵ Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74 (1965)²⁶ written specifically for Fisher-Dieskau, should be included among this latter category. Indeed, the innovators Schoenberg and

²² Parsons, 'The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid-Century', p. 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

²⁴ Paul Griffiths, 'Lied: The 20th Century' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), xiv, p. 679. Hereafter referred to as Griffiths, 'Lied: The 20th Century', xiv.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 678.

²⁶ Britten, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74, for Baritone and Piano (London: Faber and Faber, 1965). Hereafter referred to as Britten, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74. Interestingly Hamburger states in his introduction that Hölderlin's poetry is 'very different from the prophetic poems of William Blake'. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems of Hölderlin*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1943), p. 96. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALB 1-9500063.

Berg composed very few Lieder after World War I and Webern, who, after his almost exclusive engagement with Lieder since 1914, all but abandoned this genre after 1925. For these composers and their followers, this shift of compositional effort is a direct result of the introduction and mastering of techniques of deodecapronic music; this effectively ended the Lied tradition of ‘the paralleling of tension and release in the [source] poetry with tonal dissonance and consonance’ in the music.²⁷ The heightened importance of exclusively musical means served to diminish the effect of lyrical poetry and fuelled the existing ‘*Wort-Ton Problem*’, a debate relating specifically to the problem of unifying words and music in song, a discourse which is the focus of the following chapter.

Schoeck’s musico-political statement, translated as ‘What now is the point of singing here and in solitude, when all have departed from us who took pleasure in our song?’,²⁸ reveals his deep-felt conservative traditionalism. Chris Walton questions the accuracy of the image of Schoeck, as portrayed by his biographer Hans Corrodi, as a ‘fierce anti-modernist’.²⁹ Parsons points out Schoeck’s achievements, in his ability to ‘conjoin the Lied’s archetypal lyricism with free-ranging post-Romantic tonality and twentieth-century atonality’;³⁰ while Walton remarks on the composer’s return to tonality by 1928, which resulted from a rejection of his music by the International Summer Contemporary Music Festival in Siena in that year.³¹ It is Schoeck’s ability to combine aspects of the new with the old, which affords a useful contemporary

²⁷ Griffiths, ‘Lied: The 20th Century’, xiv, pp. 679–80.

²⁸ Othmar Schoeck’s *Lieder nach Gedichten von Uhland und Eichendorff* op.20 (1910), a setting of Eichendorff’s *Nachruf* (Obituary). Parsons, ‘The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid-Century’, p. 292.

²⁹ H. Corrodi, *Othmar Schoeck. Bild eines Schaffens* (Frauenfeld, 1956), cited in Chris Walton, ‘Schoeck, Othmar’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), xxii, p. 575. Hereafter referred to as Walton, ‘Schoeck, Othmar’, xxii.

³⁰ Parsons, ‘The Lied in the Modern Age: To Mid-Century’, p. 293.

³¹ Walton, ‘Schoeck, Othmar’, xxii, p. 574.

comparison to Britten, for both composers made significant contributions to the genres of opera and art song.

By the time Britten reached maturity, the Lied and art song had, in general, become a marginalised genre. Therefore, Britten's prominent inclusion of established Lieder repertoire, together with his original compositions in his concert performances with Peter Pears, provide conspicuous evidence of his intention to continue to explore an expression of poetic lyrical sensibility in his music, despite his contemporaries' musical trends. Likewise the consistency and quality of Britten's compositional engagement with song throughout his career provides evidence that song was not a marginal activity either to his total oeuvre or to his vocal repertoire.

1.4 BRITTEN'S FOREIGN-LANGUAGE ART-SONG REPERTORY

It is widely acknowledged that Benjamin Britten was attracted to and inspired by the quality of the written word.³² In his art-song output, this attraction was not only limited to the settings of English-language poetry, but his literary eclecticism also led him to compose song cycles in French (Rimbaud, 1939), Italian (Michelangelo, 1940), German (Hölderlin, 1958), and Russian (Pushkin, 1965), in each case, setting poems in their original language. That Britten never set a foreign language in translation, with the exception of the *Songs from the Chinese* op.58 (1957)³³ for high voice and guitar (translated by Arthur Waley), shows a deep linguistic respect for the original language of his selected poetry and a desire to remain faithful to his poetic source; in fact, Britten's precedence for the use of a translation of Chinese texts echoes Mahler's

³² For further discussion of Britten's response to text see: Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1989), p. 64; Graham Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano: Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 2–3; and Ralph Woodward, 'Music for Voices', *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 260; and Chapters 2, 4 and 5 of this thesis.

³³ Britten, *Songs from the Chinese* op.58, for High Voice and Guitar (London: Hawkes and Co., 1959).

similar practice in *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908–09) (translated by Hans Bethge). Britten's foreign-language settings are significant with regard to the quality and the quantity of his art-song repertoire, accounting for approximately one fifth of his total compositions in this medium. Through his Hölderlin cycle, Britten ventures outside the English art-song tradition and directly engages with the German language and its recognised literary traditions.

Britten was commissioned by the BBC, prior to the composition of this song cycle, to compose a completion of the fragment of Franz Schubert's song, *Gretchens Bitte*, for soprano and piano (1938), a setting from *Faust Part I* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.³⁴ Therefore, Britten was, even in the late 1930s, considered by the BBC Music Department to be sufficiently informed of and experienced in Lieder practices to contribute sufficiently to this genre's repertoire. Britten also provided arrangements in 1942, for voice and orchestra, of both Franz Schubert's *Die Forelle* ('The Trout'), by the poet C.F.D. Schubart, and Robert Schumann's Eichendorff setting, *Frühlingsnacht* ('Spring Night'). These completions and arrangements are of historical interest rather than of analytical importance. They also display a practical side of Britten's compositional character: he wanted to expand the performance possibilities of music which inspired him.³⁵ In this way, Britten can be said to have interacted directly with significant poets and composers of a 'golden age' of Lieder. However, it was not until 1958 that Britten chose to engage in the composition of six Lieder, setting poems by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), a seminal figure in German literature. These songs were published four years later in 1962. Britten's final German text setting, a setting of

³⁴ Schubert: *Gretchens Bitte: Szene aus Goethes Faust für hohe Stimme und Klavier*, [D.564] Completed by Benjamin Britten (London: Faber Music, 1998), introductory note by Jenny Doctor.

³⁵ Britten's desire to expand the performance possibilities is also seen in the quantity of his realization of music composed by Henry Purcell (*The Knotting Song*, Z371 (1939) and *O Solitude*, Z406 (1955); both were first performed by Pears and Britten).

Goethe's *Um Mitternacht*³⁶ was composed c.1960,³⁷ its subject matter of night, rest and dream are themes which were explored by many other Lieder composers,³⁸ the most famous and widely performed setting of this text being that of Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832).³⁹ Britten's setting was first performed at the 1992 Aldeburgh Festival and was published posthumously in 1994.⁴⁰ The calibre of these poetic and compositional associations reveals a knowledge of and respect for historical convention. However, this compositional body of work also shows Britten's intention to interact directly with and contribute to the corpus of Lieder repertoire.

1.5 BRITTEN'S STYLE OF LIEDER PERFORMANCE

It must be stated from the outset that questions arose as to the authenticity of Britten's and Pears' Lieder performances. Their first complete public performance of Schubert's *Die Winterreise*⁴¹ was at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1961 and the famous Decca recording followed in 1963;⁴² subsequently Britten agreed to the recording for television of the complete cycle.⁴³ It is significant that these performances occurred only after

³⁶ Britten, 'Um Mitternacht', in *The Red Cockatoo and Other Songs* (London: Faber Music, 1994), pp. 30–32. Rosamund Strode stated in a prefatory note that 'if Britten was thinking about writing a Goethe cycle — as several marked poems indicate may have been the case — he apparently achieved only this one song'. Britten, *The Red Cockatoo and other Songs* (London: Faber Music, 1994), p. 3.

³⁷ 'Um Mitternacht' (p. 507) together with 'Prometheus' (p. 319) and 'Ganymed' (p. 321) are marked in pencil in Britten's copy of Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Goethe: Gedichte, Vollständige Ausgabe* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1959). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB –Alb 1-9500052.

³⁸ The following examples of settings illustrate the significance of night as a literary theme: Schubert (Goethe), 'Nachtgesang' D119 (1814); Schumann (Goethe), 'Wanderers Nachtlid' op.96 no.1 (1850); Brahms (Heine), 'Mondenschein' op.85 no.2 (1878).

³⁹ Carl Friedrich Zelter, 'Um Mitternacht', *Fünzig ausgewählte Lieder*, ed. by Moritz Bauer (Berlin: Martin Breslauer, 1924).

⁴⁰ 'Um Mitternacht' was first performed by Lucy Shelton (S) and Ian Brown (pf) 15 June 1992 at the 45th Aldeburgh Festival, Blythbury Church, Suffolk. Britten, *The Red Cockatoo and Other Songs* (London: Faber Music, 1994), p. 3.

⁴¹ Schubert, Franz, *Die Winterreise* op.89 D911, in *Franz Schubert: Complete Song Cycles* ed. by Eusebius Mandyczewski (New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 56–131.

⁴² Schubert, Franz, *Die Winterreise*, D911, Peter Pears (T), Benjamin Britten (pf) (CD Decca 466-382, 2000 [October 1963]).

⁴³ This David Myerscough-Jones designed staged version was recorded at Snape Maltings, 9–11 September 1970 and first broadcast on BBC Two 15 November 1970. Interestingly John Culshaw, the producer of this project and of the 1963 Decca recording of *Winterreise*, notes that Britten agreed to participate only on the basis that 'the camera would concentrate on the distraught traveller seen in various

Britten's compositional engagement with Lieder, thereby acknowledging the maturity and interpretive depth required by this psychologically intense Schubert work.⁴⁴ They had performed the other Schubert song cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin*⁴⁵ also by Wilhelm Müller in the 1950s. However, Pears' and Britten's performance of Schubert's *Die Winterreise* received much contemporary critical comment. In his weekly article for the *Sunday Times* (16 June 1963) Desmond Shawe-Taylor reviewed a contemporary Pears-Britten recital concert of *Winterreise* at the Guildhall, in which the reviewer refers briefly to 'some questionable details' in 'Wasserflut' in particular, and his 'apparently deliberate disregard of the left hand's dragging dotted notes against the triplets of the right hand or the voice (or is this practice now considered correct?)'.⁴⁶ A fortnight later Shawe-Taylor, after receiving communication from Paul Hamburger and Maurits Sillem ('musicians of a scholarly turn of mind'), 'gladly apologise[d] to Mr Britten for having wrongly impugned his Schubertian scholarship'.⁴⁷ Britten responded by letter and subsequently Shawe-Taylor published an article containing Britten's statement that he had been 'entirely instinctive over it'.⁴⁸ This article collected and edited a number of remarks by music critics, much of which related specifically to the 'correctness' and scholarly justification of Britten's practice.⁴⁹

abstract settings while the piano remained permanently out of vision'. Franz Schubert, *Die Winterreise*, D911, Peter Pears (T), Benjamin Britten (pf) (DVD Decca 074-3257, 2008 [1970]), video booklet p. 8.

⁴⁴ Carpenter states that Pears had 'not felt ready to sing the cycle [*Winterreise*] until he was fifty'. Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 402. This detail is also corroborated in the BBC recording for television of Britten and Pears in discussion during Schubert Workshop September 1968, produced for BBC Television by Barrie Gavin. Franz Schubert, *Die Winterreise* D911, Peter Pears (T), Benjamin Britten (pf) (DVD Decca 074-3257, 2008 [1970]), bonus tracks 1–3.

⁴⁵ Schubert, Franz, *Die Schöne Müllerin* op.25 D795, in *Franz Schubert: Complete Song Cycles* ed. by Eusebius Mandyczewski (New York: Dover, 1970), pp. 2–53.

⁴⁶ Desmond Shawe-Taylor, 'Weekly Review: The Player and the Sound', *Sunday Times*, 7309 (16 June 1963), 40.

⁴⁷ Desmond Shawe-Taylor, 'Weekly Review: Schubert as Written and as Played', *Sunday Times*, 7311 (30 June 1963), 36.

⁴⁸ Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *et al.*, 'Schubert as Written and as Performed' *The Musical Times* 104/1447 (1963), 626–28. The text of Britten's letter of response is not published in either *The Musical Times* or in the *Sunday Times* between 16 June and 25 August 1963, 7319–25 inclusive.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 626–28.

Graham Johnson also considers that ‘Pears and the composer evolved their own Schubert style’, which was not based on ‘established traditions (particularly regarding tempo)’ but rather on their innate musical response as performers.⁵⁰ Johnson goes on to speculate that Britten’s interpretive style may have been very different had his planned study with Alban Berg in Vienna occurred in the 1930s. He also identifies the likely beneficial impact on Britten’s Lied interpretations resulting from his close collaboration with Erwin Stein and Hans Keller, both Viennese émigré musicians who had direct experience of Mahler as a composer and a conductor.⁵¹

Kenneth Whitton addresses directly the potentially thorny issue of the authenticity of the singing of German Lieder by non-native singers in the post-World War II period. In general, he is critical of the pre-1945 Lieder performances of British and American singers in respect of their competence in the German language but also in their awareness of developments in German literature since c.1800.⁵² Whitton ranks the post-World War II singers Janet Baker (b.1933) and Pears as comparable in artistic achievement with native German singers such as Elizabeth Schwarzkopf (1915–2006). Furthermore, Whitton qualifies this opinion in stating that Pears’ and Baker’s German was ‘almost “akzentfrei”, free of English accent’.⁵³ These comments should be considered in the context of the time to which they relate: these non-native Lieder performances originated initially from outside the Lieder tradition, German recordings were not widely available, and previously there had been an acceptance of less than perfect German diction and intonation. Adams identifies the specific difficulty for non-native singers of German of the ‘proper sequencing and articulation of consecutive

⁵⁰ Graham Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), p. 56. Hereafter referred to as Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵² Kenneth Whitton, *Lieder: An Introduction to German Song* (London: Julia MacRae, 1984), p. 174.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

consonant sounds, within and between words’, which may have impacted the sense of line in this Britten and Pears recording.⁵⁴ This is, however, not the case in current recordings by Ian Bostridge, who is also a German scholar and historian. The subtlety of these linguistic comments does not seek in any way to question the musical or dramatic validity and achievement of these interpretations, but rather to contextualise the reception of Pears and Britten’s Lieder performances. (Donald Ivey’s research into the importance of accentual syllabic prosodic rhythm in both German and English poetry, and its effects on text setting, will be considered in the succeeding chapter (see 2.5).) Interestingly, when Whitton mentions Pears he refers specifically to the ‘duo Pears-Britten’, thereby acknowledging the special musical aesthetic which was created in their joint performances and their ‘enormous contribution to popularising the Lied during the period 1950–75’.⁵⁵ That their last public recital together, at Schloss Elmau, West Germany in January 1973 should include Schubert’s *Winterreise*,⁵⁶ retrospectively is a fitting tribute to their joint contribution to Lieder and this, undoubtedly conscious gesture, also serves as a symbolic song of farewell.

Whitton also recounts the admiration of the German baritone, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who described the Britten and Pears performance of *Winterreise* as being ‘unforgettable’.⁵⁷ Although the original work was composed for the tenor voice, Whitton still considers that ‘this cycle does demand the lower voice’ of a baritone quality.⁵⁸ It is an interesting parallel that Britten wrote his English-texted *Songs and*

⁵⁴ David Adams, *A Handbook of Diction for Singers: Italian, German, French* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 84.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁶ John Evans, Philip Reed, and Paul Wilson, eds, *A Britten Source Book* (Aldeburgh: Britten-Pears Library, 1987), p. 118.

⁵⁷ Kenneth Whitton, *Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau Mastersinger: A Documentary Study* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1981), p. 203.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

*Proverbs of William Blake*⁵⁹ (Blake being a contemporary of Hölderlin) specifically for Fisher-Dieskau (a consummate Lieder performer), and that Britten composed this voice and piano song cycle only after both his direct engagement with German Lieder in his *Hölderlin* cycle in 1958, and with his extensive performance engagement with the Schubert cycles in the early 1960s. This later Blake English song cycle reflects upon a deepening absorption of the traditions of German Lieder and a conscious desire on the part of Britten to expand the popularity of English-language song through an association with such an internationally acclaimed Lieder interpreter as Fisher-Dieskau.

1.6 BRITTEN AND THE GERMAN LANGUAGE

In his 1963 interview with Murray Schafer, Britten states: '[I am] not a linguist, but I pride myself that I have a feel for languages'.⁶⁰ Although both Britten and Pears were proficient German speakers, it is likely that Britten collaborated with a native German speaker while composing the *Hölderlin* settings.⁶¹ There is, however, no written evidence of such collaboration in his correspondences, held at the Britten-Pears Foundation, and therefore it is likely that Britten worked through the original German-language text with his close friend Prince Ludwig von Hesse (an established poet in his own right) who had suggested the suitability of Hölderlin's poetry to Britten.⁶² That Ludwig also provided the German translation for Britten's subsequent work *Nocturne*

⁵⁹ Britten, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74.

⁶⁰ Ralph Woodward, 'Music for Voices' *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 260. Hereafter referred to as Woodward, 'Music for Voices'. Cited after Murray Schafer's *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 121. Hereafter referred to as Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*.

⁶¹ This linguistic collaboration is also a feature of the composition of the Russian song cycle *The Poet's Echo*, op.76 from 1965, as Britten worked closely with Mstislav Rostropovich on Pushkin's original text.

⁶² Ludwig von Hesse gifted a volume of his own poetic collection to Britten January 1954. The inside cover page is inscribed 'From one who can a little, to one who must a lot'. This published volume lends potential credibility to the literary significance of Ludwig's suggestion for Britten to set Hölderlin's poetry; it also shows the poet's appreciation of Britten's poetic predilection and sensitivity. Ludwig Landgraf, *Ludwig Landgraf: Gedichte* (Darmstadt: Eduard Roether Verlag, 1951). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9500066.

op.60, also from 1958, adds weight to the likely truth of this contention. The necessity for such close linguistic collaboration is again highlighted by Johnson⁶³ when he comments on Britten's spoken German 'in an English word-order, which became known informally as "Aldeburgh Deutsch"'.⁶⁴

The first performance of the *Hölderlin* cycle was an altogether German affair. The *Hölderlin* cycle is based on a German text which was suggested by Britten's friend, Ludwig von Hesse, to whom it is dedicated. The first performance, by Britten and Pears, took place in Germany at a private concert in the home of Ludwig von Hesse on 20 November 1958.⁶⁵ The recording of this cycle was played on radio on the BBC Third Programme a week earlier.⁶⁶ This foreign premiere represented a break in Britten's general practice of premiering many of his song cycles at the Aldeburgh Festival, and thereby reveals the composer's intention to showcase this cycle of Lieder for a German-speaking audience and German music critics.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF BRITTEN'S SELECTION OF HÖLDERLIN POETRY

Consideration of the poetic source of this *Hölderlin* song cycle reveals significant insight into Britten's literary and philosophical knowledge, and also his poetic discernment. His choice of texts by the late-eighteenth-century poet and philosopher Friedrich Hölderlin shows Britten's conscious decision to identify with a major figure of German literature who was not widely set in the nineteenth century by Schubert,

⁶³ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 57.

⁶⁴ Hugh Wood, 'Britten's Hölderlin Songs' *The Musical Times* 104/1449 (1963), 871–73. With this cycle Britten is considered to have completed a trilogy of song cycles in the major western European languages of song, first French then Italian and now German. Wood contends that 'the musical character of the settings reflects a deep awareness that the composer is now dealing with the language used by Schubert, Wolf and Mahler'.

⁶⁵ Schloss Wolfgarten was the home of Prince Ludwig von Hesse. Paul Banks, *et al.*, eds, *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works* (Aldeburgh: Britten-Pears Library, 1999), p. 116. Hereafter referred to as Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*.

⁶⁶ First radio broadcast 14 November 1958 on the BBC Third Programme (pre-recorded 20 October 1958). *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Schumann or Wolf. Harry Seelig identifies only one Brahms choral setting with orchestra of the poet's *Schicksalslied*, op.54 (1869–71),⁶⁷ and Johnson notes that the twentieth-century Hölderlin settings by Max Reger (1912), Paul Hindemith (1933) and Hanns Eisler (1943) had not been widely known or performed.⁶⁸ Therefore, the choice of Hölderlin allowed Britten the artistic freedom to select and set poems which had not previously been musically explored in either Lieder or English song. The practice of setting poetry in its original German language by English composers was not unique to Britten.⁶⁹ What was new to English song was the identity and poetic intent of Britten's selected poet. Recognition of this discerning approach contributes to an enhanced appreciation of the composer's particular poetic sensibilities.

Susan Youens' concept of an art song's 'pre-history' provides a useful framework to approach and consider the background of both the poet and his poetry, thus supporting an 'enhanced understanding and appreciation of' the resultant musical work.⁷⁰ Hölderlin looked to classical Greece for his poetic and philosophical influences which he then combined with ideas of German nationhood and Christianity. These elements resulted in German free verse which, though rich in verbal imagery due to its Greek origin, often appeared syntactically and metrically obtuse to nineteenth-century

⁶⁷ Harry E. Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as A "Literary Song Cycle"', in *Word and Music Studies 4*, ed. by Lodato *et al.* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 101. Hereafter referred to as Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as A "Literary Song Cycle"'.
⁶⁸ Johnson notes the following Hölderlin settings: Max Reger setting op.24 *An die Hoffnung* (A/Mez, Orch/pf), 1912. Paul Hindemith, 'Sechs Lieder' (T, pf) 1933–5 and also 'An die Parzen'; 'Sonnenuntergang' [2 versions]; 'Ehmals und jetzt' [2 versions]; 'Des Morgens'; 'Fragment'; 'Abendphantasie'. Hanns Eisler, 6 *Hölderlin Fragmente*, 1943. Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 57.

⁶⁹ Other English composers set verse by H. Heine such as: Charles Villiers Stanford, *Six Songs* (H. Heine) op.4 (1874). These German text settings are an exception for Stanford and relate to a European trip he undertook in the summer of 1874. Paul Rodmell, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 43; Fredrich Delius, *Four Songs* (H. Heine) (1890–91). In addition to setting of German and French (Paul Verlaine) Delius wrote a considerable number of songs to Scandinavian texts often from German translations of the original, *Seven Songs from the Norwegian*, Robert Threlfall, ed., *Frederick Delius: Complete Works* (London: Delius Trust, 1990), p. 131.

⁷⁰ Susan Youens, *Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. x–xiii.

composers.⁷¹ In addition, Seelig identifies the challenge which the ‘formal and semantic intricacies of Hölderlin’s poetry’ offer the composer.⁷² In his selection of shorter poems and fragments, Britten therefore ‘avoided the virtuosically varied meters and formidably involuted language that characterise much of Hölderlin’s work’.⁷³ Instead Britten chose to look to this poet’s more lyrical poems for musical inspiration and prominently underscores his literary appreciation of the Romantic idea of fragmentation as a compositional framework for song.

Britten was well-read and fully aware of the ‘pre-history’ of Hölderlin’s poetry. His personal library, now housed at the Britten-Pears Foundation, includes August Closs’s 1942 selected and edited *Friedrich Hölderlin: Gedichte*, which claims to be the first English edition of this poetry,⁷⁴ as well as Michael Hamburger’s 1943 translated *Poems of Hölderlin*,⁷⁵ and two copies, in German without translations, of *Hölderlin: Gedichte*.⁷⁶ These books provide the poetic source for Britten’s settings. Hamburger’s monograph includes a substantial introduction in which the poet’s life, influences and works are discussed in some detail. This introduction, which includes many references to Goethe, together with Hölderlin’s peripheral association with the Weimar Classicism of Goethe, Schiller and others, left Britten in no doubt as to the literary calibre and intentions of his chosen poet.

⁷¹ Michael Hamburger, ed., *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Michael Hamburger. 3rd edn (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1994), p. xviii.

⁷² Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as A "Literary Song Cycle"', p. 102.

⁷³ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1989), p. 365. Hereafter referred to as Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*.

⁷⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Friedrich Hölderlin Gedichte*, ed. by August Closs, 2nd edn (1942) (London: Duckworth, 1944), p. 9. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9700774.

⁷⁵ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems of Hölderlin*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (Kingsway: Nicholson and Watson, 1943). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9500063.

⁷⁶ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hölderlin - Gedichte*, Pasnass-Bücherei Nr. 21 (Switzerland: Alfred Scherz Verlag Bern, n.d.). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9500062. Hereafter referred to as Hölderlin, *Hölderlin - Gedichte*, Pasnass-Bücherei Nr. 21 (n.d.). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9500062 (second copy also n.d., Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9500401).

1.8 HÖLDERLIN CYCLE: POETIC SOURCE AND MUSICAL SETTING

Britten selected six Hölderlin poems for his song cycle, which are representative of all periods of this poet's output, including the isolation of his final thirty-six years of 'insanity'. The literary association of the contrasting of madness and social isolation with artistic genius, as also seen in Hugo Wolf's later years of mental instability, would not have been lost on Britten and may have reinforced his inclusion of material from Hölderlin's final works.⁷⁷ Not alone does Britten make representative poetic selections from all periods of Hölderlin's poetic output, but he also selects six poems containing subject matter which typifies the very essence of Hölderlin's oeuvre: namely the appropriation into German cultural history of Classical Greek philosophies concerning aspects of classical male beauty and virility as well as man's interaction with the gods in the context of a non-conventional Christian ideology. These themes are central to an understanding of this poet's motivations. Part of Britten's achievement is that he has identified a foreign-language poet with whom he shares aesthetic interests: the poet's concerns are also those of the composer and are particularly visible in Britten's third and fourth settings of Hölderlin. The related literary themes of youth and the corruption of innocence were to occupy Britten throughout his compositional career in the vocal genres of song and opera as seen in other of Britten's contemporary works: *Winter Words* op.52 (1953)⁷⁸ from poems by Thomas Hardy and in *The Turn of the Screw* op.54 (1954)⁷⁹ from a novel by Henry James. These particular themes, which may have a confessional aspect, will also be shown in Part 2 of this thesis to have been explored by Britten as far back as the 1930s in his settings of Auden's poetry.

⁷⁷ Knowledge of Schubert's anguish and fear of mental illness as a result of his terminal syphilis would not have been in scholarship contemporary to Britten's early engagement with Schubert song.

⁷⁸ Britten, *Winter Words* op.52, Lyrics and Ballads of Thomas Hardy, for High Voice and Piano (London: Boosey and Co., 1954).

⁷⁹ Britten, *The Turn of the Screw* op.54 (London: Hawkes and Son, 1955).

In his Hölderlin cycle, Britten uses a combination of complete poems, a selection of verses from complete poems, and what are referred to as Hölderlin's 'fragments'. All the fragments are, however, substantial. Britten's inclusion of the word *Fragmente* in the cycle's title recognises both the epigrammatic nature of much of his textual source but also foregrounds his prominent musical practice, in this cycle, of providing allusion to musical styles past and modern. The practice of setting incomplete poems was not unusual for Britten and was also central to his achievement of musical unity and textual continuity in his song cycle *Nocturne* op.60 for tenor, seven obbligato instruments and strings, also composed in 1958.

The process of poetic selection also necessitates conscious omission on the part of the composer, which serves to highlight further that which is set. Review of Britten's original poetic sources for this song cycle reveals the composer's handwritten poetic selection shown in its final order on the inside cover of *Hölderlin - Gedichte*.⁸⁰ Later, in the front-end pages, also in his hand-writing, Britten lists the following four additional poems which he does not set: 'Sonnenuntergang', 'Brot und Wein', 'Erntezeit', and 'Das Angenehme'.⁸¹ The omission of 'Sonnenuntergang' ('Sunset') is likely to have occurred for extra-musical reasons as the poetic image of the sun had already been explored in the fifth song 'Hälfte des Lebens' ('The Middle of Life') with the words *Den Sonnenschein* (the shining sun): therein illustrating Britten's sensitivity to his poetic text and his preservation of the poetic structural integrity through his decision to exclude an alternative depiction of the image of the sun: shining sun and sunset.⁸² A

⁸⁰ Hölderlin, *Hölderlin - Gedichte*, Parnass-Bücherei Nr. 21 (n.d.), inside cover. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALB 1-9500062.

⁸¹ Hölderlin, *Hölderlin - Gedichte*, Parnass-Bücherei Nr. 21 (n.d.), front-end pages. The poems appear on p. 11, 29, 35, and 60 respectively. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALB 1-9500062.

⁸² Colin Matthews also identified, during his opening address at the 'Britten Study Day' held on 4 April 2008 at the University of East Anglia, that it was common practice for Britten to compose extra settings in advance of a final selection. This practice is also evident in Britten's exclusion of his setting of *Sir*

comparison of these two handwritten listings of poems, one draft the other final, reveals Britten's replacement of 'Menschenbeifall' (Human Applause) from being a closing song, perhaps suggested by the textual reference to applause, to being the opening song.⁸³

Britten further illustrates his poetic discernment through his ability to collect disparate-related literary ideas in a seeming progression. However, this work has been categorised as a 'literary song cycle' by Walter Bernhart in 2001,⁸⁴ and this status was subsequently and comprehensively confirmed by Harry Seelig.⁸⁵ In his *Hölderlin* song cycle, Britten creates literary thematic unity through his selection of separate poems, which he considers relate to the themes of youth and maturity in middle age. This chapter permits only a cursory consideration of Britten's musical translation of this literary theme and focuses on aspects of the songs which have their origins in the Lieder traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In addition to Hamburger's poetic translations which were available to Britten while composing the Hölderlin cycle, Elizabeth Mayer and Peter Pears provided a singing translation. As a foreword to the published score of this work Britten provided a full German text and the latter English translations of the poems as set in addition to the full bilingual text underlay of the music,⁸⁶ thus ensuring the comprehension of the poetic meanings of this German-language poetry for an English-speaking audience, but also expanding the performance, and resultant commercial potential of this cycle.

Nameless and *If It's Ever Spring Again* from the song cycle *Winter Words* (lyrics and ballads by Thomas Hardy) in 1953.

⁸³ Hölderlin, *Hölderlin - Gedichte*, Parnass-Bücherei Nr. 21 (n.d.), front-end pages. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALB 1-9500062.

⁸⁴ Walter Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles. The Variety of Britten's "Charms"', in *Word and Music Studies 3: Essays on the Song Cycle and on Defining the Field*, ed. by Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 211–26.

⁸⁵ Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as A "Literary Song Cycle"', pp. 101–22.

⁸⁶ Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61.

1.8.1 ‘Menschenbeifall’ (Human Applause), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.1

The opening song affords a ‘contemptuous glance at worldly fame’,⁸⁷ in which the vacuous nature of this recognition is initially musically heralded by the hollow sounding ascending bare octaves of the piano introduction; this atmosphere is further accentuated by both the interspersed full bar rests and by the initial vocal conformity to this sparse texture (see Ex. 1.1). This opening song, which is far removed from nineteenth-century stylistic practices, allows Britten the initial musical space to set out a contemporary scene before undertaking a musical journey of past literary ideas and musical styles. The ambiguity of the first verse of this poem is characterised musically in Britten’s use of bald open octaves in the piano part; however, this gives way to the clarification of meaning contained in the first couplet of the second verse which is set to repeated-note clusters which are rhythmically displaced and ‘intense’ and ‘marked’ in performance indication. The return in the final couplet of this song to the style of the song’s opening confirms Britten’s ironic intent to return musical focus to the vacuity of human adulation—this musical return is not implied in the poem’s text and is musically realized by Britten.

From the outset of this cycle Britten can be said, in this song, to respond to the essence of the poetry as contained in the epigrammatic ending of the first stanza as encapsulated in this inspirationally suggestive text, ‘*Wortereicher und leerer war?*’ (Rich in empty resounding words). Evans identifies the presence of quartal chords at this point in the song and adds that all twelve notes of the chromatic scale are identifiable, in the piano writing, within these six sustained compound perfect-fourth chords (bars 26–32) as a conspicuous reference to Schoenbergian practice.⁸⁸ Although Evans argues that this musical point ‘does not invite interpretation in terms of any

⁸⁷ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 388.

⁸⁸ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 366.

verbally definable symbolism’,⁸⁹ I would rather suggest that this musical allusion to the twentieth-century practice of Schoenberg and others contributes to the song’s hollow ironic opening in its representation of meaningless applause; in terms of the meaning of the text that it underscores and what otherwise might be considered an exclusively musical device, the richness of these ‘resounding’ compound fourths can be said to have their genesis in the poetic text. This spirited contemporary opening song has the intention and effect of focusing the listener’s attention upon the literary informed musical ideas that are to follow in the subsequent settings.

Example 1.1: ‘Menschenbeifall’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.1, bars 1–10

With spirit (*lebhaft*) (♩ = 108)

Voice

Piano

f marked
(mit Nachdruck)

6

f

Ist nicht hei - lig mein Herz,
Love has hal - lowed my heart,

f

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

1.8.2 ‘Die Heimat’ (Home), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.2

This song provides a more traditional lyrical ‘plea for a return to the security of childhood’⁹⁰ as represented by the literary depiction of ‘home’. Here, Britten ‘moves nearer to the lyricism of Romantic song’⁹¹ as symbolically represented in the primary structural outline of the vocal melodic line, which contains an initial descending melodic sixth leap followed by gradual melodic ascent returning to the initial vocal pitch at ‘*Heimat wieder*’ (turning homewards) (see Ex. 1.2). This longing for home is part of a recognised Romantic idea of *Sehnsucht* (longing).

Example 1.2: ‘Die Heimat’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.2, bars 13–15

The musical score for Example 1.2 consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lyrics are: 'Wohl möcht auch ich zur Heimat wieder; So too would I be turn-ing home - wards;'. The piano accompaniment features a canon with the vocal melody at the distance of one bar. The piano part is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes several grace notes (*γ*) in the right hand.

Once again Britten responds musically to the essence of this poem as encapsulated in the following text from the first stanza: ‘*Wohl möcht auch ich zur Heimat wieder;*’ (I too would gladly now turn homewards).⁹² The piano treble’s melody responds as an exact canon to the vocal melody at the distance of one bar in the first verse (bar 3); this echo effect creates a musical equivalence of the textual *Sehnsucht*. Ron Brendel reads this reference as an ‘allusion to nostalgic homesickness’.⁹³ The transfer of the canon

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁹² Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, pp. 104–5.

⁹³ Ron Brendel, ‘Beyond Borrowing: Britten’s Eclecticism in the Hölderlin Songs’ (Unpublished conference paper presented at ‘Britten in Context’ Conference, Hope University, Liverpool, 12 June 2010), p. 4.

into the piano bass for the second verse (bar 22) affects a deeper awareness of suffering caused by geographic distance as a symbolic representation of adulthood and lost innocence. The relatively static nature of the piano accompaniment here serves to throw into relief the symbolic journey of maturity and homecoming as musically depicted by a return to the home pitch, while the recurrence of this figuration conveys the ever-present desire to return to ‘Ye blessed shores’ of his youth or the second verse (bars 22–23). The repeated octave inner-voice piano quaver seconds ascend relentlessly from ‘D’/‘E’ by step till they eventually return to these pitches as if to signify musically a return to the stability of the song’s opening, and yet the seconds represent a constant expression of anguish. The incorporation of these inner 9/8 quavers within the context of the canon in a 3/4 time framework creates a compound metre which functions as a constant nostalgic reminder of home, of the unrelenting desire to return to the place of one’s youth and the implied innocence of that time.

1.8.3 ‘Sokrates und Alcibiades’ (Socrates and Alcibiades), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.3

This poem deals with the recognition by the older sage of the simplicity and youthful male beauty of the stripling Alcibiades, as described in Plato’s *Symposium*.⁹⁴ The first strophe of this two-stanza poem takes the form of questioning the propriety of the Greek philosopher Socrates’ homage to the beauty of male youth, and the second stanza delivers the philosopher’s reply. The first verse’s questioning atmosphere is musically represented by dissonant contrapuntal clashes between the vocal line and single melodic line piano writing as heard in the ‘c#²’ and ‘d²’ (bars 3–4), the ‘a¹’ and ‘g#¹’ (bar 9), and

⁹⁴ A brief account of the complex Greek view of ‘corrupting the young’, insofar as the ‘young were not to be trusted with public affairs, that they were easily “corrupted” intellectually and morally and therefore they were a threat not only to themselves but to society at large’, is provided in M. I. Finley, ‘The Elderly in Classical Antiquity’, in *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 8–9.

the ‘*bnatural*¹’ and ‘*bflat*¹’ (bar 17). The poem’s text ‘*Wie auf Götter, dein Aug’ auf ihn?*’ (As on gods, do you gaze on him), at the end of verse one, is musically (and symbolically) represented by contrary motion between the stepwise ascent in the vocal line and the first instance of triadic descent in the piano accompaniment—as if the gods were looking upon this youth from above. This section leads into a brief interlude, the rhythm and harmonic texture of which provides the musical framework for the second verse.

Britten uses the exact single line of the *pianissimo* melody of the piano opening, barely heard beneath the *mezzoforte* dynamic of the sceptic’s *rubato* vocal line (see Ex. 1.3a), as the framework of the answering vocal phrase accompanied this time with sustained chords in the piano (see Ex. 1.3b). These passages illustrate Britten’s ability to use inventively the same musical material to express very different ideas and to reinforce the essence of the philosophical view expressed in the text; that within the question there lies the nature of the answer. This musical equivalence of linguistic logic presents an intellectual element to the compositional structure of this song which reveals Britten’s deep absorption of his text and its context.

Britten affirms the validity of Socrates’ response in his chordal piano writing which utilises all twelve notes of the chromatic scale in twelve major root-position triads based on each of these chromatic notes (bars 29–49). Reference to the practice of the Second Viennese School, already commented upon in the opening song, now becomes more apparent. The selection of this succession of root-position chords seeks to reinforce further Socrates’ persuasive contentions as being wholly natural and simultaneously logical and is referred to by Woodward as a symbolic musical

equivalence of ‘beauty and perfection’.⁹⁵ A review of the sketches⁹⁶ for this song show, in the composer’s hand writing, his listing of these twelve chromatic notes and his deliberate ticking and re-ticking of these, thereby illustrating his absorption of twentieth-century musical language. It also shows the composer’s deliberate intention to provide a contemporary reinterpretation within the context of Hölderlin’s nineteenth-century lyrical reflection on classical ideas. With both this and the following song we see Britten engage with and musically respond to the core of his poet’s focused Hellenic literature and philosophies.

Example 1.3a: ‘Sokrates und Alcibiades’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.3, bars 1–6

Slowly moving (*langsam bewegt*) (♩ = c.80)

mf freely (*frei*)

Voice

Wa - rum hul - di - gest du, — hei -
 And why fa - your est thou, — ho -

Piano

pp (*with the voice*) (*mit der Singstimme*)

The musical score is for a voice and piano piece. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is 'Slowly moving' with a metronome marking of ♩ = c.80. The dynamics are marked 'mf freely (frei)' for the voice and 'pp (with the voice) (mit der Singstimme)' for the piano. The voice part features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the fourth measure and another triplet in the sixth measure. The piano part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a sustained bass line and a more active upper register.

⁹⁵ Woodward, ‘Music for Voices’, p. 272.

⁹⁶ Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61, for High Voice and Piano, MS (Aldeburgh: Britten-Pears Foundation, n.d.). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9300656, pp. d1 and c2.

Example 1.3b: ‘Sokrates und Alcibiades’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.3, bars 30–35

p

Wer das Tief - ste ge - dacht, liebt das Le - ben dig - ste, — Ho - he
Who most deep - ly en - quires, loves what is live - li - est, — And true

1.8.4 ‘Die Jugend’ (Youth), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.4

As the text of the previous song considered Greek philosophy, the text of this current song engages with Greek mythology and the classical myth of Ganymede: a representation of male youthful physical beauty⁹⁷ ‘whom the god Zeus, in the guise of an eagle, raised up to Olympus to become the cup-bearer of the gods’.⁹⁸ These two songs seem to create a two-song set in which relationships between males are considered in a literary and classical context. The tight slow-moving logical compositional structure of the former setting of the aged Socrates appears to give way appropriately to the quick and lively through-composed setting of the youthful Ganymede. These songs from 1958 give substantial literary and mythical reference to Britten’s persistent musical interest in ideas of lost innocence and male attainment of adulthood. These themes are pertinent to the consideration of Britten’s setting of six poems by Auden which are explored in Chapter 5, many of which also contain homoerotic allusion. This later Hölderlin cycle, which Britten published during his life, reveals that these themes which exercised the composer for some twenty years still

⁹⁷ The appropriation of the myth of Ganymede is also widespread in graphic art, such as his naked depiction on an Attic red-figure bell krater, painted by the Berlin Painter (c.500–490 BC) now housed at the Louvre, Paris. Susan Woodford, *An Introduction to Greek Art* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 70.

⁹⁸ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 89.

provide musical inspiration. However, the consideration of two young men in the setting of Auden's 'To Lie Flat on the Back' (see 5.5.3.2) and the young lovers of 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (see 5.5.4.2), both from 1937, has given way to the current 1958 settings of Hölderlin's poetry in which the relationship being considered is between a mature male figure and a youth at the stage of attaining adulthood. The consistency of this confessional aspect is likely to have contributed to Britten's inspiration in each of these phases of song composition. In turn, the persistence of these themes for Britten seems to dissipate Carpenter's 1992 argument that both of the songs 'Socrates and Alcibiades' and 'Die Jugend' were Britten's retort to Charles Mackerras, with whom the composer was having difficulties subsequent to the conductor's casual remark about Britten's closeness to boys in their current musical collaboration with *Noye's Fludde* (June 1958).⁹⁹ This remark was recounted to Britten and subsequently caused a falling-out between him and the conductor.¹⁰⁰ Carpenter's remark, that 'he [Britten] seems to be answering Mackerras's jibe by asserting that his love for the young has nothing unnatural about it', appears retrospectively to be overly simplistic and does not consider the role of this song set in the chronology of the total song cycle.¹⁰¹ Likewise, Britten's conscious desire to compose works which find inspiration in a musical and literary German Lied tradition is not sufficiently recognised. Also the precedence provided by Schubert's song 'Ganymed' D544¹⁰² (1817) and also set by Wolf from a text by Goethe is not acknowledged. Britten's awareness of each of these sources is evidenced by his marking of his edition of Goethe's poetry¹⁰³ and inclusion of

⁹⁹ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, pp. 384–85.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 384–85, 388.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

¹⁰² Schubert, 'Ganymede' (Goethe), (D544) op.19 no.3, in *Schubert Lieder* (Frankfurt: C. F. Peters, n.d.), pp. 244–47.

¹⁰³ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Goethe: Gedichte, Vollständige Ausgabe* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1959), p. 321. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB –Alb 1-9500052.

individual scores of Schubert's¹⁰⁴ and Wolf's¹⁰⁵ songs. Britten's score of Wolf's setting of 'Ganymed' shows evidence of the composer's sensitivity to German text: the literal translation of German is added in pencil to underlay the German text in addition to the printed English singing translation and German italicised underlay (English text 'yearning', German text '*schmachte*', Britten has written 'longing'), perhaps also evidence of his awareness of the Romantic tenet of *Sehnsucht*.¹⁰⁶

In Hölderlin's poem 'Die Jugend', Ganymede states that it is his love of the gods which has made him a man; the subject matter of this poem presents a variation of the theme of the preceding song. Again, Britten uses contrasting harmonic texture to effect this musical transformation. The simple sparse accented opening accompaniment which symbolises youthful play develops into sustained dense chords, in both piano hands, which first appear at the textual reference to '*Vater Helios*' and returns in the third verse, when the protagonist addresses the gods directly. In the final verse of this song the piano accompaniment incorporates both of these former aspects: the playfulness of the boy is heard in the alternating energetic crotchets and quavers of the piano treble while the gods are represented by the repeated held trills of the piano left hand. This leads to the first instance of an octave step-wise ascending melodic scale in the voice, ending on the poetic and musical climatic *forte* high 'g²' in which the protagonist declaims dramatically: '*Im Arme der Götten wuchs ich gross*' (In the arms of the gods I grew). The increasing richness of harmonic texture, dynamic change and crescendo all reflect upon a figurative attainment of manhood.

¹⁰⁴ Schubert, 'Ganymed' (Goethe), op.19, no.3 (Leipzig: Breifkopf and Härtel, n.d.), pp. 2–6. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 2-9402079.

¹⁰⁵ Wolf, 'Ganymed', *Gedichte von Goethe, eine Singstimme und Klavier* (Leipzig: C. F. Peters, n.d.), pp. 3–7. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9203231.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, bar 25 p. 4.

Britten's exclusive use of textual repetition in the first verse of this song serves two purposes. Firstly, the repeat of the poem's opening line serves to act as a dramatic device suggesting that the protagonist was thinking of the past and repeats the words as a memory aid and as a point of departure into the past '*Da ich ein Knabe war*' (In my days of boyhood) (bars 2–5, 7–10); it also textually and musically recalls the Romantic literary idea of *Sehnsucht*, in this case a longing for the freedom and innocence of boyhood. However, the variant repetitions of the text '*Spielten mit mir*' (played with me) (bars 36–44) serve a different purpose as they represent a more direct musical evocation of this youth's playful interaction with the gods, as musically characterised in a series of energetic octave, seventh and sixth leaps.

Britten's song sets four of the six verses of this poem; verses four and five are omitted, perhaps for the following musico-poetic reasons (see Table 1.1 for the texts which are not set by Britten). Firstly, these verses are more contemplative and less pictorial than the stanzas which are set. Secondly, the final verse follows on well poetically and semantically from the third verse, '*Wie euch meine Seele geliebt*' → '*Mich erzog der Wahllaut*' (How my soul loved you then → I was reared by the melody). Conversely, the fourth verse starts with an apparent double negative which may cause diminished intelligibility of the text in performance. Finally, the word 'Menschen' (men/human) is repeated three times in the course of these two verses and Britten may have felt this over-repetition to be a restriction for successful musical composition. The through-composed structure of this song responds to the irregular versification of the source poem and serves as a contrast to the regularity of the other poems set in this cycle. The choice of this poem reiterates Britten's literary discernment, in his decision to retain a common poetic tone through his exclusion of two verses of

text, and his identification with a recognised classical literary tradition, but more importantly, in his ability to musically highlight its literary core.

Table 1.1 Text of ‘Die Jugend’ not set by Britten in *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente*

Da ich ein Knabe war	Youth
Hölderlin	(Poetic translation) Michael Hamburger ¹⁰⁷
Zwar damals rieff ich noch nicht Euch mit Nahmen, auch ihr Nanntet mich nie, wie die Menschen sich nennen, Als kennten sie sich.	Though then not yet I called You by your name, and you Addressed me never, as men do, As though they knew each other,
Docht kannst’ ich euch besser Als ich je die Menschen gekannt, Ich verstand die Stille des Äthers, Der Menschen Worte verstand ich nie	Yet I knew you better Than ever I knew men; I understood the Athers stillness, But never have I comprehended human words.

1.8.5 ‘Hälfte des Lebens’ (The Middle of Life), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.5

Seelig remarks that this song has not yet received ‘musicological interest commensurate with the poem’s profound impact on literary critics’.¹⁰⁸ The mood of the song cycle as a whole takes a change with this song whereby the melancholy of middle age dramatically contrasts with the joyful youth of the preceding three settings. The awareness of midlife and its accompanying anxiety is musically represented in the meandering descending chromatic vocal line and contrasting slow first verse and agitated second verse tempi, which reflect directly the mood and detail of the text.

On the surface of this song we see the stylistic fingerprint of Schumann’s piano writing in Britten’s relentless figuration of ascending crotchet triplets in writing for the piano.¹⁰⁹ This nineteenth-century accompaniment practice contrasts with Britten’s lack of tonal clarity which alludes to the musical language of the twentieth century (see Ex.

¹⁰⁷ Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, pp. 118–19.

¹⁰⁸ Seelig, 'Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as A "Literary Song Cycle"', p. 110.

¹⁰⁹ Also used by Schumann in his setting of ‘Der Nussbaum’ (The Nut Tree), *Myrthen*, op.25 no.3, text by Julius Mosen, ed. by Clara Schumann (New York: Dover, 1981), pp. 26–29.

1.4). In this example we experience an obsessive chromatic melancholic semitonal descent in the voice, which contrasts with both the dual tonality of the piano treble and the repeated tonic pedal in the left hand. Britten's use of this ascending Schumannian outline serves to contrast dramatically with the textual dominance of images of the weighty over-abundance of nature as characterised by the chromatic descent in the vocal line (see Ex. 1.4), which is suggested by the text '*Tunkt ihr das Haupt / Ins heilignüchtrene Wasser*' (dip your heads into the pure hallowed water) (bars 17–21). This poetic idea of over-ripeness is also heard in the opening line of the first verse of the poem in '*Mit gelben Birnen hängen*' (With yellow fruit it hangs there) (bars 1–6), but on this latter occasion the meaning of the image is clarified through the use of the Christian symbolism of 'pure water' (see Table 1.2). The opening textual allusion to *Sehnsucht* (longing) is, however, not sustained, as shadow gives way to seasonal darkness. The piano's repeated ascent has the effect of musically confirming this hermeneutic understanding.

Example 1.4: 'Hälfte des Lebens', *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.5, bars 17–21

The musical score for Example 1.4 consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with a *dim.* marking and features a chromatic descent from G4 to D4 across five bars. The lyrics are: 'Tunkt ihr das Haupt / Ins heilignüchtrene Wasser.' The piano accompaniment features a repeated ascending chromatic line in the right hand and a tonic pedal in the left hand. The piano part ends with a *pp* marking.

Table 1.2 Text of ‘Hälfte des Lebens’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.5

Hälfte des Lebens	The Middle of Life
Hölderlin	(Poetic translation) Michael Hamburger ¹¹⁰
Mit gelben Birnen hängen Und voll mit wilden Rosen Das Land in den See, Ihr holden Schwäne, Und trunken von Küssen Tunkt ihr das Haupt Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.	With yellow pears the land, And full of wild roses, Hangs down into the lake, O graceful swans, And drink with kisses, You dip your heads Into the hallowed-sober water.
Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo Den Sonnenschein Und Schatten der Erde? Die Mauern stehn Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde Klirren die Fahnen.	Alas, where shall I find when Winter comes, flowers, and where Sunshine, And the shadows of earth? The walls stand Speechless and cold, in the wind Weathercocks clatter.

Britten's continued use of this repeated ascending triplet figure, as a structural device, in the second and final verse of this song initially appears at odds with the seasonal poetic progression from late summer to winter, but he achieves this musical transformation rather by means of both tempo change from the slowness of summer to the agitation of winter and by changes in time signature. However, tension is musically highlighted at the outset in the conflicting piano triplet-crotchets and triplet-quavers against the duple metre of the voice. The pervasive relatively-secure environment of the opening stanza is represented in the repeated piano bass 'tonic' 'BBflat' pedal, whose absence in the closing verse contributes to the doubt and increased desolation of Britten's text setting here. The initial Tempo I is momentarily recalled by conspicuous reference to this 'BB' pedal at points of textual reference to the first verse and its accompanying images of summer, such as '*Blumen*' (flowers) (bar 32) and '*den Sonnenschein*' (the shining sun) (bars 34–35) and in the piano's concluding postlude (bars 47–48) and effects a transitional memory shift to the past. An isolated incidence of

¹¹⁰ Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, pp. 158–59.

a vocal leap, in this otherwise step-wise primarily-chromatic vocal line (other than octave register adjustments), arises in a depiction, by tritone, of the clattering of weather cocks in the final line of text. Again in this song, as in the third song ‘Sokrates...’, Britten achieves textual dualism by means of essentially musical structural uniformity.

1.8.6 ‘Die Linien des Lebens’ (Lines of Life), *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.6

Evans refers to this poem as ‘the most moving of all the poems written in Hölderlin’s madness’;¹¹¹ it therefore provides a fitting epigrammatic conclusion to Britten’s cycle. The increasing self-doubt of the protagonist, which commenced in the previous song, is deepened and heightened in this the cycle’s final song. This progression is musically represented in the four-part canon which initially creates parallel fifth movement, and in the symbolic use of the tritone (see Ex. 2.1, bars 1–3) as a device of heightened awareness and musical presentation of the equivalence of the variety of possible life journeys. The hollow opening fifths of this closing song recall the despondence of the hollow octaves of the opening song ‘Menschenbeifall’. Evans refers to Britten’s use of this song’s framework as ‘the most German of structures, a chorale fantasy’ and that the song ‘emerges almost automatically from its text’.¹¹² The canonic figure itself can be seen as relating to the preceding song’s Schumannian piano accompaniment; the overall shape of the five-note ascent followed by minor-third descent has been retained but is now extended to a six-note ascent followed by a diminished-third descent, thereby creating the canon’s motif that organically develops from the preceding song. Indeed the final open ‘BBflat’ note of this penultimate song only finds resolution as the fifth of the final chord of the closing song, which arises in the context of an ultimate shift from an E-flat minor tonal centre to E-flat major.

¹¹¹ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 369.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 369.

Example 1.5: ‘Die Linien des Lebens’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.6, bars /15–20

The image displays a musical score for 'Die Linien des Lebens' from 'Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente' no. 6, bars 15-20. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in a soprano register, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The lyrics are: 'Mit Har - mo - nien und ew' - gem Lohn und Frie -' and 'With har - mo - ny, re - ward and peace e - ter -'. The piano accompaniment features complex chordal textures with many dissonances, particularly in the right hand. The dynamic markings for the piano part include *ff*, *sf*, *poco dim.*, *f*, and *mf*. There are also performance instructions like 'den. nal. 8va' and a fermata over the final chord. A double bar line with repeat dots is at the end of the piano part.

Britten’s discordant setting is in stark contrast with the relative concordant nature of the ‘spiritual optimism’ and philosophical outlook of the poem (see Table 1.3).¹¹³ In addition the poem’s final textual climax, ‘*Lohn und Frieden*’ (‘eternal recompense and peace’) is musically shattered by Britten’s climactic chordal dissonance as also reflected in the dynamic escalation from *triple piano* to *forte* (see Ex.1.5). Brendel remarks that this juxtaposition of dissonance on texts of harmony and eternal peace clearly expresses self-doubt at life’s end.¹¹⁴ The repeated conflict of the pitches ‘b-natural’¹ in the voice,

¹¹³ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 388.

¹¹⁴ Ron Brendel, ‘Beyond Borrowing: Britten’s Eclecticism in the Hölderlin Songs’ (Unpublished conference paper presented at ‘Britten in Context’ Conference, Hope University, Liverpool, 12 June 2010), p. 7.

and ‘B-natural’ and ‘Bb’ in the piano writing commences on the word ‘*Harmonien*’ (Harmony), thereby symbolising Britten’s musical questioning of the inconclusive nature of Hölderlin’s philosophical outlook. The relative dramatic conclusion of this song is also heightened by its role as the closing song of the cycle and leaves us in no doubt that Britten has formed his independent reading of Hölderlin poetry and has musically made this poetry his own.

Table 1.3 Text of ‘Die Linien des Lebens’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.6

Die Linien des Lebens Hölderlin	Lines of Life (Poetic translation) Michael Hamburger ¹¹⁵
Die Linien des Lebens sind verschieden, Wie Wege sind, und wie der Berge Grenzen. Was hier wir sind, kann dort ein Gott ergänzen Mit Harmonien und ew’gem Lohn und Frieden	The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease Like footpaths and the mountains’ utmost ends; What here we are, elsewhere a god amends With harmonies, eternal recompense and peace.

1.9 MUSICAL UNITY THROUGH TONAL STRUCTURE

Britten’s *Hölderlin* song cycle does not seek to achieve cohesive musical unity by way of a continuous ‘narrative’ (as in Schumann’s song cycle *Liederkreis*), or through the exposition of a psychological journey (as in Schubert’s *Winterreise*); instead, having no identifiable plot, it utilises the model of Schumann’s *Liederreihe*, or song row, without an obvious narrative whereby tonality provides a structural connective element. Whittall considers that Britten’s *Hölderlin* cycle ‘has the clearest progressive tonal scheme of all of the cycles’.¹¹⁶ The clarity of the tonal framework of this song cycle primarily represents Britten’s intentional musical response to his poetic selection. However, it should also be reconsidered in the context of the levels of tonal experimentation in the

¹¹⁵ Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, pp. 266–67.

¹¹⁶ Arnold Whittall, ‘Tonality in Britten’s Song Cycles with Piano’, *Tempo* 96 (1971), 8.

twentieth century, as constituting Britten’s conscious display of homage to the fundamentally tonal origins of German song. This is presented in the ‘underlying ... “flat” direction of the whole cycle’ which Whittall identifies as the tonal structure of this song cycle:¹¹⁷ F major—A major—D major—G major—Bb major—Eb major (see Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Tonal structure of Britten’s song cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61

Song Title	Key: Inner-group	Key: Outer-group
1. ‘Menschenbeifall’ (Human Applause)	F major – (1 flat)	
2. ‘Die Heimat’ (Home)		A major – (3 sharps)
3. ‘Sokrates und Alcibiades’ (Socrates and Alcibiades)		D major – (2 sharps)
4. ‘Die Jugend’ (Youth)		G major – (1 sharp)
5. ‘Hälfte des Lebens’ (The Middle of Life)	Bb major – (2 flats)	
6. ‘Die Linien des Lebens’ (Lines of Life)	Eb major – (3 flats)	

Investigation of the increased ‘flat’ direction of the tonal centres of these successive songs reveals the presence of an inner and outer grouping of songs, whereby the F major first song may be grouped with the Bb major penultimate and Eb major final songs: each key shows an incremental flat in the key signature. Given the consistent presence of Bb in these framing songs the dissonance created with B in the final song, ‘Die Linien des Lebens’, takes on greater musical significance (see Ex. 1.5, bars /15–16).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

The inner group of songs, numbering two to four inclusive, reveals the progression of a reverse circle of fifths, in which one sharp is omitted in each successive song. This also has the effect of an increased ‘flat’ direction. These tonal progressions are a direct result of Britten’s reading of Hölderlin poems. The ‘inner’ group deals with the more private and intimate related aspects of home, youth, and love as ways of considering a youth’s development to manhood, which is musically represented by keys with sharps in the key signatures. The ‘quiet port’ is seen as an appropriate place for the young in the second song, the effect of the innocent Alcibiades on others is considered in the third song, and the role of the gods in protecting the youth is the subject matter of the fourth song—common among these Britten selections is his exclusive identification with young men. By contrast the ‘outer’ grouping is more public in nature and addresses middle age and maturity with increasing apprehension and anxiety as symbolised by the increasing use of flats keys in these two final songs. Therefore, the increasing ‘flat’ direction of the cycle can be taken at these two complementary levels to represent both human development and the anxiety of advancing age. The clarity of this dualistic structural approach to a tonal framework reinforces the binary nature of the poetic content which Britten chooses to highlight and interpret in his *Hölderlin* settings.

In addition to the tonal unity which Britten assigns to this song cycle, musical cohesion is achieved by the literary lexical unifying effects of recurring images: of God, the gods, and a higher world. The conspicuous presence of these textual references in Britten’s selected poems leaves us in no doubt as to the composer’s awareness of the central role which Hellenic and Christian ideals held in Hölderlin’s appropriation into Germanic literary culture; the opening song speaks of the ‘*Göttliche*’ (God-like), the second song of ‘*Ihr holden Ufer*’ (O blissful shores), the third to ‘*Wie auf Götter*’ (As on gods), the prepenultimate of the ‘*Lüfchen des Himmels*’ (breezes of Heaven), the

penultimate of *'heiligenüchterne Wasser'* (hallowed-sober water), and the closing song refers to *'ewigen Lohn und Frieden'* (eternal recompense and peace). Likewise the prominence of *'Lebens'* (life) in the title and first line of the final two-song set encourages further review of the text and the identification of *'Lebens'* in the opening song. So too, love and matters of the heart feature prominently in the subject matter of this Britten selection from Hölderlin's poetry: *'Hertz'* and *'liebe'* in the opening song; *'Liebe'*, albeit *'Liebe Leiden'* in the second; *'mit Liebe'* and *'liebt'* in the third; *'das Herz'*, *'mein Hertz'*, *'Liebling'* and *'lieben'* in the fourth; and *'Küssen'* in the penultimate song. The themes of Life and Love run throughout this cycle and offer textual connectivity within the context of other Romantic ideas of longing and fragmentation, which provide an additional recurring sub-text. Britten therefore creates a cohesive song cycle by musical and literary means, a literary cycle not alone at the level of the work of a single poet, but also through a discerning selection of related large-scale themes and local-level imagery.

1.10 BRITTEN'S LIEDER: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Having considered Britten's many-faceted interaction with German Lieder, we may now consider his cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* as part of that genre, a judgement based not alone on language, but rather on this composer's identification of and attraction to the lyrical, literary-based origins of this tradition. He engages fully with Romantic ideas of fragmentation and *Sehnsucht* and incorporates texts which reengage with classical themes and subject matter. Britten has been shown not to be restricted by the texts he sets and does, at times, highlight musically a poetic reading which appears to contradict or create a tension with his source text. Britten's journey to 'distant

[musical and literary] islands' provided him with a rich harvest indeed.¹¹⁸ His 'feel for [setting] language'¹¹⁹ responded to the interpretive challenge of his selected poetic texts and provided Britten with a framework in which to express, in art song, his music-based ideas. Indeed, the composer's literary knowledge, discernment, and poetic-textual sensitivity meant that he was pre-disposed to the attractions of this poetic-based musical genre. In his selections Britten reveals his attraction to lyrical verse and he responds with individual contemporary text setting.

In his *Hölderlin* cycle, Britten reveals his ability to synthesise nineteenth-century literary and compositional practices within his contemporary musical language which binds these separate, at times fragmentary poems into an aesthetic musical whole. In much the same way as Othmar Schoeck, Britten's extensive musical and literary references to past idioms reveal both his awareness of and respect for the richness of the heritage of the German Lied tradition, and his desire to contribute to the corpus of German Lieder, from a position that was geographically distant but aesthetically informed by a rich musico-literary experience rooted in that tradition. Britten's specific contribution to Lieder and broader consistent promotion of art song is conspicuous within the context of an increasing marginality of twentieth-century song.

Furthermore, it is possible that this consideration of the depth and extent of Britten's absorption of the heritage of the nineteenth-century Lied tradition, as revealed through his German-language art-song compositions, has a wider relevance for this thesis. Ultimately I would suggest that his English-language settings require reassessment as an expression, in part, of a Lieder aesthetic, in addition to being a consequence of an English song tradition — all provide evidence of Britten's text-

¹¹⁸ This text is from the second line of the first verse of Hölderlin's poem *Die Heimat*. Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁹ Woodward, 'Music for Voices', p. 260. Cited after: Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, p. 121.

setting responses to the inspiration of lyrical poetic verse — Romantic and romantic-classical in the case of Hölderlin and contemporary in the case of Auden (chapters 3–5). The linguistic and stylistic eclecticism of Britten’s text setting may be regarded as a musical transcendence of the boundaries of musical genre which are based solely on language.

CHAPTER 2

TEXT SETTING: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE RELATIONSHIP OF MUSIC AND WORDS IN SONG

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Music set to words can reflect them in many different ways. Perhaps the most fascinating and greatest settings are those where the tonal and rhythmic structure, the form, and the motivic design embody equivalents for salient features of the text: grammar and syntax, rhyme schemes and other patterns of sound, imagery...Structural connections between words and music occur frequently in the art-song repertory...¹

The ‘theory-based analysis of song is notoriously lacking in models’ which deal comprehensively with the relationship of text and music; thus, Kofi Agawu declares in *Music Analysis* in 1992,² in an article which still generates debate.³ Agawu further explains that the ‘marginality of song *as song* in literature [of music theory and analysis] speaks to a very real problem, namely, how to account for the syntax of a genre [song] that includes two nominal semiotic systems, music and language’.⁴ This awareness of song as a unique genre within musical genre, due to its inter-relationship with representational text, and equally cognisant of the differing capacity of music and

¹ Carl Schachter, ‘Motive and Text in Four Schubert Songs’, in *Unfoldings: Essays in Schenkerian Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Joseph N. Strauss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 209. Hereafter referred to as Schachter, ‘Motive and Text in Four Schubert Songs’. (see 2.6 for a discussion of this quotation).

² Kofi Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, *Music Analysis*, 11/1, 1992, 3–36 (3). Hereafter referred to as Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’.

³ Agawu’s article is formative to a more recent study: Lawrence M. Zbikowski, ‘Words, Music, and Song: The Nineteenth-Century Lied’, in *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 243–286. Hereafter referred to as Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*.

⁴ Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 3.

text to contain and convey meaning, will inform the methodology and the practical approach in this thesis. Britten, in his song repertory, brings together two artistic media—music and poetry. Each medium is capable of occupying a whole artistic and aesthetic space; however, when combined in song, the relationship of text and music forms a new art work, for which exclusively musical or literary focused theories provide analytic tools which prove problematic in the song analysis. This chapter does not claim to propound a new or definitive theory of text setting; to do so is beyond the scope of this thesis; rather, it engages critically with eminent theories and approaches to text setting, in order to define a valid and justifiable approach to Britten art song. Many of these approaches, or aspects thereof, will offer a theoretical backdrop for much of the text-setting analysis of these, heretofore little-researched, Britten art songs.

Many of the approaches and theories presented here have been developed either primarily or exclusively from the aesthetic of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lieder tradition. However, they also have broader applicability to English-language song, not least because of the significant impact of Germanic musical traditions on instrumental and vocal English music, but also, significantly, because of the predominance of lyrical poetry as the source of both English song and Lieder. This latter point is particularly relevant to Britten's discernment in his selection of lyric poetry by Auden which he set in song, and is considered in this thesis, but it is also representative of Britten's general choice of lyric source for song. The preceding chapter has sought to contextualise Britten's attraction and exposure to, and his deep absorption of, German-language song, to the extent that the application of the approaches and theories explored here, though developed specifically from and for a related genre, are justifiably directly relevant to our present consideration of his English song repertory.

In subsequent sections theories will be dealt with primarily in chronological order of date of contribution; however, where there is a potential crossover of ideas, connections will be identified between the views proposed by contemporary musicologists and theorists.

2.2.1 TEXT SETTING: AN ISSUE OF DEFINITION

In line with Agawu's pronouncements as to the dearth of formal theory concerning song and texted music, so too, the activity of text setting is not sufficiently clearly defined. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* offers the idea of text setting as both a compositional and an analytic activity, analysis being concerned with the areas of the syntactic and semantic relationship between music and text.⁵ Syntactic concerns make reference to the musical response of the work to the structure of the source text, at both the level of overall form, and sentence and word patterns; semantic questions relate to the response of music to the ideas and underlying meaning contained in the text.⁶ The practice of word-painting is primarily, yet not exclusively, concerned with syntactic issues while tone or mood painting, again not solely but primarily, engages with semantic issues.

On the face of it this broad subject outline seems useful but it is also problematic: as there is no mention of the impact of text setting on performance and music/song reception, likewise there is no generally accepted conception of the boundaries of text setting. It is unclear whether text setting is the contained study, in the case of this thesis, of what Britten does musically with words, or whether it encompasses the complete appreciation of song or indeed vocal music. For example, Bruce Hayes narrowly interprets the text-setting problem proposed by Halle and Lerdahl, as 'concerns how

⁵ Jonathan King, 'Text-Setting', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), xxv, pp. 319–20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 319–20.

lines of linguistic text are arranged against a predetermined rhythmic pattern',⁷ this activity essentially describes the activity of text underlay only and ignores the wider formative, compositional, performance, interpretative, and analytic aspects of the relationship of music and text. No definitive theory of vocal or text-based music exists. Rather, song theory survives on the margins of theories of instrumental music and while it has been enriched by many specific individual musicological research contributions, none of these propounds a comprehensive theory of text setting. The relatively recent emergence of exclusive research into the interaction between text and music was remarked on by Scher, in the introductory claim which he made in his edited collection *Music and Text* (1992), that this volume provides the first 'broadly conceived framework' of this musicological subject area.⁸

Indeed, Jonathan Dunsby introduces, with apparent controversial intent, the notion of 'untheory' (his term), to question the desirability or the feasibility of codifying a 'theory of music and words,'⁹ thereby highlighting the complexity of this relationship as presented in song and also the impact of the individuality of a composer on the activity of codification. Rather he accepts, in relation to his monograph *Making Words Sing*, in respect to his own contribution to this argument, that it should be 'concentrated and digestible, and anything but comprehensive'.¹⁰ Within the context of such a discussion, this thesis seeks to contribute to the body of text-setting knowledge from within the confines of a specific exploration of Benjamin Britten's response to lyric poetry—his musical interpretation of text. A worthwhile starting point for this research is an

⁷ Bruce Hayes, 'Textsetting as Constraint Conflict', in *Proceedings of 'Typology of Poetic Forms'* (Paris April 2005 (2005)), pp. 1–19. Hereafter referred to as Hayes, 'Textsetting as Constraint Conflict'. Hayes refers to J. Halle and F. Lerdahl, 'A Generative Textsetting Model' *CM*, lv (1993), 3–23.

⁸ Steven Paul Scher, *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. ix. Hereafter referred to as Scher, *Music and Text*.

⁹ Jonathan Dunsby, *Making Words Sing: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 6, 25–32. Hereafter referred to as Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*.

¹⁰ Dunsby's achievements in this regard are evident in this slim (153-page) volume: Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 7.

awareness that the relationship between lyrical poetry and music operates on differing levels of mimetic sophistication and interrelatedness. The resultant evidence of this song analysis will be presented to support an enhanced appreciation of the relative significance of text to Britten's compositional process and to the output of that process—song.

2.2.2 TEXT SETTING: A STILL-EVOLVING APPROACH

David Lewin, in his recent monograph, *Studies in Music with Text*, proposes an approach to the consideration of the relationship of 'musical structure and poetic imagery'.¹¹ Although Lewin presents and outlines his approach in the context of an exploration of Schubert's song 'Auf dem Flusse', from *Die Winterreise*,¹² and does not lay claim for a wider application of this approach to a consideration of these relations in song in general—in spite of the fact that it amounts to a blueprint for the creation of a comprehensive approach—likewise he makes no claims that this approach amounts to a theory of text setting.¹³ While Lewin makes reference to the 'sections' of his written analysis, it is however useful, and indeed appropriate, to refer to each of these phases as stages rather than 'sections', thereby reinforcing their progressive logical nature, and strengthening his overall argument. Lewin's approach has been formative in the development of the framework which underscores this current thesis, and a summarized version of his approach follows which serves to inform aspects of both text-setting theory and practice.

¹¹ David Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, ed. by Richard Cohn, *Oxford Studies in Music Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 109–125. Hereafter referred to as Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*.

¹² Schubert, *Die Winterreise*, ed. by Eusebius Mandyczewski, in *Franz Schubert Complete Song Cycles* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

¹³ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 109. Lewin's article "'Auf dem Flusse": Image and Background in Schubert Song' was first presented in *19th-Century Music*, 6 (1982), 47–59.

Table 2.1 A consolidation of Lewin’s ‘sections’ into stages

New Categorisation	Focus of Activity	Lewin’s: Equivalent Designation¹⁴
Stage 1	Theoretical framework	Section 1: A critical stance
Stage 2	Poetic reading	Section 2: A reading of the text
Stage 3	a) Musico-poetic analysis b) Musical analysis	Sections 3 and 4: Mimetic techniques and deeper structure
Stage 4	Interpretive analysis	Section 5: Interpretation

I respectfully suggest that Lewin’s five-‘section’ approach to song analysis may be re-focused on activity and consolidated into a four-‘stage’ approach, or at least could beneficially be considered progressively in this way, as seen in Table 2.1; these stages also retain Lewin’s actual practical approach to the written interpretation of song, but seek to identify the interrelated and joint analytic nature of Lewin’s music and musico-poetic analysis of section three and section four in his approach.

The outline of Lewin’s sectional approach to song analysis and interpretation, as shown in Table 2.1, will now serve as a framework for the following central section of this chapter’s exploration and response to Lewin’s work, but it will also provide a fresh opportunity to engage with the research of the following eminent musicologists (arranged in broad chronological order of contribution to the text-setting debate): Arnold Schoenberg, Susanne Langer, Edward T. Cone, Kofi Agawu, Joseph Coroniti, Lawrence Kramer, Steven Paul Scher, Lawrence Zbikowski, Christopher Wilson, and Jonathan Dunsby.¹⁵ Many of these theories lean towards the specific awareness of the

¹⁴ As summarised from Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 109.

¹⁵ The following literature will be specifically referred to in this current research: Leonard Stein, ed., *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, trans. by Leo Black (London: Faber and Faber, 1975); Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Development from Philosophy in a New Key*

role of rhythmic analysis for the interpretation of song. This synthesised appreciation of the complexity of the research field of text setting leads into a specific discussion of the practical and theoretical insights to be gained from an engagement with the expansive and convincing approach to rhythm and metre taken by Yonatan Malin in his recent published monograph *Songs in Motion*;¹⁶—all of this in the service of an informed contextualisation of Britten’s art-song repertory.

Dunsby seeks to bring some certainty to the issues at hand as he extols the need for clarity ‘about whether we are discussing matters of production, reception or description/explanation’.¹⁷ Art song interacts with and benefits from all three musicological discourses. This thesis focuses on the final category—in a search for expressive meaning in Britten’s songs informed by a close reading of his texts. That is not to say that the songs considered in Part 2 of this thesis could not also have been studied from the perspectives of performance and/or reception; both aspects would further enhance cultural understanding of these works. However, even within Dunsby’s apparently straightforward pithy quotation, proved above, there is need for a refinement of definition. It is uncertain whether Dunsby means performance when he refers to ‘production’, or whether he includes the act of composition in this activity. If in the

(London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953); Edward T. Cone, ‘Words into Music: The Composer’s Approach to the Text’, in *Music: A View from Delft*, ed. by Robert P. Morgan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and ‘Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?’, in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century “Lied”’, 3–36 and ‘Perspectives on Schubert’s Songs’, *Music Analysis*, 16/1 (1997), 107–22; Joseph Coroniti, *Poetry as Text in Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: From Stravinsky to Reich* (Lampeter, Edwin Mellon Press, 1992); Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) and *Musical Meaning: Towards a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Scher, *Music and Text*; Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*; Christopher R. Wilson ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-Century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Poetic Theory and Practice’, in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, ed. by Jeremy Dibble and Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 278–94; Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*; in addition to Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*.

¹⁶ Yonatan Malin, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied*, ed. by Richard Cohn, *Oxford Studies in Music Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Hereafter referred to as Malin, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied*.

¹⁷ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 2.

latter interpretation the composition of song is included in ‘production’, then it should be noted that this act of artistic creation, within its culturally inclusive context, is also often the focus of the following chapters of this thesis.

2.3.1 THEORETICAL STANCE

Literature on the relationship of words and music is vast in scope and there are many scholars who have provided insightful historic and stylistic surveys.¹⁸ In this thesis, I wish to recognise the significant contribution of this extant research, and to apply the writings of these prominent twentieth-century historical musicologists and theorists, as pertains specifically to issues of text setting. These approaches are united by a common desire to identify, to a greater or lesser extent, the formative influence of text in the compositional process and to place its function in song. Within this body of research, the intention is to contribute to musicological knowledge through an identification of the potential cross-fertilisation of associated ideas, among scholars, and through an assessment of the growth which has occurred in these still-evolving theories and methodologies.

Lewin considers that a precursor to text-setting research is the establishment of a ‘general critical stance towards the relation of music and text’ in song.¹⁹ However, many musicologists commence research pertaining to text setting with a brief selective historical contextualisation which is not always explicitly useful in developing an

¹⁸ Examples include: Jane K. Brown, ‘In the Beginning Was Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. by James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 12–32; historical and geographic, Denis Stevens, *A History of Song* (London: Hutchinson, 1960); stylistic, Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: Free Press, 1970); Lorraine Gorrell, *The Nineteenth-Century German Lied* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1993); and Rufus Hallmark, ed., *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996). More recently, Aisling Kenny provides an up-to-date contextualized overview of the specific relationship of words and music in Nineteenth-Century Lieder: Aisling Kenny, ‘Josephine Lang’s Goethe, Heine and Uhland Lieder: Contextualizing Her Approach to Nineteenth-Century German Song’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2010), pp. 128–58.

¹⁹ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 109.

approach to song. For example, Kramer opens his chapter on song with a quote from Milton's poem 'At a Solemn Music' in which the relation of music and poetry is described as:

Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ,
Dead things with inbreathd sense able to pierce.²⁰

This contextualisation is helpful only insofar as it identifies similarities and differences between these two media as a 'synthesizing power of divine creation',²¹ highlights the complexity of this interrelationship and also clarifies past formative ideas. Such debate is reminiscent of a past historiographic view which is dominated by literary, or even poetic, hyperbole, in which assertion takes the place of evidence-based research. So too, Blasing introduces his subject with Plato's argument (always presented as a contemporary view): 'there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry' in which 'Poets are banned from the Republic, ostensibly on the grounds that mimetic fictions are imitations of imitations and thus twice removed from the Truth'.²² As a result, should we now consider that song is therefore twice removed and once transformed, or trice removed, from truth or meaning? Such semantics do not progress this discourse. Rather, this exploration commences with Suzanne Langer's seminal 1953 chapter, 'The Principle of Assimilation', in her book, *Form and Feeling*, which engages with and responds to contemporary musicological research. It should be noted in the following subsections that it is necessary to include a number of extended quotations in advance of subsequent interpretation, not generally the preferred approach in this thesis,

²⁰ As cited in: Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 125. Hereafter referred to as Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²² Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 1. Hereafter referred to as: Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*.

but required here so as to ensure the accurate presentation of the complexity of the views of each author.

2.3.1.1 LANGER: MUSIC SWALLOWS WHOLE WORDS!

Langer presents strongly, and convincingly, a number of related absolute pronouncements in the text-setting debate. She raises the philosophical problem inherent in vocal music, as she sees it: ‘the much-debated principle of “purity” of artistic medium’²³ (see also Nietzsche’s view on this subject 2.3.1.4); whether poetry and music as artistic mediums are less whole when they interconnect in song. The discourse of music and text is presented as an issue of relative primacy. Langer focuses on language as the raw material of poetry and states that the composer should neither ignore the essence of poetry nor wholly obey its poetics, but rather, in song, the composer ‘transform[s] the entire verbal material—sound, meaning, and all—into musical elements’.²⁴ In her pragmatic view of the composer’s approach to text setting she reflects that: ‘composers have made as free as they liked with their texts’.²⁵

In essence, Langer considers that the composer ‘annihilates the poem and makes the song’; and that in this act of assimilation ‘music swallows words; not only mere words and literary sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry’;²⁶ by implication this would also include poetic form. Both of these terms, annihilation and assimilation, are steeped in connotations of power and the exertion of that power over another. The totalitarian aspect of this former view, of extinction, is somewhat mitigated by the latter term, which is defined as either the taking fully into one’s mind or the conversion of a

²³ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Development from Philosophy in a New Key* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 149–50. Hereafter referred to as Langer, *Feeling and Form*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–53.

substance similar to itself.²⁷ Interestingly, both of these definitions of assimilation, when applied to song, imply the transformation of words into music in song: ‘they are no longer prose or poetry, they are elements of music’.²⁸ Langer emphatically declares:

Song is not a compromise between poetry and music, though the text taken by itself is a great poem; *song is music*.²⁹

Song is not, in Langer’s terms, an equal meeting of ‘harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse’;³⁰ music dominates and mediates the entire discourse. As she proclaims that song is music, she extends this idea and makes similar claims for opera (dramatic music) and for programmatic music—indeed, all text-based music (not mentioned specifically but accepting that programme music may also be inspired other than by text).

In addition to her formulation of this theoretical stance (to apply Lewin’s term) in song, Langer gives guidance on the actual relation of text and music. In support of her primary thesis she contends that ‘the “poetic core”, becomes motivating centers [*sic*] of feeling, musical ideas’, and that ‘a song conceived “poetically” sounds not as the poem sounds, but as it feels’.³¹ These aesthetic observations will be particularly useful in an assessment of Britten’s particular stance in his art songs. Interestingly, for this thesis, Langer also further informs our musico-literary appreciation of the poet Hölderlin, a subject of the preceding chapter, who considered that:

A verse has a beginning, and sooner or later reaches a point of highest intonation. Then it sinks back again and dies away...The poet begins with an agonized situation that cries for its resolution. He intensifies the unbearable. He introduces scenes of relative calm and starts a further increase of feeling, till a crisis occurs and the tension is swiftly or gradually resolved.³²

²⁷ Chambers, *The Chambers Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Chamber Harrap Publishing), pp. 59, 93.

²⁸ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 150.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152. (Italics inserted by this author).

³⁰ Cited in: Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 125.

³¹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, pp. 158–59.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 162–63.

The parallels between this description of a literary melodic and harmonic equivalent topography with the driving motion of a musical topography in song, are evident, although the poetry described contains a stronger narrative and a greater dramatic subject matter and content than may be considered to be purely lyrical in nature.

2.3.1.2 CONE'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Subsequently, Edward Cone engaged with the ideas proposed by Langer. I wish to interact with his research at three points in time: his 1956 chapter, 'Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text';³³ his seminal consolidating 1974 monograph, *The Composer's Voice*;³⁴ and the subsequent revision and development of his ideas in the chapter, 'Poet's Love or Composer's Love?'.³⁵ These historiographic snapshots provide a fascinating written expression of the enthusiasm of an academic willingness to engage, respond and reengage with a significant and fluid theoretical topic.

In 1956 Cone considers the question 'how to set to music a pre-existing poetic text not specifically written for this purpose' to be a 'newly arisen problem' first encountered in song in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.³⁶ He provides a concise but insightful history of text setting in which he correlates the development of vocal music, as an established musical form, with the relatively recent development of independent instrumental music.³⁷ Cone contends, in the case of Schubert's songs, that

³³ Edward T. Cone, 'Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text', in *Music: A View from Delft*, ed. by Robert P. Morgan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 115–23. Hereafter referred to as Cone, 'Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text'. This chapter is a reprint from *Sound and Poetry*, ed. by Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), written in 1956.

³⁴ Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). Hereafter referred to as Cone, *The Composer's Voice*.

³⁵ Edward T. Cone, 'Poet's Love or Composer's Love?', in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 177–92. Hereafter referred to as Cone, 'Poet's Love or Composer's Love?'.
³⁶ Cone, 'Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text', p. 115.

³⁷ The rise of independent instrumental forms is primarily attributed to the rise of modern tonality in the seventeenth century: Cone, 'Words into Music: The Composer's Approach to the Text', p. 116.

song was no longer ‘content with vaguely indicating the mood of the poem but instead actively shaped its emotional content anew in accordance with its own interpretation’.³⁸

Central to Cone’s argument being an appreciation of how differently the mediums of poetry and music operate. He states that:

Poetry is much less determinate than music in these respects [verse form and metrical structure] and offers to the interpreter what a musician would consider a bewildering infinity of choice. Not only that: in reading or listening to poetry, the mind can move backwards and forwards through the work; it can subconsciously accept or reject many possibilities of meaning and interpretation; it is constantly busy making comparisons and clarifying relationships. In a word it is constantly trying to apprehend the poem under many of its possible forms. Not so in music, where the mind is, so to speak, chained to the vehicle of the moving sound. If it tries to struggle free of the present moment, it finds that it has lost the music in so doing. Hence it must follow the piece through from beginning to end, and it must perforce be satisfied with those relationships immediately perceptible during one journey. But if poetry is more flexible in this regard, music is more vivid; by the very concentration it requires it presents its single aspect with greater immediacy and with the illusion of closer personal contact.³⁹

The essence of the argument posited in this dense extended quotation, which allows little possibility for truncation, is an appreciation of the practical and unique ability of ‘songs in motion’⁴⁰ to transport the listener in the real-time enactment of the song; albeit described here in involuntary terms. Awareness of these very real aesthetic differences in how poetry and music are perceived will provide a method of assessing Britten’s level of consciousness of the independence of his artistic role from his source poet, in Part 2 of this thesis. Given Cone’s views as to the relative diversity of written text, it is not surprising that he concluded, in 1956, that the only possible justification for the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴⁰ Yonatan Malin’s monograph, of this name, will be discussed later in the current chapter.

composition of art song is the attempt to enhance ‘our understanding of the poem’—a view he later revised.⁴¹

We perceive, more acutely, the influence of Langer on Cone’s ideas in his views expressed in his later book, *Composer’s Voice*, when he states that:

A song is not primarily the melodic recitation or the musical interpretation or the criticism of a poem...it is first of all a new creation of which the poem is only one component’.⁴²

This represents a major leap for its author from his previously held view of the primacy of the appreciation of the poem in song. In this regard, he now states that the composer is not primarily engaged in “setting” a poem, rather the composer focuses on his/her specific, albeit silent, reading of the poem.⁴³ And in clarification Cone offers:

And to say that he [the composer] “sets” even his reading is less accurate than to say that he appropriates it; he makes his own by turning it [the poem] into music. What we hear in a song, then, is not the poet’s persona but the composer’s.⁴⁴

This ‘turning’, or translation, is however, not a mimetic act. With Cone’s closely relating ideas, such as ‘a new creation’ and ‘appropriates it’, he has effectively contributed to a significant revision of Langer’s principle of assimilation, while he simultaneously progressed his own ideas.

By the time of his contribution to Scher’s collection of essays, *Music and Text* (1992), Cone had synthesized his views of the constituent ‘personas’ in song, to the extent that ‘my three original figures have collapsed into one: a unitary vocal-instrumental protagonist that is coextensive with the persona of the actual composer of the song’, even in ‘songs with full-fledged instrumental parts’.⁴⁵ The previous three

⁴¹ Cone, ‘Words into Music: The Composer’s Approach to the Text’, p. 123.

⁴² Cone, *The Composer’s Voice*, p. 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Cone, ‘Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?’, p. 182.

personas referred to were: ‘the vocal, the instrumental, and the (complete) musical.’⁴⁶ This convincingly-argued condensed idea of the protagonist’s cumulative and simultaneous awareness of all influences is not in itself helpful to the current practical application of this theory to Britten’s songs; an awareness of and an appreciation of the constituent components which Cone enters into the mix, in song, are more informative for this purpose.

Cone had previously proposed a number of personas in song, each containing an increasing complexity of meaning: at a base level the ‘verbal persona’ is present in the ‘poetic persona’; ‘vocal personas’ differ from ‘the purely verbal personas of the poetic text inasmuch as “they express themselves at least as much by melody as by speech, and as much by tone-color as by phonetic sound”’;⁴⁷ the ‘vocal persona adopts the original simulation of the poetic persona and adds another of his own: he “composes”, not the words alone, but the vocal line as well’;⁴⁸ the ‘instrumental accompaniment (no longer referred to by Cone as the ‘instrumental persona’) directly conveys certain aspects of the musical consciousness of the vocal protagonist’.⁴⁹ Awareness of distinct motivations and also the interrelatedness of these attitudes in song, the ‘verbal persona’, the ‘poetic persona’, the ‘vocal persona’, and instrumental accompaniment, lead to an enhanced appreciation to the totality of song. A significant practical benefit of this approach to song may be an awareness of the relative and changing presence of these forces in a song.

In addition, Cone proposed three further profound corollaries to his theories of song, ‘a world in which words give way to music as the primary vehicle of

⁴⁶ Cone, *The Composer’s Voice*, pp. 17–8.

⁴⁷ Cone, *The Composer’s Voice*, pp. 9–10. As cited in: Cone, ‘Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?’, p. 177.

⁴⁸ Cone, *The Composer’s Voice*, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Cone, ‘Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?’, p. 181.

expression'.⁵⁰ Firstly, that 'the poetic persona, originally a surrogate for the actual poet, now becomes, through its participation in the vocal-instrumental persona, a surrogate for the actual composer',⁵¹ and by extension that the composer can now be viewed as a 'composer-poet' and the protagonist can now be considered as a 'poet-composer'.⁵² Cone has come full circle from a poetry-centred, to a musically-centred, view of song while accommodating the coexisting individual motivation of: composer, poet, text, protagonist, singer and accompanist, melodic line, instrumental line (albeit harmonic), in the context of an audience.

Cone concluded with the following statements which take on a level of revealed meaning:

Probably the singer's first task is to determine the nature of the protagonist [therein identifying the song with the protagonist]—to ask, "Who am I?" The answer is never simple. Just as we conceive of the composer's own persona as operating in three areas—verbal, vocal, and instrumental—so we interpret the protagonist as moving on three levels simultaneously: the poetic, which is strictly verbal; the vocal, which conjoins the words with a melodic line; and the vocal-instrumental, which embeds the line in the total musical structure.⁵³

2.3.1.3 ASSIMILATION: APPROPRIATION AND BEYOND

Kramer presents the aforementioned contributions of Langer and Cone as an evolutionary development of ideologies, from Langer's original ideas of music's annihilation and related assimilation of poetry, and Cone's concurring notion of poetic assimilation, through to a general acceptance of music's appropriation of text. Having contextualised this historical backdrop Kramer then proposes his own incremental contribution to this debate, that:

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵³ Cone, *The Composer's Voice*, p. 23.

A poem is never really assimilated into a composition; it is *incorporated*, and it retains its own “body,” within the body of the music.⁵⁴

This view is analogous to the former views, as to the appropriation of text by music in song, with the essential distinction that Kramer considers that the poem’s essence remains on in the song, albeit transformed. Kramer’s convincing argument is further strengthened by his subsequent presentation of the balancing, opposing, now-dated, extreme views of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and the philosopher, poet and composer Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom expressed opinions which exhibit excessive literary affiliations. Rilke proposed an exclusively artistic view, which considered that a creative output must occupy ‘the whole artistic space’,⁵⁵ thereby denying, or significantly reducing, the possibility of reinterpretation or adaptation, while Nietzsche’s insider equally-separatist view is that ‘when a composer writes music for a lyrical poem...A necessary relation between poem and music...makes no sense, for the two worlds of tone and image are too remote from each other to enter more than an *external relationship*’.⁵⁶

Essentially, Kramer sees the critical issue as being an assessment of the ‘disintegrative effect of music as such on words as such’.⁵⁷ Usefully, he lists examples of this type of transformative effect of music on words:

—the expressive forcing of high and low tessitura, where the sound of the word inevitably fades into the effort of attacking the pitch; the complication of rhythm and the varied movement of the voice towards and away from speech-like patterns; the reiteration, alteration, and syntactic breakdown of the text—

⁵⁴ Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 127.

⁵⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters, 1910–1926*, trans. by Jane Bannard Green and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 246. As cited in: Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 128.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On Music and Words’, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, in *Between Romanticism and Modernism: Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, by Carl Dahlhaus, trans. by Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 112. As cited in: Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 128. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁵⁷ Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 129.

Thereby, he explains the distinction between the singing of words and their being spoken, so that words cease to ‘function as a speech act’,⁵⁸ an aspect which Cone also specifically addresses and referred to in the previous section. Kramer explains that many of these obstacles to textual declamation and clarity result from the ‘intonational manner that presents the voice as a precisely tuned instrument rather than as a source of utterance’.⁵⁹ Kramer builds significantly upon this idea of musical and textual disintegration in his later essay on ‘songfulness’ which is explored later in this chapter.⁶⁰

2.3.1.4 CORONITI’S VARIANT REITERATIONS

Coroniti’s opening chapter entitled ‘A Relationship of Equals?: Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music’ may be criticised as his introduction amounts to little more than a secondary re-examination of the same opinions consolidated and expressed, and in the same order, as discussed by Kramer in his 1984 chapter (see 2.3.1.3).⁶¹ The particular value of Coroniti’s contribution to this current text-setting debate is his theoretical response to the activity of actually setting poems to music; this personal experience shapes his debate as he seeks, uniquely, to explicate aspects which are essential for the artistic act of song composition.

Coroniti questions whether composers should ‘be satisfied to function as musical explicators of another medium’.⁶² Langer considers, ‘a poem that has a perfect form, in

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Towards a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 51–67. Hereafter referred to as Kramer, *Musical Meaning*.

⁶¹ Coroniti’s arguments are weakened by extensive secondary quotation of, for example, Cone, Rilke, Langer (p. 127 is misquoted as p. 128), and Boulez, cited from Kramer (1984): Joseph Coroniti, ‘A Relationship of Equals?: Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music’, in *Poetry as Text in Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: From Stravinsky to Reich* (Lampeter, Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), pp. 3–18, (3, 4, 5, 7). Hereafter referred to as Coroniti, ‘A Relationship of Equals?: Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music’.

⁶² Coroniti, ‘A Relationship of Equals?: Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music’, p. 3.

which everything is said and nothing merely adumbrated, a work completely developed and closed, does not readily lend itself to composition'.⁶³ Related to these points, Dunsby contends that 'the text has some price to pay for being set to music'.⁶⁴ Coroniti expresses his 'own ambivalence concerning the value of musical settings of great poetry. Part of the problem is my appreciation of the *sound of a great poem, its own music*'; he asks rhetorically 'is the composer, really needed here?'.⁶⁵ He develops significantly this latter aspect of the innate musicality inherent in words. All of these views seek to highlight the incremental elements which music, as an artistic medium, brings to the activity of song making.

Coroniti offers Ezra Pound's concept of the 'absolute rhythm' of a text as a way of appreciating the musicality of poetry, 'a rhythm which was part of the poetic idea itself, not a discipline over which the poem is strung'.⁶⁶ Coroniti contends that this theory, of a poem's deeper 'absolute rhythm', 'offers the composer a way of communicating poetic meaning without resorting to imitation'.⁶⁷ Schafer, in his introduction to *Ezra Pound and Music*, paraphrases the poet's idea of '*melopoeia*', as poetry 'wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning'.⁶⁸ Likewise, W. B. Yeats considers that 'every poet who reads his own poetry gives as much importance to the rhythm as the words'.⁶⁹

⁶³ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 154.

⁶⁴ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ Coroniti, 'A Relationship of Equals?; Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music', p. 1. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁶⁶ R. Murray Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 15. Hereafter referred to as Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*.

⁶⁷ Coroniti, 'A Relationship of Equals?; Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music', p. 7.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, Pound also recognises, in addition to '*melopoeia*' that there are two other types of poetry as: '*logopoeia*', the poetry of ideas and precise expression; and '*phanopoeia*', the poetry of images, although these aspects may be present jointly in all poetry. A reading of Malin's *Songs in Motion* suggests that the origins of the nineteenth-century Lied were particularly focused on '*melopoeia*', while the poetry of Auden set by Britten contained all three aspects of these Pound definitions. Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*, pp. 3–4.

⁶⁹ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 601. Hereafter referred to as Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915–1939*.

Finally, for this thesis, Coroniti contends that a poetic text may be engaged with by a composer either as a ‘driving force...or merely the object of imitation...he must decide whether his music will parallel the text internally as well as externally. I say...externally since there are...few settings that altogether avoid imitation’.⁷⁰ This view of the poem’s internal life may now be bound together with Pound’s idea of a poem’s ‘absolute rhythm’. Collectively these ideas, the abstract ‘absolute rhythm’ and the more generally perceivable, musical rhythm of text, provide the guiding principles for Malin’s analysis of rhythm and metre in his recently published *Songs in Motion*, which will be considered in this chapter.

Britten’s close professional relationship and personal friendship with the poet and librettist Ronald Duncan commenced in the 1930s and brought the composer into contact with Pound in 1938; therefore, this suggests that Britten may have been aware of Pound’s and Yeats’ related aesthetic views on the interconnections between poetry and music.⁷¹

2.3.1.5 LEWIN’S OWN APPROACH: A SUMMATION

Whatever filled the poet’s breast Schubert faithfully *represented* and *transfigured* in each of his songs, as none has done before him. Every one of his song compositions is in reality *a poem on the poem* he set to music.⁷²

As a critique from within Schubert’s contemporary artistic circle, Josef von Spaun’s 1829 often-reported prophetic view of song is taken as a starting point by Lewin in the formulation of his own philosophical stance on text setting.⁷³ Lewin’s view states that:

⁷⁰ Coroniti, ‘A Relationship of Equals?; Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music’, p. 12.

⁷¹ Ronald Duncan’s interactions with Pound in the 1930s and also Britten’s opportunity to meet Pound in London in 1938 are detailed: Schafer, ed., *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*, pp. 433–34.

⁷² Otto Erich Deutsch, ed., *The Schubert Reader*, trans. by Eric Blom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), p. 875, as cited in Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 110. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁷³ This quotation is also presented as an example of a formative insightful view for text-setting theory by: Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*, p. 243.

The world of the song is not simply a musical world. On the other hand, it is also not simply the textual world translated into music: it not only “represents” this world...but also “transfigures” it. So if we have as text a poem on X, we should consider the song to be another, related poem on X. Rather, the song should be considered a poem on the poem-on-X.⁷⁴

This recent theoretical derivation posited by Lewin in effect represents a philosophical approach to song and provides an aesthetic framework with which to consider the text of a poem on a particular theme (designated as X in this critique), and the text of the song as a distinct yet related artefact. He explains and summarises as follows: ‘hence we can understand the song as a poetic “reading” of the poem-on-X that is its text, a reading that employs a particular mimesis of X as a representational means’.⁷⁵ For the sake of greater clarity, though not wishing to simplify or otherwise misrepresent Lewin’s epigrammatic statement, a song may be alternatively considered as a musical presentation of a poetic reading of a text. With this contribution we have a view of song as ‘a’ poetic reading (the composer’s) of a text which refocuses analytic attention from Langer’s idea that the ‘song is music’, the starting-point of this present discussion.⁷⁶

Where do Britten, and indeed Auden, sit in this debate? The poet willingly produced his verse for the composer to set—his artwork already intact. Likewise Britten did not feel his song compositions represented the annihilation of the text of his artistic collaborator. This is particularly the case in Britten’s song, given the calibre of the poets and the quality of the poetry he sets to music, as surveyed in the introduction to this dissertation and demonstrated in Tables I – IV. The theoretical stance taken here will have implications for the three remaining stages of song analysis as presented by Lewin, and summarised in Table 2.1: poetic reading, music and musico-poetic analysis, and

⁷⁴ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 110.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷⁶ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 152.

interpretation. Subsequent exposure to Britten's text-setting practices, in Part 2 of this thesis, will facilitate the ascertainment of his likely view of a theoretical framework of song, albeit inconclusive and fluctuating.

2.3.2 'A' READING OF THE TEXT

The poet expresses poetic ideas, images, and moods within the context of a personalised but diverse spectrum of poetics and the result of this artistic process is the poem. The text, by implication in its final form, ordinarily in written form, is then available, subject to methods of distribution (ordinarily by publication), to be appreciated and criticised generally, and also to be interpreted and reinterpreted both within poetry and literature, as poetic influence or quotation and more widely in other artistic media. The composer, like any other dramatist, novelist, dancer, or visual artist, who chooses to engage with a text, needs to construct a 'reading' of the poem; as the poem was specific to the poet, though not necessarily personal or autobiographical, so too, the reading of the text by the composer, 'his reading', is likewise individual. In part it is the diversity of compositional possibilities which mitigates against the formulation of an agreed theory of text setting in song; conversely this variety also brings great interest to art song. The song as a musical work incorporates the composer's poetic reading—the song presents the final musical expression of that informed view. Kramer considers that the composer 'does not *use a reading*' of the text, but rather that the song:

is a reading, in the critical as well as performative sense of the term: an activity of interpretation that works through a text without being bound by authorial intentions.⁷⁷

Thereby, Kramer frees the composer from the necessity, or indeed any obligation to attempt to remain faithful to his observation of the poet's view. Byrne Bodley presents an aspect of the complexity of Goethe's opinions on the issue, of a composer's liberty to

⁷⁷ Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 127.

interpret literature freely; this outlook includes the poet's admiration of the composer Carl Friedrich Zelter's faithful reflection of definitively strophic poetry in strophic song rather than in through-composed form,⁷⁸ whilst also accepting Goethe's viewpoint that:

one can take the poem as one pleases. I do not demand *that all my literary works* should be observed through the same glass. Everyone can take from them what they find, and for them that is truth.⁷⁹

This conversational recall appears, at first sight, to suggest an apparent contradiction with the poet's earlier expressed view of strophic poetry, but it may provide a balanced approach in which some poetry ('not demand that all') is more open to free formal musical interpretation. This compositional decision is likely to be based upon a combination of the relative strength of lyrical textual accentuation and the relative openness of the poetic ideas and images contained in the text. Thus the poet clearly accepts the validity of the composer's application of an alternative lens in 'reading' the poet's extant literary artefacts. Lewin also considers this aspect of the composer's interaction with his chosen text; he proposes that the composer's reading is 'in a sense "about" the poet as image-maker' and his own is as 'image-questioner',⁸⁰ thus allowing and providing a non-confrontational context, as Kramer does, for two creative artists to engage differently with a common imaginative source in poetry.

Agawu identifies a potential problem for song analysis as the 'failure to distinguish sufficiently between matters belonging to the genesis of a song and the song itself'.⁸¹ Rightly, he criticises analysts who focus exclusively on the former information as formative; certainly this type of information is likely to be more available and

⁷⁸ Lorraine Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 12. Hereafter referred to as Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings*.

⁷⁹ This quotation is attributed to Goethe by the Swiss composer Xaver Schnyder von Wartensee after a conversation with the poet. Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings*, p. 12. As cited from: Hedwig Walwei-Wiegelmann: *Goethes Gedanken über Musik* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1985), p. 139. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁸⁰ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 111.

⁸¹ Agawu, 'Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied', 8–9.

plentiful. This could be considered as a possibility in the case of Britten research, as arguably Britten has, or soon will have, one of the best, if not the best resourced musical archive.⁸² Though not explicitly stated, Agawu is referring to the activity of descriptive analysis. The same formative research material can also be put to use by an analyst in an exploration of ‘the song itself’. This author, even cognisant of Agawu’s explicit warning and implicit encouragement, always seeks to provide an interpretative analysis which is factually substantiated.

At times Britten provides marginalia in his poetic volumes giving useful clues as to his personal poetic interpretation, which may provide insights for local-level analysis, for example, the highlighting of key words in a text, or also at a structural level, such as provisional and final listings of poetic selection in cyclic works, thereby allowing us a glimpse into the formative text-based activity of the composer; an example of this practice has been identified in the previous chapter, in which this extra-musical evidence is considered. Ultimately, the song is the final arbitrator of the text and the conclusive artistic expression of the text. That song expresses this reading in exclusively musical terms is common among the approaches presented above; likewise none of these twentieth-century musicologists considers song to be in essence a sung version of poetry.⁸³

In addition to a contextualisation of essential detail pertaining to the literary, artistic, political, social, and sexual interaction and collaboration of Britten and Auden, much of the factual historical evidence contained in Part 2 of this thesis seeks to provide

⁸² The Britten Thematic Catalogue project will, on completion, provide a significant research resource in addition to the existing extensive Britten and Pears Library and well-resourced archive.

⁸³ Wilson enforces this idea, that song is not sung verse: Christopher R. Wilson ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkin’s Poetic Theory and Practice’, in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, ed. by Jeremy Dibble and Bennett Zon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 278. Hereafter referred to as Wilson ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkin’s Poetic Theory and Practice’.

a critique which also serves to inform an appreciation of the cultural context of Britten's readings of Auden's poetry, as it is expressed and evidenced in his songs.

2.3.3.1 MIMETIC TECHNIQUES: STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS

In Lewin's sequential ordering of the activity of song analysis, this current stage seeks to recognise the direct and indirect imitative representations of the poem in the song; it follows on closely and logically from the preceding ascertainment of the composer's 'reading' of the ideas, images expressed in the themes, subject matter and other formal poetics of his chosen text. Lawrence Zbikowski considers that a close reading of the text will reveal a 'rich discourse structure in its own right, one with intriguing possibilities *for pairing with* the discourse structures of the music'.⁸⁴ So too, an appreciation of the composer's 'theoretical stance' to text setting will inform the likelihood and the extent of the presence of musical and textual mimesis. As much as musical and poetic congruence is highlighted at this stage in the song's analysis, so too, the possibility and presence of musical and poetic ambiguities and contradictions are shown in relief. Awareness of these latter aspects is particularly useful in an assessment of the composer's musically-informed view of his text and in establishing evidence of his 'reading' of the poem.

Much of the debate concerning the ability of music to represent text in song focuses upon the differing form and capacity of music and words, as independent languages, to convey meaning.⁸⁵ Interestingly, Anthony Newcomb proposes that it is more beneficial to explore the more specific hypothesis 'how *might* music mean', rather than to consider the expansive and less fruitful philosophical consideration of 'what

⁸⁴ Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*, p. 249. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁸⁵ Agawu presents 'ten propositions about language and music' in: Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*, ed. by Rick Cohn, *Oxford Studies in Music Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 20–29.

does music mean?’⁸⁶ Dunsby almost hesitates in stating a preliminary view which he sees as self-evident, that ‘whatever verbal language and musical language are in themselves, they are not a mere addition of the two intact “languages” when they occur together’ in song; by implication, he also resists the reductionist view of song, as ‘some kind of idealised third language that is [therefore] beyond analysis, beyond interpretation’.⁸⁷ That musical semantics and syntax operate differently to their verbal counterparts is also highlighted by Wilson, who remarks, that ‘music may have meaning, but it is an imprecise language, a language of suggestion and imagery, not verbal description’; thereby accepting the role of interpretation in song analysis.⁸⁸ Wilson’s critique of this aspect is not unproblematic, as he considers also that poetry often departs from the realm of depiction and may explore suggestive and abstract ideas and images; however, his idea serves to distinguish the artistic nature of musical and poetic expressions. He also cautions the carefully-applied use of literal cross-over descriptive terminology which has been developed to describe the application of detail in one discipline to another. Wilson considers the close interpretation by Wendell Howard of the musical term ‘chromaticism’; as used by Gerard Manley Hopkins in a critique of his verse that describes increased tension in which there is some correlation between the musically defined term and the poetics discussed; however, Wilson views their interrelations as too vague and imprecise to gain widespread musicological currency.⁸⁹ Wilson thereby negates the usefulness of this type of rhetoric for the

⁸⁶ White astutely paraphrases Newcomb: Hayden White, ‘Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse’, in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 288, 293. Hereafter referred to as White, ‘Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse’. As cited after: Anthony Newcomb, ‘Narrative Archetypes and Mahler’s Ninth Symphony’, in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 120–21.

⁸⁷ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Wilson, ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Poetic Theory and Practice’, p. 278.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 280–82.

analysis of song. Hayden White's concluding essay to *Music and Text* also conveys a dichotomy of musical and literary meaning which he summarises after Newcomb stating:

In the musical work, structure is explicit and meaning difficult to discern, while in the literary work meaning is [ordinarily] easily discernible but structure elusive.⁹⁰

The identification of the relative foreground and background roles of structure and meaning in music and poetry as explicit and implicit features characterises the complexity of this debate. Ultimately, Marshall Brown (in the same volume) contends that there is a contemporary artistic tendency in which literature is 'striving towards the condition of music' while music is 'striving towards the condition of language'.⁹¹ Collectively these related yet distinct views engage with a debate contributing to the validity of a hermeneutics of song—each author providing another step in what Dunsby terms as a 'hermeneutical pathway'⁹² in a discussion of song.

Taking one step back from the textual source of song, Blasing's exclusively literary exploration of the mimetic role of poetry within linguistics, particularly lyric poetry, bears some comparative benefits for our current discourse of the role of text in song, as a differential marker of this vocal genre from other musical genres. Blasing acknowledges the presence of a defence of poetry, when compared to other literary forms, which is based upon a justification graduating from mimesis to representation and ultimately to 'truth',⁹³ mimetic qualification providing the weakest form of validating authority in this critique. Likewise, in song literal mimetic correspondences

⁹⁰ In response to Anthony Newcomb's article 'Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony', (pp. 118–36), also in the same volume: White, 'Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse', p. 288.

⁹¹ White, 'Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse', p. 289. As cited from Marshall Brown's 'Origins of Modernism: Musical Structures and Narrative Forms', also from this volume, pp. 75–92 (p. 85).

⁹² Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 6.

⁹³ Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words*, p. 2.

between text and music are presented frequently and prominently in order to justify a similar claim for song as Blasing posits for the lyric, that ‘lyric poetry is not mimesis’⁹⁴—one needs to supplement basic-level evidence of mimetic correspondences with song’s capacity to express higher-level representation and indeed truth. The marginality of representational song in the context of absolute music also finds its parallel in Blasing’s critique: ‘today poetry is largely ignored by literary studies’,⁹⁵ as its pursuit of truth is also less clearly defined than other factual and philosophical literary genres, this is also the case in text-based song.

However, it is limiting to our discourse to consider that song is exclusively a mimetic representation of its text—although music has mimetic capacity. The extent and the depth of its presence in song is contingent on a combination of the composer’s theoretical stance, ‘his reading’ of the text, his appreciation of the cultural context of the poem’s genesis, but also on his contemporary compositional intentions. However, the contemporaneous cultural contexts of the origins of both Auden’s poetry and Britten’s songs, of themselves, give no assurance of musical and literary parallelism, but that being said Britten’s songs have mimetic capacity. To identify such correspondences as mere low-level representations would be to diminish and ignore these factual relationships, which may be formative of less obvious deeper-level musical expression of its text. Dunsby summarises:

My thesis...is not that poetic language is not the same as musical language...poetic language bears endless fascinating comparison with music...this otherness...resides in categorical distinctions.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 19.

He thus encourages a multi-layered exploration of song which does not settle for the identification of surface-level musical and textual correspondences, but which seeks the recognition of deeper-level musical equivalences and unique expressions in song, as will be considered in Kramer's idea of 'songfulness'⁹⁷ and Dunsby's promotion of 'vocality',⁹⁸ which provide examples of explications of the 'otherness' of song.

Kramer proposes the application and expansion of musical hermeneutics to song, as an alternative view to what he considers to have been a previously dominant formalist aesthetic; an approach which considered music to be a radically inferior medium to language in a discourse of meaning, and that 'intelligibility in music rests on a purely "musical" foundation, the working-out of "musical ideas"', and that 'any definite meaning attached to a composition is in principle detachable as "extramusical"'.⁹⁹ Kramer summarises his call for musical hermeneutics and states 'that musical representation has significant, definite, interpretatively rich ties both to musical processes and to cultural processes...[and] is one of the basic techniques by which culture enters music, and music enters culture, as meaning, discourse, and even action'.¹⁰⁰ A consideration of the political action in Britten's Auden songs in Chapter 4 and the social and sexual meaning of the songs in the subsequent chapter will each reveal evidence of the results of this two-way artistic musical/cultural exchange.

Usefully, Kramer provides us with a working definition of musical representation: which posits that a representation is established when 'one thing is taken to resemble another, provided that the resemblance is also taken to be intentional'.¹⁰¹ In order to minimise the subjectivity inherent in this type of assessment this author will seek to

⁹⁷ Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, pp. 51–67.

⁹⁸ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, pp. 3–6.

⁹⁹ Lawrence Kramer, 'Music and Representation: The Instance of Haydn's *Creation*', in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 139.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

corroborate any interpretation of representation in Britten's songs by way of additional confirmation of the composer's intentionality. To effect such a correspondence Kramer uses the term 'designator' as an 'allusion, implicit or explicit, that tells the observer what is being represented...the designator is never extraneous to the representation'.¹⁰² In song the text — as designator — cannot be detached from the musical work. In song the poem provides the designator; this role is performed, in instrumental (non-vocal) music by 'titles, programs, and epigraphs; and musical allusions to sonorities, styles, or specific works'.¹⁰³ Awareness of these designators empowers the audience to identify 'likenesses between the details, textures, or processes of the music and the designated objects(s) or representation'; once such correspondences have been realised the listener can proceed to make 'interpretive connections between the music as likeness and the music as structure'.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, in song, the text may be considered to be an organic component in this act of interpretative empowerment.

Kramer proposed the idea of song as a musical metaphor of text, thus allowing the 'possibility of two-way transfers of meaning, as the discourses in which each term of the metaphor is inscribed become available to the other term.'¹⁰⁵ Kramer extrapolates this metaphoric exchange into two aspects of enhanced understanding of music. Initially, the text acts as an indicator of the scope of the 'discursive field', thereby defining the context of the mediation, and subsequently 'reinterprets the discourse by means of the music'.¹⁰⁶ In this way, Kramer avoids the connotation of text as the mere provider of a context for the music. 'The music and the discourse do not enter into a

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

text-context relationship, but rather into a relationship of dialogical exchange.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, media (music and text) and their discourse, in song, are considered to be inseparable. Acceptance of this precondition has implication for the analysis of song as a total artwork.

Musicologists tend to identify aspects of this mimetic relationship in respect of the analysis of a particular song, and do not attempt a comprehensive classification of specific musical features which may be interpreted as representational of text; this may be due to the enormous number of ways in which music may be mimetic. Even if such a task were attempted, the continually changing and expanding nature of the interrelationship of text and music would be problematic for the maintenance of stable categorisation. In the course of his worked example of his approach to Schubert's song, 'Auf dem Flusse', Lewin provides a table which details the musical response to the text vis-à-vis: duration (number of bars), tonality, the relationship of voice to piano treble rhythmic motive.¹⁰⁸ In the course of his discussion he identifies the following disparate mimetic aspects: musical strophic time is compared to poetic stanza time, which identifies semantic climax with a faster pace of change; related to this are the increasing pace of tempo, dynamic, and harmonic change; tonality is described in terms of its ability to effect a binary optimistic or pessimistic outlook or a more complex expression of ambivalence; rhythmic and melodic motives are considered and their relative placement on strong or weaker beats; the role of the piano parts in dialogue with the voice is expressed as providing a shifting support, detachment, and reunion.¹⁰⁹ Wilson, within the limiting confines of his chapter, proposes musical equivalents for the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the rhythmic musicality of which was systematically

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁸ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, pp. 113–14.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–18.

marked-up by the poet, by way of specific notation marks (diacritics) which highlight, primarily for the purpose of verbal recitation, relative strong and weak syllables, caesura and pause marks, and rhythmic freedom.¹¹⁰ Table 2.2 summarises Wilson’s equivalent musical agogics of Hopkins’ notated poetic text.¹¹¹

Table 2.2 Wilson’s Equivalent Musical Agogics of Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’

Hopkins’ Poetic Markings	Musical Equivalents
Metrical stress	Accent or dynamic intensity
Strong stress	Dynamic intensity and <i>tenuto</i>
Pause	<i>Tenuto</i> but not necessarily accented
Slur or circumflexion	Lengthening, <i>rubato</i>
Slur	Duplets, a slight hurrying of the rhythm
Slur, over 3 or more syllables	Triplets, or marked hurrying of the rhythm
The outride (under syllables)	<i>Rubato</i> , followed by expressive hesitation

The musical intentionality of this poet to clarify the musical aspect of the accentual rhythmic aural quality of his English verse is assured by way of Hopkins’ consistent manual notation of his poetic text, which subsequent to Wilson’s interpolation of musical equivalents may now be translated as a pitchless rhythmic musical score, thereby clearly linking textual rhythm and syllabic stress with its expression in purely musical rhythm.

2.3.3.2 A MIMETIC EVALUATION MODEL

In an attempt to address the specific lack of musicological research into the core issue of the ability and capacity of song to respond to a text, Peter Stacey in a 1989 article offers

¹¹⁰ Wilson ‘The Influence of Nineteenth-century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkin’s Poetic Theory and Practice’, pp. 280–82.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 292–93. After: W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, eds, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 293.

a literary-based model for an approach to text-based music.¹¹² Stacey commences with a succinct overview of the historical development of theoretical approaches to text setting, paying particular attention to changing attitudes to textual primacy, and the mimetic relationship of music and text. This development can be characterized as a continual relative shift from low-level word painting to higher-level mood representation.¹¹³ Britten's art-song output occupies a relatively stable and conservative position, within the terms of Stacey's historical development, when compared to the 'explosion of activity and innovation in the field of vocal music' in the mid-twentieth century, in which tonal experimentation is widespread and the expansion of vocal techniques is evident in works such as Berg's opera *Lulu* (1937).¹¹⁴

Stacey's approach to the mimetic analysis of song is summarised by activity, and presented in Table 2.3. Part of the attraction of Stacey's approach to the consideration of the relationship between music and its source text—poetry and prose in the case of Britten's art songs—is his identification of the separate aspects and procedures of this analysis. Each constituent element may initially be assessed individually while also contributing to a more complete evidence-based appreciation of the response of song to text. It should also be noted that there may be significant overlap between many of the categories, for example: the prescribed vocal style will impact upon an assessment of the intelligibility of the source text and consequently directly effect an evaluation of the

¹¹² Peter F. Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition', *Contemporary Music Review: Music and Text*, V (1989), 9–27. Hereafter referred to as: Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition'. This article is contained in a special edition of *Contemporary Music Review*, entitled 'Music and Text', which is devoted exclusively to text-setting issues and represents a significant single contribution to the study of music with text. This publication is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin Britten, which may reasonably be considered to be an indication of the general acceptance of the relative significance of these issues to his songs and other vocal compositions.

¹¹³ Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition', 9–16.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

relative primacy of music or text. It is necessary, for the purpose of clarity, to explain the meaning which Stacey attributes to each procedure (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Stacey’s procedures for examining text-based music

1. The text
2. Condition of the text
3. Vocal style
4. Intelligibility of the text
5. Techniques of relating music and text <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct mimesis • Displacement mimesis • Non-mimetic relationship • Arbitrary association • Synthetic relationship • Anti-contextual relationship
6. The relative status of the media

1) A consideration of the text involves an assessment of the following: firstly, the meaning of the text including a review of the symbolic use of ideas and imagery; secondly, the poetic form of the text which may vary from conventional forms of poetic versification to free form; and finally consideration of the sound of the text. This last element also takes into account the innate rhythmic musical character of words, their metre and word stress patterns, and also identifies and phrases with phonic attributes, such as assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. The identification of these elements in the source text enables one to consider the relative extent of their corresponding representation in the final musical work.

2) The condition of the text assesses the composer’s treatment of textual detail. For a song to be in what Stacey defines as ‘prime condition’, all original formal and

structural detail should be intact.¹¹⁵ A 'fragmented condition' applies where, either high-level structural aspects are removed, or where 'lower-level' sentences and words are altered or repeated, often for musical reasons. Partial fragmentation arises most frequently in Britten's songs; he does however tend to respect the integrity of the poetic source, but not to the extent of Hugo Wolf's reverence¹¹⁶ for the original poetic form in works such as his 53 *Mörike Lieder* (1888).¹¹⁷ Again, this aspect of evaluation reveals the relative importance of the structure of the poem in shaping Britten's art song.

3) Variations in vocal styles available to a composer range from lexically- to musically-dominated vocal styles in which 'speech, music and gesture' may be combined.¹¹⁸ In practice this extends from recitation in melodrama, through the *Sprechgesang* of Schoenberg, Berg and others, to conventional syllabic and melismatic singing. In general Britten's art-song vocal style is to mix syllabic and melismatic singing in a declamatory manner. The identification of the selected vocal style will allow an assessment of the extent of its response in the music of the text set.

4) This aspect of Stacey's model considers whether the work is audible and can be readily understood. Articulation may be clear, over-articulated or under-articulated. At all times Britten intends his song texts to be clearly audible and intelligible, thereby emphasizing the direct nature of the relationship of these songs to their poetic source. In each of his foreign-language settings Britten provides an English-language translation in the score for performers and in the concert programme notes for his audience. An example of this is the performance translation, commissioned by Britten and provided

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁶ The complexity of the 'interplay between poetry and music in the songs' of this 'Poet's Composer' is explored in: Susan Youens, *Hugo Wolf and His Mörike Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. i.

¹¹⁷ Hugo Wolf, *The Complete Mörike Songs*, ed. by Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover Publications, 1982).

¹¹⁸ Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition', 21.

by Elizabeth Mayer and Peter Pears, for the *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61,¹¹⁹ which reveals the importance Britten places in providing a translation of these settings of the original German poems even though recognised translations such as Michael Hamburger's were readily available. Table 2.4 shows the original Hölderlin German text of 'Die Linien des Lebens' (The Lines of Life), the sixth and final song from *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61 (marked A), together with the performance translation, which implies the meaning, provided by Mayer and Pears (marked B) and Hamburger's poetic free translation (marked C). Hamburger also refers to his prose version of his translation of this poem.¹²⁰

Table 2.4 Text of Britten's 'Die Linien des Lebens' with translations

A) Friedrich Hölderlin: 'Die Linien des Lebens',¹²¹	
Die Linien des Lebens sind verschieden, Wie Wege sind, und wie der Berge Grenzen. Was hier wir sind, kann dort ein Gott ergänzen, Mit Harmonien und ew'gem Lohn und Frieden.	
B) 'The Lines of Life': trans by Elizabeth Mayer and Peter Pears	C) 'The Lines of Life': trans. by Michael Hamburger¹²²
Each line of life is different from another, As rivers are, or like the mountain ranges. What we are here is there by God completed, With harmony, reward and peace eternal.	The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease Like footpaths and the mountains' utmost ends; What here we are, elsewhere a god amends With harmonies, eternal recompense and peace.

¹¹⁹ Britten, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61 (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962).

¹²⁰ Hamburger refers to a Penguin Poets series in 1961 by Penguin Books. Michael Hamburger, 'Brief Afterthoughts on Versions of a Poem by Hölderlin', in *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*, ed. by Daniel Weissbort (London: MacMillan Press, 1989), p. 53.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, iii.

¹²² Hamburger, ed., *Hölderlin: His Poems*, pp. 262–67.

5) The techniques of relating music and text identify the types of relationships which exist between music and source text, and they arise in the following circumstances: (a) Direct mimesis arises when music audibly imitates any subject, idea, image or tone contained in the text. If the mimesis relates to the overall tone or mood of the text it is termed 'high-level', while if it is localised and refers to a single word or phrase it is termed 'low-level'. Rosenwald also makes use of a similar distinction but cautions on the dismissal of word painting as superficial imitation as it may serve a dual purpose, whereby it also contributes to the creation of the mood of the work.¹²³ (b) Displaced mimesis occurs when sound elements, which derive from the text, are used, but the linkage is no longer immediately audible. (c) A non-mimetic relationship may arise in a composition in which the composer does not intend any imitation of text but the listener constructs a chance connection. Uniquely, this idea goes beyond Kramer's definition of a composer's intentionality in determining musical representation.¹²⁴ (d) Arbitrary association occurs not by an imitation of the text in the music but rather it is created through the repetition of a musical feature or motif which then becomes associated with a word, phrase or idea. It is surprising that this central mimetic means is not given more prominent treatment by Stacey; perhaps this oversight reveals the exclusive literary intention of this author. (e) In a synthetic relationship the text and music are so closely related that a synthesis arises. Stacey cites the conjunction of text and music in 'concrete poetry and text-sound composition' as examples of this aspect of word-text relations, the former providing a typographical interpretation.¹²⁵ (f) Anti-contextual relationships occur when music is composed which deliberately contrasts

¹²³ Lawrence Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-setting, and Performance', *The Journal of Musicology*, 11/1 (1993), 56. Hereafter referred to as Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-setting, and Performance'.

¹²⁴ As discussed above. Kramer, 'Music and Representation', p. 140.

¹²⁵ Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition', 22.

with, or apparently contradicts, the source text. The first three of these aspects relate to the form and the degree of the imitative gesture evident in the music.

6) The relative status of the media utilized may be identified as having ‘textual primacy’, ‘musical primacy’ or oscillating between the two. Philip Rupprecht’s view that it is ‘Britten’s tendency to place the burden of musical expression in the voice line itself, and not in the accompaniment’¹²⁶ provides a very clear general pointer of Britten’s textual focus. The experience of listening to a song will lead to an overall general impression of the dominance of text or music but throughout the duration of the performance the relative shift of primacy is likely to be in dialogue. This evaluation may differ in response to the subtlety of a specific performance experience of individual interpretations, so that an assessment of relative primacy of the same song performed by Pears with Britten¹²⁷ at the piano may differ from that, of say, Robert Tear and Philip Ledger¹²⁸ or Anthony Rolfe Johnson and Graham Johnson.¹²⁹

2.3.3.3 AN APPLICATION OF STACEY’S MODEL TO BRITTEN’S SONG

Britten’s sixth and final song ‘Die Linien des Lebens’ (The Lines of Life) has been selected from the song cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61¹³⁰ for the purpose of an applied analysis of Stacey’s method, in order to assess its usefulness in mimetic identification within song. The following brief analysis utilizes the categories as identified by Stacey in his model of assessing text setting in song (as seen in Table 2.4).

¹²⁶ Philip Rupprecht, *Britten’s Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 2.

¹²⁷ Britten, *Winter Words* op.52, Peter Pears (T), Benjamin Britten (pf) (CD Decca 476–849, 2006 [1956]).

¹²⁸ Britten, *Winter Words* op.52, Robert Tear (T), Philip Leger (pf) (CD EMI 73997, 2000 [1973]).

¹²⁹ Britten, *Winter Words* op.52, Anthony Rolfe Johnson (T), Graham Johnson (pf) (CD Hyperion 55067, 2001 [1985]).

¹³⁰ Britten, ‘Die Linien des Lebens’, *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op.61 (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962), pp. 20–21.

1) The poetic text concerns a retrospective view of life which draws on images of nature, as expressed in the contrasting physical features of rivers and mountains, as symbolic representations of the progression of life's journey. Britten appropriately selects this complete poetic fragment from the poet's later period of mental illness. This poem takes a traditional form of two phrases each in two rhyming couplets ending with the strong alternating assonances *verschieden*, *Grenzen*, *ergänzen*, and *Frieden*. And as such, it portrays many of the poetic rhythmic features which Malin identifies as characteristic of Lieder (see 2.5).¹³¹

2) The poem is in 'prime condition' in this setting as there are no alterations, deletions, or additional repetitions of the text.

3) The vocal style is almost exclusively slow syllabic-minim movement with the exception of the additional passing notes at the end of each even-numbered phrase highlighting the repeated sound quality of the text *Grenzen* and *Frieden* (see Ex. 2.1). There is a trance-like quality in the vocal part and the limited tessitura of the first and third phrases contrasts with the expanded ranges of the second and final phrases.

4) With regard to the intelligibility of the text, the poem is markedly audible and can be understood at all times. Britten's concern for the provision of an English-language translation, for an English-speaking audience, has already been noted above.

5) In relation to the techniques of correlating music and text, there is an abundance of direct mimesis in this Britten song. However, the categorization of mimetic relationships as either high-level or low-level is problematic, as much of the word painting contained in this song also contributes to presentation of the essence of the poetic mood and meaning. High-level imitation is evident in both the canonic piano and the vocal line (see Ex 2.1, bar 3) in which the introductory piano motif is augmented in

¹³¹ Malin, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied*, p. 3.

the vocal line; these entries are a direct and literal musical response to the text '*Die Linien des Lebens*' (The Lines of Life), and also in the first incidence of 4-part texture on the words '*Mit Harmonien*' (with harmony). Low-level direct imitation arises in the piano line's depiction of a meandering river or pathway (see Ex. 2.1, bars 7–9) and the ascent and descent of the subsequent phrase which also responds directly to the text '*Berge Grenzen*' (Mountain ranges). This song could be considered a study in direct mimesis.

One might consider the first alteration from the opening repeated canonic phrase, at the word '*verschieden*' (different), to be an example of non-mimetic relationship, whereby the initial musical line only starts to change or differ on the word 'different'. However, this is almost certainly Britten's musical intention, and therefore this observation should be reclassified as an illustration of a direct high-level mimetic response. The following aspects of Stacey's mimetic model do not appear in this song: displaced mimesis, arbitrary associations, or synthetic relations. An anti-contextual relationship exists in the last line of the song, when we hear Britten's dissonant piano accompaniment which is in stark contrast to the text. The poem questions the value of earthly toil and concludes optimistically that the reward of 'peace eternal' awaits us in the next life. The musical resolution of this dissonance is likewise not achieved while the human voice is present, but is delayed until the piano postlude. This prolongation of musical tension awaits exclusively musical resolution (eternal rest) (see Ex. 2.1). This contrast between musical hermeneutic and poetic meaning takes on even greater structural importance given that this is the last song of this six-song cycle and represents the composer's clear appropriation of the poetic meaning—Britten has musically made his own of this Hölderlin poetic fragment.

6) It would be simplistic to consider that the text has primary status in this song solely because of its audibility, textual integrity, and intelligibility. Likewise, the music of the piano has structural importance as it presents the opening statement of the canonic material and the dynamic climax of the piano postlude, both of which are direct musical responses to the selected text; also, the piano's role in the ultimate resolution of dissonant tension has been noted. Therefore Stacey's final question may be valid in a comparative sense but it is not meaningful here as Britten has appropriated his text, in terms of Langer's and Cone's theory, and incorporated it, in terms of Kramer's critique, in his composition.

Stacey's model provides a useful framework for the assessment of the multifarious possibilities for text setting in song. Though developed primarily as a comparative model, to compare the works of the same composer over time or to compare songs by different composers, it also offers an insightful interpretation of art song, and thereby provides an entry route into the complex nature of the relationship of music and text in this genre. The almost exclusively literary focus of this approach to this aspect of song analysis is likely to warrant critical musicological attention, by Agawu and others for this very reason. Stacey states that he does not claim that his approach amounts to a fully developed theoretical and analytic model, nor is it proposed in that capacity here, but it is, in my opinion, a useful step towards achieving an understanding of the purely mimetic capacity of song as required within the context of Lewin's more comprehensive approach.

Example 2.1: 'Die Linien des Lebens', *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* no.6

Slow and solemn (*langsam und feierlich*) (♩ = 66) *pp*

Voice

Piano

ppp

(without Ped.)
(ohne Ped.)

Die
Each

Li - nien des Le - bens sind ver - schie - den,
line of life is diff - rent from an - o - ther;

Wie We - ge sind, und wie der Ber - ge
As ri - vers are, or like the moun - tain

always *pp*
(immer *pp*)

Example 2.1: continued

Gren - zen. Was hier wir sind, kann
 ran - ges. What we are here is

dort ein Gott er - gän - zen, Mit
 there by God com - ple - ted, With

Har - mo - nien und ew' - gem Lohn und Frie - -
 har - mo - ny, re - ward - and peace e - ter - -

den.
 nal.
ff *f* *poco dim.* *f* *mf*

pp *slow cresc. (langsam cresc.)* *f* *with Ped. (mit Ped.)* *Ped.* *

2.3.4 MUSIC ANALYSIS

This analytic stage in Lewin's approach to song interpretation requires a deep systematic investigation 'into the tonal and rhythmic structure of the music'.¹³² An initial primarily musical exploration will reveal the conspicuous presence of tonal, harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic patterns in the music. Lewin suggests the use of Schenkerian reductive analytic sketches to reveal and demonstrate these essential aspects of the song. These musical gestures then take on meaning or significance, though not exclusively, through an application of a combination of the two preceding stages, in an informed reading of the text and in a consideration of the mimetic potential in the song (see Table 2.1). Exclusively, or apparently exclusively, structural-level musical gestures or motifs are given significance as potential for hermeneutic value. This analytic stage seeks to be expansive rather than restrictive in relation to any preconceived expectations derived from activities of stages of pre-analysis. In the critique that follows we experience very different aspects and orientations of analysis; Lawrence Rosenwald, Dunsby, Hayden White, and Nicholas Cook each contribute specifically to the understanding of analysis and interpretation of song, in a non-prescriptive way often stating particularly what will not work in an analysis.

Rosenwald has identified issues of song analysis that apply specifically to art song as a literary-based or inspired musical genre; while he does not prescribe any one analytic approach to song, his opinions indirectly provide guidance on the selection of the qualities which a good model of text-setting analysis requires. He is concerned at the propriety of the application of a body of musical theory and analysis, to song, which has been developed 'exclusively or at any rate normatively on a model of textless music'.¹³³ He considers that one approach undertaken by music theorists has been to develop a

¹³² Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, pp. 109, 118–22.

¹³³ Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-Setting, and Performance', 53.

‘specifically musical language [...] to describe music that does not need to translate musical data into, say psychological data’.¹³⁴ Rosenwald goes so far as to say that it is now common for texted music to be viewed as an ‘anomaly’ in musical analysis. He expects of any theory of music that it should be sufficiently general to consider text as well as music in addressing the ‘poetic, formal, semantic and aesthetic complexities of a song’.¹³⁵ Schoenberg (in an article which will be referred to again shortly) considers poetry, as an artistic medium, to be less ‘pure’ or less ‘unpolluted’ than is ‘absolute’ music as it is ‘still bound [for the most part] to subject matter’.¹³⁶ A logical extension of this view poses the question: why then choose to ignore or fail to consider this relatively stable hermeneutic element in song analysis—thus strengthening the case for a text-to-music approach to song analysis.

In relation to text-based music, Rosenwald also suggests that a rhythmic-centred analysis of this music may prove more insightful than an exclusively harmony-centred approach as there is no ‘evident way to move from terms of harmony to terms pertinent to the text, whereas the movement from terms of musical rhythm to terms of textual rhythm is relatively easy’.¹³⁷ A glaring exception to this limiting view of harmonic analysis arises in the identification in Chapter 1 of this dissertation: Britten’s conscious strong tonal structure in his song cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente*; the correlation between the apparently exclusively music element has been shown to be reflective of a deep shifting and progressive poetic hermeneutic. Rosenwald’s suggestion highlights the particular difficulties in analysing vocal music but the weakness of this argument

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹³⁶ Leonard Stein, ed., ‘The Relationship to the Text (1912)’, in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, trans. by Leo Black (London: Faber and Faber, 1975). Arnold Schoenberg, ‘The Relationship to the Text’, in *Style and Idea*, ed. by Leonard Stein (London: Faber, 1975), p. 144. Hereafter referred to as Stein, ed., ‘The Relationship to the Text (1912)’, in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*.

¹³⁷ Rosenwald, ‘Theory, Text-Setting, and Performance’, p. 58.

stems from the presumption that composers will in general respond in detail to the actual source text. This may not always be the case: composers may use the text as catalyst only, as with Arnold Schoenberg who contends that the initial impact of the opening words of a poem provided sufficient inspiration for song composition.¹³⁸ Dunsby cautions the appropriateness in taking Schoenberg's view too literally and therefore doubts the status of these comments as a basis of a theoretical approach to song; Dunsby questions if Schoenberg was being entirely serious and expresses his suspicion that Schoenberg 'was at least exaggerating if not fabricating his musical experience'¹³⁹—Dunsby thereby, effectively and convincingly weakens an argument which might be proposed when in a study down-grading the importance of a full consideration of the text in song analysis.

Rosenwald also notes the criticism made by Joseph Kerman¹⁴⁰ of Heinrich Schenker's failure to examine 'the surface features of the music' in his analysis of Robert Schumann's song 'Aus meinen Tränen sprießen'.¹⁴¹ Rosenwald takes this a step further in claiming that Schenker ignores 'in particular such surface features of the music [which] lend themselves to being explained by reference to the semantic aspects of the text'.¹⁴² I would go further than Rosenwald and say that it is essential to consider in song how the composer's musical decisions are made in relation to the text's poetic form and structure. This aspect is of particular relevance in an evaluation of Britten's art song, detailed evidence of which will be provided in Part 2 of this dissertation. For now, examples of poetic influence are evident, on a large scale, in his adherence to the formal

¹³⁸ Stein, ed., 'The Relationship to the Text (1912)', in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, p. 144.

¹³⁹ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, pp. 62–63.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Kerman, 'How We Got into Analysis and How to Get Out', in *Critical Inquiry*, VII (1980), pp. 311–31. As cited from Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-Setting, and Performance', p. 55.

¹⁴¹ Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-Setting, and Performance', p. 55.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

structures and versification of the source poetry of his song-cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, op.35,¹⁴³ as highlighted by Barbara Docherty (1989),¹⁴⁴ when compared with the freer structural treatment of his later cycle, *The Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, op.74.¹⁴⁵ The extent of his relative formal treatment of structure, highlighted at the level of the work's title, may be considered as one of Britten's personal responses to poetic genre.

Dunsby, who is recognised by Agawu as coming from a formalist analytic approach to music,¹⁴⁶ provides an overview of four methodologies of music theory and analysis: however, they are not specific to text-based music.¹⁴⁷ He compares these four approaches solely in terms of the general critical antagonism and resistance which they receive as 'hegemonies', and states whether they are either: 'overdetermined' or 'underdetermined', in relation to being 'told too much or too little altogether about the piece, the repertoire, the age or the culture'; or empirically overloaded or empirically deficient, which leads to being 'told too little or too much in relation to what one believed in the first place'. Within this specific terminology Dunsby considers that: Schenkerian analysis may be considered too focused and therefore 'overdetermined' in its analysis; Forte's 'pitch-class set theory' by comparison may be considered 'underdetermined'; Nattiez's semiotic analysis likewise becomes 'underdetermined'; while Cone's idea that music can be 'beyond analysis' leads to 'empirical defeatism'.¹⁴⁸ The idea of the analysis being overdetermined in relation to song becomes a particular

¹⁴³ Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* op.35 (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1946).

¹⁴⁴ Barbara Docherty, 'Syllogism and Symbol: Britten, Tippett and English Text', *Contemporary Music Review*, 5 (1989), p. 37.

¹⁴⁵ Britten, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74 (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

¹⁴⁶ Kofi Agawu, 'Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime', *Music Theory Online*, 2/4 (1996), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.96.2.4/mto.96.2.4_agawu.html> [Accessed 30 August 2010] (para. 4 of 17). Hereafter referred to as Agawu, 'Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime'.

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Dunsby, 'Criteria of Correctness in Music Theory and Analysis', in *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music*, ed. by Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 77–85.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

concern because the text cannot retain its intelligibility within such useful summation and distillation of core musical structures, whereby textual semantic and syntactic linkages are unintentionally but effectively broken in the course of these reductive methods. Dunsby's brief contribution on this occasion is useful in its identification of what an approach to analysis should not be or rather should be careful to contain.

Hayden White in his concluding article, 'Commentary', to Scher's edited seminal collection, *Music and Text*, brings this continuing debate to the fore in terms of his mediation of articles in this volume, which may be considered to come from both formalist and 'new historicist' ideologies. This debate is undertaken within the consideration of the relative 'relevance of knowledge of social-cultural contexts to the understanding of the forms and contents of artistic, and especially musical, artefacts'.¹⁴⁹ White propounds the recent enhanced view of musical hermeneutics which seeks to reveal ways in which the 'social context bears upon, determines, influences, or otherwise informs the production, form, content, and reception of the musical' work.¹⁵⁰ In effect he cautions against any notion that all facts are to be considered indiscriminately as relevant facts for analytic purposes, in his determination of two predominant hermeneutic orientations: firstly, 'aestheticizing' requires that the artwork 'transcends the social conditions of its production and consequently yields insight into the nature of human creativity'; and 'politicizing' presumes that the work 'at least reflects or may be determined by the interests—political, cultural, economic, and other—of specific social groups and classes at specific moments of historic conjecture'.¹⁵¹ At first glance these two concepts may appear to be mutually exclusive, but when combined are of specific relevance to the Britten songs in Part 2 of this

¹⁴⁹ White, 'Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse', p. 288.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

dissertation; criticism may be levelled at the revealed political, cultural, economic, and militaristic context of Britten's song cycle *On This Island* op.11 (chapter 4) or, for example, in another single song 'The Sun Shines Down' (chapter 5). This extra-musical politicizing context will be shown to be intrinsic to the final art work, while also being of, and contributing to, general aesthetic value. A more complete awareness of these associations and connectives, both textual and musical, informs our view of these songs. This poetry by Auden is not clogged by its topicality and likewise Britten's song conveys aesthetic quality.

Hayden White's concluding remarks in *Music and Text* (quoted in 2.3.3.1), after Newcomb, may now be expanded fully as:

In the musical work, structure is explicit and meaning difficult to discern, while in the literary work meaning is [ordinarily] easily discernible but structure elusive. *This insight alerts us to the danger of what we might call "the structuralist fallacy": namely, the belief that when we have identified a structure in an artistic work, we have also found its meaning.*¹⁵²

This considered opinion implies that its author values the benefits of the application of 'new historicism' to song. Social context also matters to song analysis as a custodian of cultural meaning.

Nicholas Cook in his chapter 'What Does Musical Analysis Tell Us?' considers methods of comparative assessment for methods of analysis, or as he puts it, 'what it is that makes one analysis good and another bad'.¹⁵³ Cook cautions care in the selection of a method appropriate for purpose, and continued care in its application, so that the method of analysis is appropriate to the music;¹⁵⁴ therefore, in song, this view calls for

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 288. Cited from Anthony Newcomb's article also in this same volume: 'Narrative Archetypes and Mahler's Ninth Symphony', pp. 118–36.

¹⁵³ Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 215–33, (215). Hereafter referred to as Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

analytic methods which consider the implications of text on song. Methods, according to Cook, may focus on the discovery of what the ‘composer did’,¹⁵⁵ such as an explanation which demonstrates the presence of serial compositional techniques. Alternately, an analysis may ‘tell us something about the way we experience music’, as opposed to providing a purely descriptive-level analysis,¹⁵⁶ while in relation to motivic analysis, Cook questions the ability of an audience to recognise aurally local-level internal motifs in a piano accompaniment, or the conscious awareness by an audience of large-scale tonal frameworks as identified in Schenkerian analysis;¹⁵⁷ these latter views appear dated but they do bring to the fore the question of who analysis is for?; presumably the audience will range from the fully adequate listener to music analysts and theorists. Elsewhere, Cook states explicitly that analysis is not about understanding a performer’s action per se, while it is very much about informing performance.¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, Cook calls for flexibility of analytic approach in different musical circumstances to avoid analysis becoming purely descriptive rather than an act of interpretation.¹⁵⁹

2.3.4.1 AGAWU’S MODELS OF MUSIC ANALYSIS: GENESIS AND RESPONSES

In his seminal 1992 article ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, Agawu contributes to an ongoing debate within song analysis which seeks to define the genre, to propose methods of analysis, and to demonstrate the interpretations which will follow from these methods.¹⁶⁰ The continued relevance of this clarifying article is reflected in a body of research which has either responded to Agawu

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹⁵⁸ Nicholas Cook, ‘Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis’, in *Rethinking Music*, ed. by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 240–41.

¹⁵⁹ Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, p. 230.

¹⁶⁰ Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 3–36.

or taken his work as a starting point for further research. He describes four primary ‘competing models’ for song analysis.¹⁶¹

Agawu calls his first model an ‘assimilation model’, a term which derives directly from Langer’s research findings (for a further explanation see 2.3.1.1 above): as ‘words disappear as words’ in this model, musical elements therefore dominate. Analysis of the music is in part considered autonomous and part generative; this latter aspect includes the ‘musicalizing’ of the non-musical element of text.¹⁶² Though initially appealing, ultimately Agawu does not consider that this approach recognises sufficiently the ‘inherent musicality’ of certain poetry.¹⁶³ In Agawu’s second model, his ‘incorporation’ model, he recognises the research of Kramer (for a further explanation see 2.3.1.3 above) which accepts the ‘irreducible relationship between word...and music’.¹⁶⁴ Song, under this method, therefore becomes a mere combination of words and music, which does not tell about the nature of this relationship. Agawu proposes a ‘pyramidal model’,¹⁶⁵ as his third analytic model, in which a hierarchical relationship is shown diagrammatically between music at the base and words at the apex of the pyramid; text is regarded as providing ‘access to meaning, while...music...supports the signification of text’.¹⁶⁶ Agawu recognised the limitations of this method, as the capacity of music to convey autonomous meaning is thereby diminished. The fourth and final model proposed by Agawu regards song as a confluence of three independent overlapping systems: music, text, and song.¹⁶⁷ This autonomy allows music and words to convey

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5–8.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 5–6.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ This term is proposed by Suzanne M. Lodato, ‘Recent Approaches to Text/Music Analysis in the Lied: A Musicological Perspective’, in *Word and Music Studies I*, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 99. Hereafter referred to as Lodato, ‘Recent Approaches to Text/Music Analysis in the Lied’.

¹⁶⁶ Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 6–7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

meaning jointly but also independently of each other, while also recognising an independent persona for song. In this method, Agawu avoids a concrete identity for song, as product, preferring rather to focus on song as process.¹⁶⁸ However, he does not refer to the possible difficulty in his replication of terminology: in a differentiation of ‘song’ as an element and ‘song’ as a total experience. Kramer and others will in subsequent sections of this chapter offer alternative ideas, and terminology, for the unique aspect of song as a component of a complete artwork.

In addition to these four formal approaches to song analysis Agawu presents details of an informal six-stage activity which may be used irrespective of the chosen overall method applied. What is noteworthy, from a cursory overview of this approach, is that the development of a ‘contextual reading’ of the text occurs only at the fourth stage of these six activities.¹⁶⁹ It is therefore not surprising that he supports a music-to-text approach of song analysis, which is inclusive of exclusively musical events, or at least events which have not as yet been capable of correlation with the text. Interestingly, Lewin also provides a similarly informal framework for the analysis of music with text and he also supports a musico-poetic approach; however, unlike Agawu, he chooses to start his informal analysis with a reading of the text.¹⁷⁰ Finally, Agawu criticises the limitation of both exclusive musical analysis of song and also exclusively poetic description of song¹⁷¹—one ignores the text while the other ignores the music—both require the attention of the song analyst.

Suzanne Lodato provides an insightful critique of Agawu’s views expressed above, in which she questions the value of being prescriptive in a rigid application of a single approach, and she encourages the use of an approach which enhances interpretive

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷⁰ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, p. 135.

¹⁷¹ Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 24–25.

knowledge; the lack of a recognised formal syntax of song permits this eclectic approach. Informatively, she reveals that her research of recent Lieder analyses, which specifically identifies music and text relations, shows that ‘most’ fall into Agawu’s third song analysis category, the ‘pyramidal model’, which considers text to be the prime custodian of meaning.¹⁷² She broadly categorises these studies,¹⁷³ as focusing on one or more of the following four elements: declamation of the text, ‘semantic meaning’, ‘structural homologies’, and the identification of the correlation of musical style change and a corroborating text.¹⁷⁴ While recognising the contributions made by ‘traditional, more formalist’ analysis and ‘contextual-based techniques’—presumably this latter grouping belongs to the ‘new musicologists’ or ‘new historicists’, which Agawu refers to in a more recent article¹⁷⁵—she also acknowledges that the relative degree to which these analyses ‘privilege textual or musical meaning’, remains. However, the divide between these approaches has narrowed as context enters formal analysis and deeper musical structures inform historical analysis.

The currency of Agawu’s approaches to song analysis is seen again, more recently, in the work of the analyst Zbikowski. As with Lodato, Zbikowski critiques Agawu’s four models of song analysis, though with greater brevity, and he takes the fourth method, which conceives song as a ‘confluence of three independent but overlapping systems, music and words and song’,¹⁷⁶ as a point of departure for his own more sophisticated approach to song. Zbikowski proposes his ‘theory of conceptual blending’ which perceives the nature of song as a ‘process of conceptual blending’

¹⁷² Lodato, ‘Recent Approaches to Text/Music Analysis in the Lied’, p. 101.

¹⁷³ The studies referred to are not identified, nor is empirical data provided of their analytic methods.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁷⁵ Agawu, ‘Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime’, (para. 6 and 7 of 22).

¹⁷⁶ Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*, p. 244.

between two independent fully competent media, poetry (text) and music;¹⁷⁷ these two mental spaces are each considered to have intellectual and emotional capacity.¹⁷⁸ The interrelation of these two discourses, ‘the *overall* discourse set up by the text [poetic space] and the *overall* discourse set up by the music [music space]’ are described in terms of their interaction with each other and also these interactions with two further spaces: a generic space and a blended space.¹⁷⁹

The ‘generic space’ exists as a high-level application of a whole class, or world view, and is ‘structure around the notion of two linked but contrasting ontological states’, which are indexed, either simplistically as past and present, past and future, or in more complex relationships of, for example, theme and variation,¹⁸⁰ or stability and instability. The identification of these structural poetic and musical states will guide the process of ‘mapping between domains’.¹⁸¹ Zbikowski posits that ‘the delineation of two ontological states often provides the basis for a more extensive interpretive framework’ or interactions.¹⁸² This network arises in the ‘blended space’, which identifies the causality for a changing topography in the text and in the music, or it provides an explanation of the periodic presence of one variable. He utilises the example of the song, ‘Trockne Blumen’ (Withered flowers) by Bernhard Klein,¹⁸³ to a text by Wilhelm Müller from his poetic collection *Die Schöne Müllerin*, to describe the relationship between the poetic description and transformation of dying flowers to blossoming flowers and the musical presence of a tonal shift in the music from A minor to A major; in this case a temporal textual index is considered as interrelating with a musical index

¹⁷⁷ Thereby recognising Agawu’s description of song as process and not product. Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music*, pp. 245, 255.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 254–55.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 254–55.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–57. As cited from: Bernhard Klein, ‘Trockne Blumen’, *Lieder und Gesänge mit Begleitung des Piano Forte*, no.5 (1822).

of theme and variation. In the blended space inputs from syntactically different media are interpreted to have compositional, completion, and elaboration conceptual blends, each with increasing levels of interpretive complexity. The structural correlations of text and song described above represent the basis of a compositional blend. The protagonist's initial deeper-level implied torture giving way to thoughts of future contentment, as expressed musically in the music's melodic climactic second section, is offered as an example of completion blend. The return of modulated initial musical material is provided as evidence of a textual transformation, and is considered as an elaboration blended discourse.

In its mediation of these two discourses, this approach to song avoids both the issue of the determination of musical or textual dominance and also the notion of a preconceived relative outcome from these interactions. As Zbikowski's model fully recognises poetry and music as having rich discourse structures with differing structural syntax but with 'intriguing possibilities for pairing', song is no longer looked on as a combination but as fluid or 'blended' interaction.

2.3.5 INTERPRETATION OF MUSIC ANALYSIS

The ultimate phase of Lewin's approach to the analysis of song involves the production, by the analyst, of a formal (written) interpretation of song, as a cumulative act of reflection on the totality of the theoretical outlook taken, the poetic reading, and the analysis derived from the song (see Table 2.1). This final-stage interpretation will include the surface-level mimetic correlations identified between text and music, but it will also incorporate the application of deeper-level musical phenomena in an informed reading—as song interpretation and not in a mere description of song. Closely related to the relative focus of the method of analysis used to interrogate a song will be the form

of the resultant interpretation: for example, written analysis of a music-to-text approach will most likely follow the methodology of that approach. Here, the meaning of ‘interpretation’ is taken from Dunsby’s view of the ‘understanding of a score derived principally from the internal evidence of the [authoritative] score’ rather than on Dunsby’s view of Schenker’s ‘pejorative [use of the] term to signify the imposition of a performer’s own, personal, idiosyncratic musical ideas on those of the composer’.¹⁸⁴ However, the analyst and historical musicologist need to avoid these potential subjective pitfalls in achieving as objective an interpretation of song as possible.

In 1997 Agawu published a comparative review of three recently published monographs on Schubert lieder.¹⁸⁵ Agawu seems to reiterate much of the rhetoric of his article, ‘Analyzing Music under the New Musicology Regime’, from the previous year.¹⁸⁶ However, he has now moderated the tone of his language somewhat from the heat of his perception of a ‘regime’ change. In the latter review article, Agawu notes the effects of different target audiences on the differing styles of the written interpretation of song. He calls on analysts and musicologists to pay attention to ‘music’s ordinary language’, and not to ‘ride roughshod over many pertinent musical details’, which are not easily or immediately explicable in terms of the text.¹⁸⁷ Agawu also reiterates his call for a clear distinction to be drawn between analysis which is directed towards an understanding of the historical genesis of a work, and research pertaining to the actual composition process, as the latter tells us more about the actual work of art. Given Britten’s close professional and personal involvement, in the 1930s, with both the

¹⁸⁴ Jonathan Dunsby, ‘Performance and Analysis of Music’, *Music Analysis*, 8 1–2 (1989), 7.

¹⁸⁵ Koki Agawu, ‘Perspectives on Schubert’s Songs’, *Music Analysis*, 16/1 (1997). Hereafter referred to as Agawu, ‘Perspectives on Schubert’s Songs’. Reviews the following monographs: Marjorie Wing Hirsch, *Schubert’s Dramatic Lieder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Richard Kramer, *Distant Cycles: Schubert and the Conceiving of Song* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Susan Youens, *Retracing a Winter’s Journey: Schubert’s Winterreise* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁸⁶ Agawu, ‘Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime’.

¹⁸⁷ Agawu, ‘Perspectives on Schubert’s Songs’, 113–14.

wordsmith and the subject matter of his poetry, the distinction which Agawu highlights is not easily discernible here—the genesis and the act of composition of many of the songs considered in Part 2 of this thesis are entwined; however, in each case the text predates the song. In relation to this point, Agawu’s review of Youen’s contribution, as a three-chapter monograph, is technically correct but misleading: he states correctly that the first chapter deals with the genesis of the music (47 pages), the second chapter engages with the texts (22 pages), and that ‘the music itself occupies the final chapter (46 pages).’ However he does not reveal either the relative page count (now included) or that these chapters constitute part one only of a two-part book, the second part of which includes a comprehensive (188-page) critique of the twenty-four individual songs of *Winterreise*. Agawu is quite correct in his call to interrogate the facile association of ‘every observation about a song’s technical structure’ with aspects of the text—analysis of song and its interpretations must be robust and capable of rigorous testing within both local- and broader-level application.¹⁸⁸

Susan Youens arranges her 1996 monograph, *Schubert’s Poets and the Making of Lieder*, around the composer’s settings of four poets, Gabriele von Baumberg, Theodor Körner, Johann Mayrhofer, and Ernst Schulze, who were esteemed in their day are now considered to be ‘of mediocre [literary] talent’.¹⁸⁹ In respect of Schubert’s settings of each poet, Youens pays considerable attention to the poets and their poetic texts, within their political and cultural contexts, as a backdrop for song composition. This relative attention is evident in her final written analysis of the songs. More recently, in her 2002 book, *Schubert’s Late Lieder*, Youens chooses again to engage with Schubert’s musical

¹⁸⁸ Agawu, ‘Perspectives on Schubert’s Songs’, 115–16.

¹⁸⁹ Susan Youens, *Schubert’s Poets and the Making of Lieder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. i.

responses to a further six contemporary poets, for whom she claims that a renewed literary interest is warranted.¹⁹⁰

So too, Byrne Bodley approaches her written analysis of Schubert's songs consistently; for example, in her 2003 comprehensive monograph *Schubert's Goethe Settings*, in which she considers firstly the poetic content of the song's literary source which is then followed by her musical analysis which is, in part, richly informed by this poetic reading—connections are highlighted which reveal incidences of musical and textual coherence but also musical contradiction and ambivalence with textual source.¹⁹¹

Both of these authors contribute significantly to a rebalancing of musicological attention, redirected towards the literary source of art song, in their systematic and comprehensive presentations of their song interpretations. Evidence abounds, even at bookshelf level, of the prominence of poets in the titles of the above publications—this literary research focus richly informs the methodology, philosophical framework, and the form of their respective written analysis of song, evidence which testifies to the presence of two different, yet interrelated, complete discourses (as defined in Zbikoswki's terms). This musico-poetic approach to song analysis provides an analysis which is musically comprehensive and also inclusive of both cultural contextualisation and an evolving reception history—this is the approach taken in Part 2 of this dissertation in analysing Britten's songs.

2.4 UNIQUE IDEAS OF SONG

Lewin's approach to song, though useful as a structural framework in this current chapter, does not neatly incorporate or facilitate the discussion of all pertinent

¹⁹⁰ Susan Youens, *Schubert's Late Lieder: Beyond the Song-Cycles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁹¹ Byrne, *Schubert's Goethe Settings*.

musicological opinions of and contributions to this current engagement with the ‘text-setting’ debate. The three ideas presented here are not expressions of ‘*ad hoc* reasoning’, within Agawu’s notion of this term,¹⁹² but considered here collectively, they strive to claim for song, from within a debate which at times has focused excessively on how texted music is music, that which is uniquely the exclusive territory of song—out of a growing acceptance based on the validity of song as music will come specific differentiating models of song analysis.

2.4.1 ‘SONGFULNESS’

Kramer also provides interesting insight, though not without courting controversy, into a particular song quality which he terms as achieving ‘songfulness’ in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century song. He disputes a traditional outlook, as he perceives it, which considers song exclusively as an ‘expressive fusion of text and music’; rather, he considers it to be a ‘manifestation of the singing voice, just the voice, regardless of what is sung’.¹⁹³ Kramer, usefully, categorises the requirements by which song might be considered to be intelligible as follows: ‘the musical expression of textual affect or meaning’; ‘the musical transformation (from assimilation to appropriation and to deconstruction) of textual affect or meaning’; or the ‘relative independence of musical structure and expression from those of the text’.¹⁹⁴ Here, Kramer proposes the value of song as being other than as the prime medium of enunciation (these terms will be further engaged with in subsequent inquiry). He describes the fresh aspects of ‘songfulness’ which he proposes for song as ‘a fusion of vocal and musical utterance judged to be both pleasurable and suitably independent of verbal content’; Kramer’s

¹⁹² Agawu uses this term to criticise analysts who pursue a discourse which is either not informed by extant methodologies or does not inform a wider general theoretical knowledge: Agawu, ‘Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Lied’, 8.

¹⁹³ Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, p. 52.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

subsequent claim that his ‘description deliberately avoids listing any objectively defining features’ is therefore problematic for the wider application of his idea of ‘songfulness’ in a theory of song.¹⁹⁵

Regrettably, Kramer, in his chapter ‘Beyond Words and Music: An Essay on Songfulness’, may alienate a musicology audience of art song, in an unconvincing mediation of an initial psychoanalytic approach to the hugely emotive and symbolic mother’s cradle song, to his later consideration of Schubert’s emotional song ‘Heidenröslein’ (Little heath-rose), a 1815 setting of a text by Goethe. Comments in respect of the former song’s scenario can be unsettling, for example Kramer’s contention that the ‘voice must not display, or be required by the music to display, too much technical proficiency, which would presuppose a distanced relationship between the voice, the notes, and the text’; so too the notion, in conventional song, that the voice may be appreciated exclusively over an extended duration, ‘regardless of what is sung’, is also challenging.¹⁹⁶ This may well be an appropriate performing persona in both this intimate genre and also in folk song but it is not a primary focus in art song: not that technical display, *per se*, should be considered to be the primary focus for voice or for piano in art song (although it may provide a sophisticated musical response/equivalent to a text). In respect of the latter extended example of Schubert’s deceptive Lied, the folk-like structure of this song does not conceal the underlining meaning of the plucking of the rose, whereby deflowering is symbolic of a loss of innocence with psychological and sexual connotations. Kramer’s case could have been strengthened by the application of his principles to an additional song, one which did not express, as he terms it, such an abundant ‘high degree of songfulness’, as this Schubert song.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁹⁶ Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, pp. 54–5.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

So too, Dunsby refutes certain of Kramer's conceptual claims for 'songfulness'. Dunsby's critique disagrees with the central tenet of Kramer's argument (specifically in terms of the current presentation of Kramer's views), that 'just singing' could be independent of 'verbal content', which Kramer then extends into the idea of a 'loss of meaning' in song. Dunsby does not accept that meaning can become extraneous. He synthesises his stated extensive knowledge of Kramer's wider research, and refutes any notion that song can merely be reduced (in Dunsby's words) to 'some kind of idealized third language that is beyond analysis, beyond interpretation'.¹⁹⁸ Interestingly both Agawu and Heather Platt, in their individual reviews of Dunsby's publication *Making Words Sing*, specifically identify Dunsby's repeated rejection of Kramer's idea of 'songfulness'; with his expression of these prominent and significant views Agawu considers that Dunsby has, in effect, distanced and distinguished his own ideas from extant concepts of song, which might otherwise have been considered to be incremental to this body of research.¹⁹⁹ Kramer might have avoided the need for Dunsby to respond to his research on this specific point if he had explicitly contained his argument; it is likely that Kramer's failure to limit his views on 'songfulness' necessitated Dunsby's retort.

One particular application of Kramer's idea of song's 'songfulness' may be suggested, though not as an exclusive or a comprehensive approach to song (not that he specifically proposes it as such), but rather as an insightful tool to be applied selectively at points in song when 'meaning is so regularly cast off'.²⁰⁰ At these often climactic phrases in song, continuous textual meaning can be suspended momentarily and may be

¹⁹⁸ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Kofi Agawu, Review of: Jonathan Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*. *Twentieth-Century Music*, 3/2 (2007), 277–80, (279). And also in: Heather Platt, Review of: Jonathan Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*. *Notes*, 62/4 (2006), 975–78, (977).

²⁰⁰ Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, p. 66.

understood beneficially as an expressive act of unmediated song, thereby accepting the possibility of sifting and changing levels of hermeneutic discourse; such an application of this aspect of ‘songfulness’ is indeed useful, within this specific context, to an understanding of both song analysis and particularly text setting.

2.4.2 ‘VOCALITY’

Dunsby has also proposed a musicological idea of song which he terms as ‘vocality’. This term has evolved as a response to his exploration of twentieth- as well as nineteenth-century (modern and Romantic) song;²⁰¹ both Dunsby’s idea of ‘vocality’ and Kramer’s contribution of ‘songfulness’ have, therefore, been identified by their authors as applicable to the analysis of twentieth-century art song. There the comparisons largely end (Dunsby’s critique of Kramer has been stated above).

Dunsby takes the definition of the term ‘vocality’, which is understood in linguistics to be the ‘quality of sound that is voiced...or to the nature of a sound as being a vowel’, to which he proposes an extension of its meaning, to apply to the ‘musical meaning of the word, “performed by or composed for the voice”’, rather than the more usual application of this term in linguistics to refer to spoken utterance.²⁰² Here Dunsby does not draw a distinction between the role of the voice and the accompaniment instrument(s) in the performance of vocality. Only in the third chapter of this monograph does Dunsby attempt to define the scope of his term vocality, which refers:

to those qualities of music *and* text that enable one to identify it as articulating narrative, mood, the times of tense, associations, grammatical tropes such as the interrogative, visual images, persons and landscapes, the mundane and the divine. Vocality concerns

²⁰¹ In addition to the consideration of song with voice and piano this monograph also includes a discussion of Schoenberg’s orchestral song ‘Premonition’ op.22 no.4 and his choral work, *Friede auf Erden* (‘Peace on Earth’): Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, pp. 57–74, and 75–115 respectively.

²⁰² Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, pp. 4–5.

everything that a replete analysis of music and text ought to explain, and ought not to neglect.²⁰³

This broad-based exploration of song is subsequently refined by Dunsby to:

The vocality of a piece of music will always give rise to networks of interpretations, of implications, of inflection and of nuance, and all of them, of course, structurally ambivalent because of the divergences among musical and verbal structures.²⁰⁴

Central to Dunsby's argument is that:

poetic language is not the same as musical language...It is hardly an original thesis— [that] poetic language bears endless, fascinating comparisons with music...[in] this otherness—resides the categorical distinctions.²⁰⁵

In an explication of this core tenet of his thesis, Dunsby presents two means by which music and text reflect each other. Firstly, he presents musicological literature (Meyer), pertaining to the capacity of music to parallel 'with "expecting the unexpected" in poetic language'.²⁰⁶ In both music and text the activity of repetition, 'recurrence' and 'reiteration' are distinguished: 'recurrence' is considered as a repetition which reflects closure and completeness, while 'reiteration' is 'fairly exact and persistent change rather than further repetition is expected'.²⁰⁷ In Britten's texts we see exact and varied repetition of accentual stress and word rhyming in alliteration and assonance reflected in his compositional repetition of rhythmic figures (see Ex. 4.7 and 4.8). And secondly, in opposition to musical and poetic parallelism, Dunsby introduces the related notion of 'divergence between poetic sense and musical structure' which leads 'in the same

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 62. (Italics inserted by this author).

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16. As cited from: Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 152. Dunsby considers that this is dealt with more comprehensively by Arnold Schoenberg, 'Part One: Construction of Themes', in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. by Gerald Strang (London: Faber, 1970), pp. 1–118.

²⁰⁷ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 16.

direction' but from differing perspectives.²⁰⁸ In respect of this elusive latter concept, Dunsby proffers a popular example of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* song no.7 (1940), on the poem, 'Ich grolle nicht' ('I bear no grudge') from Heinrich Heine's collection *Lyrisches Intermezzo* (1823). Dunsby's primary point is that even within the textual economy of this poem the poet repeats the opening three words of the poem at the end of the first two-line couplet.²⁰⁹ This does not make formal sense but rather is suggestive of a protagonist engaged in an emotional internal monologue. The poet's brief textual repetition of his poetic text is responded to by the composer's extended use of textual repetition from the first two phrases of his song, such that the second line of text appears in the song as 'Ewig verlор'nes Lieb', Ewig verlор'nes Lieb', ich grolle nicht, ich grolle nicht' (Eternally lost love, eternally lost love, I bear no grudge, I bear no grudge).²¹⁰

Though not explicitly stated by Dunsby, the point at issue is that Schumann took his musical idea of repetition from a textual cue, as he musically parallels the poem, but in a musical sense he incorporates the sequential treatment of his additional textual repetition as a surface-level device, while at a deeper melodic and harmonic level these two initial phrases outline an ascent from and return to a C major tonic, as 'a glorious dramatization of the poet's interior monologue'.²¹¹ Poetic repetition and musical return may now be considered to be divergent expressions of a single idea which are neither exclusively textually nor musically based. Vocality is concerned 'with words, with

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17. The original German text of these lines is given as:
'Ich grolle nicht und wenn das Herz auch bricht,
Ewig verlор'nes Lieb, ich grolle nicht'—Which is translated as:
('I bear no grudge, even though my heart may break,
Eternally lost love! I bear no grudge.')

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

song, with text’.²¹² Through his use of this term Dunsby responds to his perception, that musicology has a tendency to divide an aspect into its constituent parts, while in the case of vocality, he sees a case for ‘taking things together’—as that is what happens in song.²¹³ In effect, Dunsby seeks to name and incorporate the marginality of philological and morphological linguistic concerns as central to the performance, appreciation, analysis, and interpretation of song.

2.4.3 ‘CANTAPAROLATION’

Agawu’s critical appreciation of the ‘catch-all’²¹⁴ nature of Dunsby’s idea of song as ‘vocality’ encourages musicological research to strive to refine and expand this significant concept further. Likewise, the singing pedagogue Kenneth Shellard recently has sought to contribute to this advanced practice, by way of his proposal of ‘cantaparolation’ as a new word in the English language, thereby addressing specifically and distinguishing the activity of singing words from the extensively researched activity of speaking words.²¹⁵ The latter activity is suitably incorporated within the study of diction, the study of spoken language, within the subject area of linguistics. In a recent newspaper interview, Shellard seeks to have the unique phonology, morphology, and paralinguistic features of the singing of words distinguished from the performance or recitation of dramatic spoken text, by way of a recognition of this clarification of

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

²¹⁴ Kofi Agawu, Review of: Jonathan Dunsby, *Making Words Sing, Twentieth-Century Music*, 3/2 (2007), 279.

²¹⁵ Kenneth Shellard has been a singing pedagogue for thirty years, teaching privately now after working as a vocal teacher at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Conservatory of Music and Drama (formerly The College of Music) from 1980 until his retirement in 2003. He holds LTCL diplomas for performance, solo-singing (1980) and for teaching singing (1981) from Trinity College of Music London. He was also the outright winner of the Bradbury Cup for self-accompanied song at the Feis Ceoil (1976–78). His enthusiasm for an enhanced interpretative practice of art song based on a balanced text-to-music approach is infectious!

theoretical terminology.²¹⁶ Many of these musical decisions relating to the singing of text are left to the performers to mediate, as musical score gives little direction as to, for example, the elision of words with a terminal obstructing consonance with subsequent vowels, or the determination of the relative prosodic articulation of diphthongs and triphthongs. This proposed word seems to incorporate the unique activities of singing which Dunsby claims for ‘vocality’, while also applying uniquely to song. This newspaper article summarises the central concerns of cantaparolation:

Shellard is not trying to get his students to spit out their Ts and roll their Rs with that horrid, phoney crispness which the word ‘diction’ seems to encourage. He wants them to think about, among other things, the shape of the vowel [and its influence on the ‘shaping’ of the voice], the meaning of the words, the musical and poetical nuance, the face as a visible part of the vocal mechanism, and what he calls ‘the linguistics of breathing’... ‘Good cantaparolation makes the words sound truthful and real...when we shape the word, it makes the emotion associated with that word come alive. It comes from within!’²¹⁷

This approach to song encourages performers to achieve a balanced intellectual and emotional response to song which is informed by an understanding of both the text (form, words, and meaning) and musical hermeneutics. The singing of words, as an act of cantaparolation, has implication for the analysis of song in addition to the more direct effect on the codification of singing performance practices. It is the theoretical aspects of this new coinage which is proposed here as this thesis is not primarily focused on song performance.

Although these three related thought-provoking aspects of song have received very differing levels of review and critique they share a common enthusiasm to explore

²¹⁶ Arminta Wallace, ‘An Irishwoman’s Diary’, *Irish Times* (8 April 2008), p. 9.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

that which is unique to song, and each contributes to our knowledge of the multifaceted evolving theoretical and practical approaches to song.

2.5 RHYTHMIC MUSICO-POETIC APPROACH TO SONG

In songs from the German and English repertoire, one of the most recognisable correlations between poetry and music is the use of some type of metrical organisation. However, the correlation is not an exact one from a functional standpoint. An overemphasis of the metrical characteristics of poetry can be destructive to a sensitive reading. On the other hand, to disregard the demands of meter in music is to invite a breakdown of one of the most important principles of its rhythmic organisation...²¹⁸

In this statement, Ivey sets out emphatically an opening position which places poetic-prosodic rhythm as a central concern of the activity of text setting in song. He likewise distinguishes this feature, of syllabic accentuation, in both German and English poetry and song, from that of French and Italian; he states that the principles of versification in these latter two languages 'do not rely upon meter as an organizational factor' as do German and English verse.²¹⁹ This statement of Ivey's considered opinion thereby permits the careful application of rhythmic theory, much of which has been developed in Lieder studies, also to English song, given the importance of textual rhythmic accentuation in the literature of these two languages.

This current chapter has repeatedly identified differing aspects of the crucial role of textual rhythm to theories of text setting, as discussed in: Hayes' review of Halle and Lerdahl,²²⁰ Lawrence Kramer,²²¹ Coroniti (including his critique of Pound),²²² Wilson,²²³ Stacey,²²⁴ and Lewin²²⁵ and Rosenwald.²²⁶ Indeed, both Coroniti and

²¹⁸ Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Style*, p. 3.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²²⁰ Bruce Hayes, 'Textsetting as Constraint Conflict', pp. 1–19.

²²¹ Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, p. 129.

²²² Coroniti, 'A Relationship of Equals?; Aesthetic Theories on Setting Poetry to Music', p. 7.

²²³ Wilson 'The Influence of Nineteenth-century Agogics on Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetic Theory and Practice', pp. 280–82.

Rosenwald propose, specifically, rhythmic analysis as their preferred approach to the systematic analysis of text-based song. This final broad section of the current chapter seeks to identify specific tools of rhythmic analysis which will, in part, inform the following analysis of Britten's songs in Part 2 of this dissertation, rather than to attempt a detailed explication of the vast musicological and analytic literature in the area of rhythmic analysis.

Alison Hood in her doctoral dissertation²²⁷ provides an extensive survey of recent theories of rhythmic analysis as proposed by ten theorists or groups of theorists.²²⁸ Her insightful analysis focuses on points of congruence but also highlights unique and inconsistent aspects, in the context of her central thesis, which is directed towards the direct and indirect applications of Schenker's theoretical ideas. Hood's critique engages with a vast array of theories pertaining to: rhythmic layering or stratification and hierarchies, rhythmic ambiguity, the distinction between rhythmic grouping and metric grouping, the role of performance in the creation of rhythmic accentuation, the nature of large-scale hypermeter in music, an identification of the distinctions between pitch-to-rhythm and rhythm-to-pitch analysis, metric consonance and metric dissonance, and the creation of musical motion through rhythmic analysis. However, her study is not specifically focused on vocal music and there is need for further research in this area.

More recently Malin, in his monograph (summer 2010), provides an exclusive and inspiring view of the relationship of music and the rhythm and metre of text; in this up-

²²⁴ Stacey, 'Towards the Analysis of the Relationship of Music and Text in Contemporary Composition', 9–27.

²²⁵ Lewin, *Studies in Music with Text*, pp. 109, 118–22.

²²⁶ Rosenwald, 'Theory, Text-Setting, and Performance', p. 58.

²²⁷ Alison Margaret Hood, 'Chopin's Strategic Integration of Rhythm and Pitch: A Schenkerian Perspective' (unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, 2003), pp.34–59. Hereafter referred to as Hood, 'Chopin's Strategic Integration of Rhythm and Pitch: A Schenkerian Perspective'.

²²⁸ Hood refers to the rhythmic research of the following musicologists and analysts: Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard Meyer, Wallace Berry, Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, Maury Yeston, Jonathan Kramer, Joel Lester, David Epstein, John Rink, Christopher Hasty, and Harald Krebs. Hood, 'Chopin's Strategic Integration of Rhythm and Pitch: A Schenkerian Perspective', p. 34.

to-date analytic study of song, he consolidates and builds on contemporary theoretical research.²²⁹ He commences his study with the self-evident truth that ‘music and poetry happen in time; song happens in time’.²³⁰ As a result, Malin calls for a concerted analytic ‘focus on the rhythms of music and poetry, and their union in song...and [to] consider their significance in a variety of musical, historical, and cultural contexts’, thereby associating poetic and musical rhythm as expressions of social context.²³¹ He states categorically that rhythmic analysis ‘*will be* a way into song’, which will give an insight into ‘layers of poetic meaning, harmony, form ([interestingly considered as] rhythm writ large), musical texture, dynamics, meaning and effect’.²³²

Although devised specifically from an analysis of nineteenth-century Lieder, and due in part to Ivey’s linguistic accentual correlations which are noted above, Malin’s observations provide a useful lens to approach Britten’s settings of Auden’s English-language poetry in the twentieth century. While cognisant of the fact that Auden’s poetry and the poetry of traditional Lieder are very different—as his twentieth-century poetry is freer in the patterning of accented and unaccented stresses—it is, however, worth noting that a significant number of the Auden poems which Britten set, are rhythmically-heavily accented. Interestingly, Malin identifies four rhythmic features which characterise nineteenth-century Lieder: verse which alternates ‘patterns of accented and unaccented syllables; contain short trimeter- or tetrameter-syllabic lines; lines are typically combined to form couplets, which in turn combine to form quatrains; cross rhymes, which reinforce the rhythm of couplets and quatrains are commonly in the forms *abab*, *abcb*, or *aabb*.²³³ Many of these generic poetic elements are also present in

²²⁹ Malin, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied*.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. x. (Italics inserted by this author).

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

the Auden poetry which Britten selected; for example, the cross rhyming *abab* dominated the source of Britten's 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (see Table 5.7), and *aabb* is present in the source of Britten's 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast' (see Table 4.4). The variety of metric count and the cross-rhyming schemes which Auden uses in the poetry which Britten selected are incorporated systematically in the poetic data tables included in Part 2 of this thesis. Malin's insightful ideas of rhythm and metre will be engaged with briefly, as a means of expanding the interpretative possibilities of the analysis of Britten's songs proffered here.

Malin justifies the focus of his study thus: 'music actively interprets the text, and one of the best ways to understand what music adds is to consider rhythm and metre in poetry and music'.²³⁴ He considers that rhythmic effects in song have 'expressive functions, as features of the poetic, vocal, and instrumental "voices"';²³⁵ such an awareness of the multifaceted impacts of rhythm appears to create a resonance with Cone's way of thinking about the multiple personas in song (discussed in 2.3.1.2 above). Malin comments on the comparatively recent musicological interest in rhythmic analysis in music theory and identifies significant studies which address rhythmic features.²³⁶

Malin, in his study of accentual-syllabic poetry, defines '*poetic meter*' as broadly: the 'patterning of accented and unaccented syllables', usually in disyllabic or trisyllabic metric feet; within the context of 'line length measured in the number of accented syllables of "poetic feet"', usually in trimeter, tetrameter, or pentameter lines.²³⁷ He

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³⁶ Considered as 'hot topics' in music theory for the last twenty-five years, Malin notes the contribution of the following: Arnold Feil, Ann Clark Fehn, Rufus Hallmark, Susan Youens, Harald Krebs, Deborah Rohr, Carl Dahlhaus, and David Lewin. Malin, *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied*, pp. ix, xiii.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

initially indirectly defines ‘*poetic rhythm*’ as the ‘further variations of stress and flow, rhythmic effects that may work with or against the poetic meter’, and later expands this definition by way of providing examples of these rhythmic effects: firstly, the substitution of the poetic foot, usually iamb (u S) with trochee (S u), in which the harsher more staccato effect of the former underscores significant initial text; secondly, through the relative accentuation above the binary levels of accented and unaccented syllables, such as strong accent and weaker accent (semi-strong); and finally, the undermining of the regularity in a poetic line, such as in the case of a caesura within a line and enjambment between lines of text.²³⁸ These poetic rhythmic effects may be considered to have their particular musical equivalent; for example, the third beat in a 4/4-time bar may be considered to be strong but not to the extent of the first beat of that bar. ‘*Musical meter*’ is defined as the ‘perception of regular pulses’ as determined by the beat, its divisions, and groupings; and expressed in the time signature, bar line, and note beaming,²³⁹ while ‘*musical rhythm*’ refers to all ‘forms of durational patterning’.²⁴⁰ Malin expresses the challenge of modern theorists to a traditional view, of metre as a fixed ‘framework for the perception’ of rhythmic expression; ‘meter itself is [now] conceived as variable and dependant on rhythmic patterning’.²⁴¹

As in the case of both music and poetry, metre denotes recurrent-expectant patterns, and rhythm denotes ‘the individuality of stress or durational patterning’, Malin therefore considers the relation of musical rhythm and metre to be analogous to that of poetic rhythm and metre.²⁴² Furthermore, given this view of metre and rhythm as being interrelated, Malin then proposes that ‘rhythm and meter are conceptual categories that

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii, 36.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xiii, 36.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

overlap in practice’ in both music and in poetry.²⁴³ Malin accepts, within the context of this analogous overarching similarity based on their internal overlapping nature, that ‘poetic meter is not the same as musical meter’, as the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables does ‘not typically form regular (i.e., perceptually isochronous) pulses like those of musical meter’; or as Cone put it ‘poetry is much less determinate than music’ (see 2.3.1.2).²⁴⁴ Likewise, the rhythm of performance is specified in a musical setting while it is not predetermined in a poetic recital.²⁴⁵ More generally, Malin recognises the ‘multiple forms of stress in musical settings, which may or may not coincide with the verbal stress and rhythmic shape of poetic lines’, such as the melodic stress generated by the melodic line, dynamic and agogic accent, and harmonic change.²⁴⁶ The subtleties of these aesthetic correlations and distinctions, based on these two different media, richly inform our understanding of a music-text relationship.

Table 2.5 Malin’s poetic features and their musical possibilities

Poetic rhythmic feature	Musical expressive equivalence	Malin ref.
Alternate long (tetrameter) and short (trimeter) lines in couplets and in quatrains	Creates a natural punctuated pause at the end of a phrase	p. 5
Initial unstressed syllable, of disyllabic-iambic and trisyllabic-anapest and amphibrach	Can express the upbeat nature of the opening of a phrase	p. 6
Initial unstressed syllable	Effectively places the final syllable on a strong beat	p. 21
An unaccented ending of first line with an accented ending in the second line in a couplet or quatrain	Open-ended effect of precedent phrase and closed effect of consequent phrase	p. 8
Substitution in iambic (u S) verse of line opening trochee (S u)	The downbeat begins with a particular emphasis as a ‘jolt or call to attention’	p. 10
Poetic accent	May be reflected by means of ‘metrical placement and registral, dynamic or rhythmic means’	p. 11

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 4.

Alternate disyllabic and trisyllabic feet	Transition from slower to faster movement of idea or motion	p. 7
Polysyllabic words have a predetermined accentual pattern	Needs to be considered to retain intelligibility	p. 10
Monosyllabic important words	May be set at pitch extremes	p. 10
Syntactic flow–caesura	Facilitates pause in phrase	p. 12
Syntactic flow–enjambment: flows not from one line to the next within a couplet, but over the potentially stronger boundary between couplets	Thereby links two phrases and distorts the ending of the first couplet. A moment of closure is forced to flow onwards, conveying emotion or motion	p. 12
Polyrhythmic Lied	Polyphonic texture, may attend to voice, accompaniment, and words emerging and receding as independent rhythmic layers	p. 32–33
Accented events– Foot, line, couplet, quatrain	Draws attention to the event, also generates metric layer when recurs regularly (see poetic accent above)	p. 38–41
Hypermeter	Perception of periodicity (recurring events) beyond the bar line and phrase length	p. 41

Malin moves from the above clarification of these working definitions and his extrapolations, to an inspired explication of the complex expressive rhythmic effects of text on music. Concepts which have application to an interpretation of Britten’s settings of Auden’s poetry are summarised here (see Table 2.5 for a synopsis of these ideas). The concepts and analytic tools presented by Malin offer a meaningful way of considering the degree to which Britten’s song repertory responds to basic-level word and line rhythms and to higher-level hypermetric poetic schemes. This approach allows a consideration of song as reflective of text, other than as the exclusive conveyor of intellectual meaning. Consequently, as Malin asserts, rhythmic analysis provides ‘a way into song’—in essence, rhythmic considerations provide a language of text and musical correlation with which to explore the expressive ‘motion’ in song.

2.6 CONCLUSION: AN APPROACH TO BRITTEN’S ART SONG

The quotation from Carl Schachter which opened this chapter served to focus initial research attention on the potential variety of possible reflections of text in vocal music,

and on the diversity of equivalents and interconnection between poetry and music in song.²⁴⁷ The concepts and ideologies proposed by a number of theorists and analysts have been presented and reviewed consistently, with particular emphasis directed towards the clarification of practical definitions, and on an identification of analytic and interpretative tools which will be deployed in the analysis of Britten's song setting of Auden. Such challenges of scope and definition have been discussed and this research seeks to address the identified musicological shortfall which affects the way that song is analysed, and ultimately interpreted, performed, and received, through the identification of interrelated ideas in the individual contributions of eminent musicologists. The structure of the body of this chapter is based on an expanded application of Lewin's approach for a single song, to song in general, and represents a conscious effort to provide an appropriate formal reflection on these issues, and achieves clarity in this complex discussion.

Acceptance that 'song is music'²⁴⁸ (see 2.3.1.1) rejects resoundingly the idea that song, as a genre, is an anomaly within music, and therefore assures the necessity for an engagement with the relations which exist between text and music in song. There is general acceptance among the theorists presented here, which are representative of a general debate, that song is more than a simplistic translation of text into another medium; rather a new art work is created, but not to the extent, as noted by Dunsby, that song should be considered as an 'idealised third language', and therefore unresponsive to present methods of literary and musical analysis.²⁴⁹ However, there is considerable discourse pertaining to the relative significance of the constituent elements and the relative dominance of linguistic and musical elements in the final composed song;

²⁴⁷ Schachter, 'Motive and Text in Four Schubert Songs'.

²⁴⁸ See 2.3.1.1 for a discussion of Langer's use of the absolutist term.

²⁴⁹ Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, p. 5.

debate continues as to both the process of making song and product of that aesthetic process. This relationship involves, as we have seen, a tension between words and music, which characterises the underlying tensions that exist between poet and composer, between ‘verbal persona’ and ‘poetic persona’, and ‘vocal persona’ and ‘instrumental persona’, between ideas of ‘songfulness’ and ‘vocality’, and ultimately between linguistic and musical meaning. Characteristically, the theories which engaged with these aesthetic ideas seek to show these discourses in high relief rather than to resolve them.

There is also widespread agreement among musicologists that song is mimetic; however, this fundamental fact can be lost sight of in the pursuit of justifying the presence of deeper levels of representational expression in song. The approach which is taken in support of this thesis is to recognise that both surface-level mimesis and deeper-level musical equivalents are jointly representational of text, and as such both require and justify investigation. Indeed, the pursuit of ‘basic’ correlations may lead to the recognition of higher-level associations.

This chapter has also sought to engage with a debate pertaining to the relative weighting of musical, poetic, and musico-poetic approaches which results from Agawu’s consideration of classification of four models of song analysis. So too, reference has been made to his repeated criticisms, as he perceives it, of an excessive poetic focus by musicologists such as Susan Youens. But significantly, such musico-poetic-based analysis of song recognises fully the lyrical poetic origins of this essentially lyrical song tradition, as has also been evidenced extensively in Malin’s forensic attention to poetic metre and rhythm and its effects on the making of song. Malin effectively de-mystifies the complexity of metre and rhythm in both poetry and in music by way of providing initial separate definitions of these two terms from within

their two separate media. He follows this with a cogent explanation, initially of how metre and rhythm overlap within their own art forms, before moving on to the core of his thesis: that the rhythmic and metric effects of text can be traced to their equivalents in the nineteenth-century Lieder which he analyses. I do not propose such a literal or near-literal application of equivalence in Britten's song, but the terms and tools which Malin develops propose a language to describe correlations which arise in these songs (see Table 2.5). This dissertation takes a musico-poetic approach to the analysis and interpretation of Britten's songs, as it will be shown that the text shapes, at times, all musical aspects of the song.

Some of the theories which have been discussed here speak intentionally to both nineteenth- and twentieth-century song, particularly those of Dunsby and Kramer and many others have been developed exclusively in response to a nineteenth-century Lied tradition; Malin's ideas referred to above are a prime example. This chapter's repeated justifications for the application of these ideas to the English songs which Britten composed in the 1930s have, in general, been based on a commonality of lyrical poetic influence and on the predominance of accentual verse to both traditions.

The focus of this research chapter is to identify and engage with exclusive theories of text setting. This interaction has resulted in the accumulation of a store of ideas, ideologies, theories, and analytic methods, which provide a resource with which to contextualise and interpret Britten's songs. In addition to the benefit of working through and appreciating the subtleties of the philosophical theoretical approaches and the broad methodologies proposed here for song analysis, there are significant interpretative insights to be taken from the application of the following specific tools.

Kramer's idea and definition of the representational capacity of music are dependent on the key aspect of the composer's intentionality, and are a useful way of

assessing the composer's reading of his text; they also encourage the search for corroborating evidence of the act of composition. So too, Kramer's idea of song as a dialogical metaphoric discourse focuses the attention on the potential reciprocity of this notion. The analytic clarity achieved by Lewin in the data table, in his analysis of Schubert's song 'Auf dem Flusse', has been noted and will be applied to Britten's song.

The particular value of engaging with Stacey's model of analysis is that he attempts to approach text setting in a comprehensive manner, albeit from a predominantly literary focus. He systematically names six distinct types of mimetic correlations between music and text and defines each (see Table 2.3, pt 5 and the surrounding discussion); thereby he provides a set of working terms to describe subtle differences in types of musical mimesis. This analytic aspect is an essential component of any theory of song. However, an extensive and exclusive application of Stacey's model to Britten's songs is not endorsed, as an initial sample reapplication of this model to other Britten songs has not revealed significant additional generic information not already presented in the worked example of 'Die Linen des Lebens' from Britten's *Sechs Hölderlin Fragments* op.61. This outcome suggests that the model should be considered as a comparative model, in respect of comparing different composers or different genres; in the latter case, this model may provide insights into an assessment of the comparative effects of text in art song and, for example, in choral song. Also useful, as a comparative analytic tool, is Stacey's idea of assessing the exact condition of the poetic text in the song, which may be in 'prime condition'. Likewise, the practical application of rhythmic issues devised by Malin have been welcomed and tabulated for further application (see Table 2.5).

The distinct hermeneutic orientations presented by White's overlapping ideas of 'aestheticizing' and 'politicizing'²⁵⁰ polarise an essential debate that underlines the circumstances of Britten's composition, in the 1930s, for the songs that will be considered in the following analytic phase of this thesis—a consideration of the diminishing capacity of mere topicality in apposition to lasting culturally-reflective artistic expression must remain a central focus of these analyses. So too, the selective application of Kramer's concept of 'songfulness' and the more widespread deployment of Dunsby's idea of 'vocality' will also provide new ways of engaging with song. In essence the issues and decisions which are a provenance of text setting are also the concerns of 'vocality'.

I repeat an earlier statement, that no definitive theory of vocal or texted music exists, to which I now add, that there is, rather, a diverse body of literature available to the song analyst which provides an array of ideas and practical tools. In addition, the theoretical song research presented here, promotes a flexible approach over prescription, and emotional and aural sensitivity over rigid theory or 'untheory' as Dunsby provocatively terms it.²⁵¹ This necessitates devising a unique detailed approach to each song or to each individual set of songs within a song cycle, which should be undertaken within a clear theoretical framework. The subsequent analysis of Britten's song repertory will lead to the attainment of a clearer picture of both, Britten's relative theoretical stance in song and his text-setting practices. Song responds to two semiotic systems, music and language; the stock of theories and practical tools presented in this chapter goes some way to formulating a language of song interpretation rooted in an informed song analysis.

²⁵⁰ White, 'Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse', p. 290.

²⁵¹ See 2.2.1 for a discussion of Dunsby's use of this controversial term.

—PART 2—

**CULTURAL CONTEXTS: TEXT SETTING IN BRITTEN'S
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SONGS FROM W. H. AUDEN,
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY**

CHAPTER 3

BRITTEN AND AUDEN IN THE 1930s: AN EVOLVING COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

3.1 INITIAL ARTISTIC INEQUALITY

By the time Britten first met Auden in July 1935, the poet, six years his senior, was already recognised as an established force in English literature. Britten, on the other hand, at the age of twenty-one had a year earlier finished three years of study at the Royal College of Music¹ and was already determined to pursue a career as an independent composer. At first glance the initial inequality of artistic achievement between Auden and Britten seems staggering. However, over a period of approximately seven years of professional collaboration, 1935–42, Britten went on to compose music for projects as diverse as documentary film-making, plays, art song, choral works and opera; in each genre Auden provided his text. This time of artistic interaction marked, for Britten, a period of intense development in his text-setting practices and established an identifiable phase in his evolving relationship with words and music.

This current research focuses on those literary, political and personal aspects of Auden's life and works in the 1930s which influenced Britten's general development as an artist and seeks to trace the direct effects of these specific influences on his composition of art song—for these formative experiences were to be felt long after the active professional and personal engagement of composer and poet ended in 1942. Events after this date are not considered here, such as the effects of Auden's re-

¹ Britten entered the Royal College of Music 22 September 1930 and left it after passing his ARCM examination 13 December 1933. Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, pp. 138–39.

conversion to Christianity in the United States in the early 1940s and his subsequent rejection of some of his extant poetry.² After his professional split with Auden, Britten was never again to work so intensely or over such an extended period of time with any other single poet or librettist of similar calibre: therefore this period of Auden/Britten interaction provides a unique insight into the socio-politically charged musical response of this young and emerging composer to this young but established poet.

3.2.1 EDUCATIONAL COMPARISON

Auden and Britten were born into similar professional middle-class families: Auden was born 1907 in York but grew up in Birmingham where his father became Chief Medical Officer for Schools and later Professor of Public Health at Birmingham University;³ Britten was born 1913 in Lowestoft and his father ran a successful dental practice. Auden's father was absent for the period of the Great War (1914–18) and Britten's father was also not heavily involved in the upbringing of his children. They were both nurtured within families which valued education and appreciated the broader educational value of the arts. These values were supported in each case by their mother and both boys developed strong relationships with their mother: Auden's mother held a degree in French,⁴ unusual for the time, and instilled in her son 'a strong literary sense as well as delight in theology and music';⁵ Britten's mother, a keen amateur singer in

² Auden later withdrew poems from subsequent collections such as 'Spain' and 'September 1, 1939'. For a discussion of the origin and withdrawal of these poems see: John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 163, 291–93 respectively. Hereafter referred to as Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*.

³ Stan Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. xiv. Hereafter referred to as Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*.

⁴ Constance Rosalie Bicknell Auden (1869–1941) graduated from the Royal Holloway, University of London in 1892 with a First-Class Honours Degree in French. 'Constance Rosalie Auden-Bicknell: personal facts and details', <<http://auden.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/auden/individual.php?pid=I2&ged=auden-bicknell.ged>> [Accessed 27 August 2010] (para. 7 of 11).

⁵ Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Sam Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 16. Hereafter referred to as Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character'.

the local choral society, also encouraged her son through an appreciation of Romantic literature and in music. Both boys attended preparatory school, Auden as a boarder⁶ and Britten as a day pupil.⁷ Coincidentally they both attended the same public school as boarders at Gresham's School, Holt, Norfolk but their periods of attendance did not overlap. Auden's five years of public schooling led to undergraduate study at Christ Church, Oxford: initially studying Natural Sciences, switching to a combined Politics, Philosophy, and Economics course and finally settling in the English Department. This selection of subjects accurately reflects the breadth of Auden's interests, many of which were to inform his later literary oeuvre and are prominently represented in the poems which Britten selected to set to music. For example, Britten's selection of 'Let the Florid Music Praise' as the opening song of *On This Island* brandishes Auden's distillation of these combined formative influences in lines such as 'Her imperial standard fly' and 'O but the unloved have had power' (see Table 4.2 for the complete text of this poem). Auden, however, graduated with a mere Third Class Honours degree from Oxford; brief research has not revealed any reasons why Auden graduated without distinction.⁸ After only two years at public school Britten competed for and was awarded an open scholarship to study at the Royal College of Music, London. Kildea considers that the outlook of this 'anti-intellectual' conservative institution served to delay Britten's development 'well into the 1930s'⁹—all was to change when he met Auden. However, it must be appreciated that Britten's formative education was

⁶ Auden attended St Edmund's Preparatory School, Hindhead, Surrey (1915–20) and public school (1920–25). Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, pp. xiv–xv.

⁷ Britten attended South Lodge Preparatory School, Lowestoft (1923–28) and public school (1928–30). Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, pp. 74–75.

⁸ Professor Edward Mendelson, the Auden scholar and editor, generously entered into e-mail correspondence on this issue [17, 19 August 2010].

⁹ Paul Kildea, 'Britten, Auden and "Otherness"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 43. Hereafter referred to as Kildea, 'Britten, Auden and "Otherness"'.

vocationally based while Auden's was more varied and academic in nature. Britten was to benefit educationally from his close interaction with Auden.

3.2.2 IMMEDIATE POST-FORMAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

In addition to their formal education, both Auden and Britten travelled to Europe after finishing their third-level university and college study. Auden's father financed a year for him in Berlin. While in Germany, Auden put himself through an enormous self-directed course of general reading, including Freud's psychoanalytical theories and the ideas of Homer Lane, 'an American quack psychologist',¹⁰ whilst enthusiastically engaging in personal sexual exploits widely available within the sexual freedom of the Weimar Republic's capital; these experiences confirming, for Auden, his homosexuality.¹¹ Perhaps, this extensive personally driven educational programme was motivated by Auden's need to prove himself, following his disappointing university graduation result (referred to above). Britten's preference, on winning a foreign-travel scholarship from the Royal College of Music, had been to study with Alban Berg in Vienna; this was, however, thwarted by suggestions made by the college to his parents that this course of study might be inadvisable.¹² The likelihood of this approach to Britten's parents reveals both the conservative nature of this musical institution's contemporary music outlook and also Britten's unquestioning acceptance of his parents' decisions. The relative maturity and personal independence which Auden experienced

¹⁰ Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', p. 17.

¹¹ Tony Sharpe, *W. H. Auden* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 2. Hereafter referred to as Sharpe, *W. H. Auden*.

¹² Britten's opinions on these events are recorded in his *Sunday Telegraph* article 17 November 1963, in which he states that it was likely that Sir Hugh Allen (Director of the Royal College of Music) 'put a spike in the wheel. At any rate, when I said at home... "I am going to study with Berg, aren't I?" the answer was a firm "No, dear." Pressed my mother said, "He's not a good influence', which I suspect came from Allen. There was at the time an almost moral prejudice against serial music.' Cited in: Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, pp. 395.

during his year in Berlin can be compared to the relatively sheltered nature of Britten's time travelling Europe in the company of his controlling mother. As a result, at the start of their respective professional careers Auden had already acquired a considerable wide-ranging knowledge and a worldly-wise sophistication while Britten lacked these experiences resulting in a confidence deficit which became an ever-present aspect of his relationship with Auden. Britten was delighted to attend the informal broad-ranging finishing school willingly provided by Auden.

However, both poet and composer experienced and achieved similarly speedy and early maturing in their individual separate artistic endeavours. Britten succeeded in having his music performed while still a student at the Royal College of Music, and subsequently published, for example, his *Sinfonietta* op.1 for chamber orchestra, composed June-July 1932, first performed at the influential Macnaghten-Lamare series of contemporary concerts (January 1933), and published by Boosey and Hawkes (1935).¹³

3.3 AUDEN THE POET: BEFORE ENGAGEMENT WITH BRITTEN

Subsequent to Auden's year of post-college travel he took employment as a school-master at Larchfield Scool, Helensborough (1930–32) and at Downes School, Colwall, Malvern (1932–35); it was during these initial teaching posts that he also had his poetry first published.¹⁴ The primary focus of this section of the current chapter is to consider Auden's extant literary achievements up until the time he met and started working with Britten in 1935, including a brief consideration of his literary influences and the poetic

¹³ Britten, *Sinfonietta* op.1, for Chamber Orchestra (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1935). Composed 20 June–9 July 1932; first performed 31 January 1933, The Ballet Club, London, Macnaghten-Lemare concert, English Wind Players, Macnaghten String Quartet, Adolf Lotter db, Iris Lemare cond.. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Auden's poetic juvenilia are published posthumously in Katherine Bucknell, *W. H. Auden: Juvenilia, Poems 1922–1928* (London, Faber and Faber, 1994). Hereafter referred to as Bucknell, *W. H. Auden: Juvenilia*.

themes which he explored in his early works, as a means of contextualising and accessing the texts which Britten selected for musical setting.

Auden's first poems were printed privately by his colleague, the poet Stephen Spender, as a pamphlet entitled *Poems*.¹⁵ Encouraged by T. S. Eliot he published his substantial poem 'Paid on Both Sides: A Charade'¹⁶ in Eliot's influential journal *The Criterion* (January 1930). A contract with Faber and Faber followed (which later became Britten's publishers), again supported by Eliot, General Editor of that publishing house at that time, leading to the publication of Auden's first anthology *Poems* (1930).¹⁷ *The Orators*, Auden's second book of poetry, was published in 1932. Auden's first play *The Dance of Death*¹⁸ was performed in 1934 and his next full-verse play, in collaboration with Stephen Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin*, was published in 1935.¹⁹ This latter collaborative project represents the first in a series of artistic partnerships into which Auden entered with friends and lovers. His next solo-poetic volume, *Look Stranger!*, was published in England in 1936 by Faber and Faber;²⁰ Auden was furious with his English publishers, as they derived the title of the collection from the title of his poem 'Look Stranger!' without his consent; Auden was travelling in Iceland and was not contactable at the time. The subsequent publication of this collection in the United States in 1937 by Random House has a revised title: *On This*

¹⁵ Rainer Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), p. 5. Hereafter referred to as Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*.

¹⁶ Edward Mendelson, ed., *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, 3rd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 3–26. Hereafter referred to as Mendelson, ed., *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden, *Poems*, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, (1930) 1933). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9300426. Hereafter referred to as Auden, *Poems*, 2nd edn.

¹⁸ Auden's play *The Dance of Death* was first performed 25 February 1934 by Group Theatre at Westminster Theatre in London, co-produced by Rupert Doone and Tyrone Guthrie, with music by Herbert Murrill. Interestingly, the subsequent production of a new version of this play, by Group Theatre also at Westminster Theatre in October 1935, was 'billed as "a political musical comedy"'. Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp. 167, 189–90.

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin: Or Where Is Francis? A Play in Three Acts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935). Hereafter referred to as Auden, and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin*.

²⁰ W. H. Auden, *Look Stranger!: Poems by W. H. Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936). Hereafter referred to as Auden, *Look Stranger!*. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9300428.

Island,²¹ Britten respected the poet's US title preference as he selects the name of Auden's poetic collection as the title for his 1937 song cycle *On This Island* op.11. Interestingly Britten also renamed the central song as 'Seascapes' rather than retaining the poem's title 'Look Stranger!', as he had in the case of this cycle's other four songs.

3.4.1 AUDEN'S 1930s POETIC STYLE: AN EXPOSITION OF TEXT-SETTING POSSIBILITIES

In his foreword to Donald Mitchell's monograph on Britten and Auden in the 1930s, Alan Hollinghurst summarises succinctly the effect of this interaction on Britten thus: 'Britten was surely never more brilliant or more happily suggestible than he was in the later 1930s and early 1940s'.²² This early technical and musical brilliance was a direct response to those very characteristics in Auden contemporary verse. Auden's literary achievements in the 1930s have been widely critiqued by literary scholars; common among recent evaluations is the recognition of Auden's ability to give voice in his literature to the political and social anxieties of a young generation of British and American intelligentsia. Davenport-Hines considers the mood of Auden's early poetry to be 'vital' for this contemporary society, 'apprehensive' of the ability of a broader society to learn significantly from past mistakes, and 'diagnostic' in its clinical tone; in this way, Davenport-Hines acknowledges that Auden's early poetry 'clarified and amplified' the concerns of a young left-wing-leaning political grouping; this repertoire provided Britten with socially-informed vital modern texts which had not been explored musically.²³ The tone, setting, and subject matter of early Auden poetry from the 1930s is referred to as characteristically 'Audenesque', as after the early 1940s the poet's style

²¹ W. H. Auden, *On This Island* (New York: Random House, 1937). Hereafter referred to as Auden, *On This Island*.

²² Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 1.

²³ Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', p. 17.

changed significantly. This present study focuses exclusively on the poet's early poetry and seeks to identify, by means of literary review, elements of Auden's style of poetics which will inform a close reading of the Auden poems set by Britten, but will also provide a poetic context for the analysis of Britten's art songs. Brief reference will be made here to Auden texts set by Britten which will be expanded upon in the two succeeding chapters.

3.4.2 POETICS FOR AUDEN

Justin Replogle identifies a number of Auden's poetic techniques, many of which have specific musical significance and potential.²⁴ Firstly, Auden's characteristic frequent use of short declarative statements²⁵ affords Britten the opportunity to point up these epigrammatic and often concluding expansive statements in a declamatory manner. Peter Porter also makes reference to this feature of Auden's verse, as a 'fondness for aphorism – not any sort of general maxim-making but a set of specific paradoxes and chidings intended to do everybody a power of good';²⁶ as seen, for example, in Britten's setting 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' in which the fourth and penultimate verse ends 'You love your life and I love you, /So I must lie alone' (see Table 5.7). At this point in the song Britten underscores the essence of isolation in his treble only piano accompaniment.

Secondly, Replogle identifies the frequent use of 'Auden simile'²⁷ as a poetic means of animating concepts and ideas; this allows for a dualistic musical presentation which is permitted by and responds to the nature of such explicit comparisons. Auden's

²⁴ Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1969), pp. 179–94. Hereafter referred to as Replogle, *Auden's Poetry*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁶ Peter Porter, 'Auden's English: Language and Style', in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 124. Hereafter referred to as Porter, 'Auden's English: Language and Style'.

²⁷ Replogle, *Auden's Poetry*, pp. 193–94.

similes are specifically identified in the poetic analysis tables which accompany each of the Britten settings in the two following chapters. In 'Seascape', we see for example a highly descriptive explicit simile in the fifth line of the first verse 'May [the sound of the sea] wander *like a river*' and later in the fourth line of the final verse we hear a more complex implied simile in 'And move in memory *as* now these clouds do'. In each case Britten musically highlights these lines of text.

Thirdly, Replogle identifies the abundance of adjectives in Auden's verse which animate associated nouns:²⁸ such highly descriptive poetic aspects can enrich and inform Britten's resultant musical setting. For example, the intimacy and vulnerability of an adolescent sunbathing scene is heightened in 'To lie flat on the back' by the poet's use of such sibilant alliterative illustrative text: 'And sunshine on the soft receptive belly, / Or face down, the insolent spine relaxed'. Such evocative words call on Britten to respond with a unique setting of this text. Auden's encyclopaedic literary knowledge can greatly enhance his poetry, as poetry, but if used as a text in song it could, if unchecked and allowed to become excessive, provide Britten with an obstacle in his musical settings. This aspect eventually became a contributing factor to the ending of their professional collaborations.

That Auden primarily used listing as his method of arranging his sequences of images is also noted by Emig;²⁹ such rhetorical practices allowed the poet to convincingly accumulate the emotional intensity of his text. The indented four-quatrain central section of Britten's 'The Sun Shines Down' is a prime example of Auden's sophisticated listing in which there is a seeming progressive intensification of social decay. However, this structural poetic device provided Britten with a significant

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁹ Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, p. 17.

challenge in subsequent successful musical settings, as he needed to avoid the possibility that the list itself may distract the listener and thereby dominate the song. In the example given here, Britten avoids the temptation to engage in a specific word-painting response to his text, but rather he underscores the mounting poetic tension with harmonic chromatic movement.

Replogle also identifies the presence in Auden's poetry of the 'musical' means by which verbal rhythms can draw attention to 'vowels and consonant sounds [which are] repeated more than is usual in average speech.'³⁰ This poetic soundworld finds its equivalence in Britten's setting: an extension of this practice is seen in Britten's continued use throughout 'As It Is, Plenty', the final song from *On This Island*, of a rhythmic pattern which is suggested by the initial words of his source. Finally, Replogle also remarks upon the particularly Audenesque practice of repeating words, vowels, and consonances which progress 'in the direction of chant, where[by] the musical mind succumbs to emotion, and the meaning of the words disappears beneath the mounting excitement of recurring sounds.'³¹ Britten reveals the extent of his literary discernment in his ability to identify, select, and seize upon the musical potential of the wealth of musico-poetic aspects in Auden's poetry.

3.4.3 TEXTUAL MEANING AND AMBIGUITY

Emig contends that in Auden's early poetry the images used by the poet are accessible yet at times 'the texts prove remarkably evasive when it comes to questions of meaning'.³² The energy conveyed in the technical brilliance of the language used can therefore affect the clarity of the meaning of the text; this provided Britten with an

³⁰ Replogle, *Auden's Poetry*, p. 179.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³² Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, p. 9.

intellectual gap in which to create new and unique meaning in his musical setting. Porter also considers that an element of ambiguity lies ‘at the heart of any Auden poem’³³ and this may arise even at the level of elevated authority which is achieved either by the use of memorable ‘attention-grabbing’ text, or a ‘single unexpected word in the opening line’ of the poem.³⁴ Britten sets poems which contain both of these related poetic features. The former trait is evident from a cursory review of the command-like title and opening line of the texts which Britten set in his *On This Island* (see Table 3.1). The latter feature is seen in Auden’s inclusion of the word *abject* in the opening line of ‘Underneath the *Abject Willow*’.³⁵ These powerful poetic openings have significant verbal impact but often do not contribute to the establishment of the meaning of the poem.

Table 3.1 Britten’s settings of Auden’s poetry in *On This Island*

Song Title	Poem’s first line
I. ‘Let the Florid Music Praise!’	‘ Let the florid music praise!’
II. ‘Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast’	‘ Now the leaves are falling fast’
III. ‘Seascape’	‘ Look, stranger, at this island now ’
IV. ‘Nocturne’	‘ Now through night’s caressing grip’
V. ‘As It Is, Plenty’	‘As it is, plenty’

Ambiguity is also often at the core of the subject matter of much of Auden’s early poetry. Deane identifies the poet’s preoccupation with ideas and images of liminality, and geographic and social borders in this period of his poetry, often symbolically

³³ Porter, ‘Auden’s English: Language and Style’, p. 132.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–31.

³⁵ Italics inserted by this author.

representing a transition between worlds: past and the present, and real and imaginary.³⁶ Emig also highlights the prominence of this aspect of physical ‘frontiers’ in Auden’s verse.³⁷ In the case of *Poems*, the topography of this poetry is situated in the contemporary industrial decline of the mining towns of North England; Porter specifically locates these settings to the mining sites of ‘Yorkshire, the Lake District and Northumberland’,³⁸ whereby Auden uses industrial failure as a metaphor for a social malaise. However, Auden’s relationship with dereliction and delinquency is complex, and is of itself a source of ambiguity: from the time of his frequent extended visits to Berlin he considered these aspects of decline also as a potential source of invigoration rather than exclusively as a source of alienation.³⁹

3.4.4 POETIC IRONY AND HUMOUR

Auden’s frequent use of irony, often mediated by an element of humour, is remarked upon by Deane.⁴⁰ The complex juxtaposition of satirical humour with serious intent as evident, for example, in Britten’s song ‘As It Is, Plenty’ provides the composer with wry terse text which requires a musical equivalence. Initially Deane contends that it is ‘typical of Auden to approach profound and timeless issues through the banal and the historically specific’, Deane develops this idea further in his consideration of the simultaneous ironic use by Auden of the very language that supports England’s imperial history and class structure, and his assertion of the ‘imminent and welcome demise of this imperial power’.⁴¹ This latter point is clearly evident in Auden’s poem which

³⁶ Patrick Deane, ‘Auden’s England’, in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Sam Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 25. Hereafter referred to as Deane, ‘Auden’s England’.

³⁷ Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, p. 3.

³⁸ Porter, ‘Auden’s English: Language and Style’, p. 127.

³⁹ Deane, ‘Auden’s England’, p. 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

Britten sets as 'Let the Florid Music Praise', in which the text states 'In that land of flesh and bone, /Where from citadels on high / Her imperial standards fly'.

3.4.5 EXPOSURE TO SECONDARY POETIC INFLUENCES IN AUDEN'S POETRY

Literary influences of particular significance to Auden's poetic style have been identified succinctly by Greenblatt,⁴² who credits Gerard Manley Hopkins as encouraging Auden's experimentation with language and metric rhythm. Robert Bridges' posthumous publication of Hopkins' poetry (1918) is considered to have also influenced the writings of Eliot and Dylan Thomas.⁴³ Auden's preoccupation with the subject matter of decline can be regarded, in part, to have its origins in the work of Eliot, from whom Auden also takes his conversational and ironic tone of expression. Deane agrees with Greenblatt's summation of the effects of Thomas Hardy's poetry on Auden as: experimenting with metrical variety and stanza form (within the context of 'traditional verse-forms') and the juxtaposition of an aerial or 'hawk's vision' distant perspective with the intimacy of a familiar perspective.⁴⁴ This secondary Hardy influence will be seen to be prominent in both Auden's poem 'Look, Stranger, at This Island Now' and Britten's setting as 'Seascape' from *On This Island*; and the primary source of this aerial-distancing feature will be seen in Britten's setting of Hardy in 'At Day-close in November', the opening song from *Winter Words*. This dualistic feature is expressed in the aspect of 'serious reflection' which Auden found in the 'personal and private interest' of Yeats' verse; Auden was to later reject these particular influences in his 1939 elegy for Yeats.⁴⁵ To these poetic influences Sharpe appends the poet Edward

⁴² Stephen Greenblatt, ed., 'W. H. Auden' in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), ii, p. 2421. Hereafter referred to as Greenblatt, ed., *W. H. Auden*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1835.

⁴⁴ Deane, 'Auden's England', p. 26.

⁴⁵ Sharpe, *W. H. Auden*, p. 11.

Thomas, from whom Sharpe considers that Auden learned the benefit of ‘unassuming and unsentimental accuracy’ thereby representing a certain kind of Englishness.⁴⁶ Britten’s setting of Auden, for example in the love poem ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’ never engages in sentimental discourse.

With these specific literary influences, Greenblatt also includes Auden’s familiarity with the ‘rhythms and long alliterative line of Anglo-Saxon poetry’ gained during his compilation of the anthology *Oxford Book of Light Verse*, and also the more general features which Auden learned from popular and folk cultures such as his cabaret poems, at least four of which were set by Britten.

The response of Auden to T. S. Eliot’s influential poetic publication *The Waste Land* (1922)⁴⁷ requires specific mention. Eliot immigrated to Britain from the United States in 1914; on arrival he was critical of the condition of English poetry and considered it to be ‘exhausted, with no verbal excitement or original craftsmanship’. He was encouraged by the clarity and precision of image provided by the French symbolists Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Rimbaud.⁴⁸ Extended suggestibility was achieved by an image’s relationship to other images. As Eliot’s epic poem had been a reflection upon human destruction and cultural decay in the aftermath of the First World War with a subsequent rise in technological advancement and a widespread sense of materiality, so too Auden’s poetry of the late 1920s and the 1930s responded to the consequent failure of these capitalist models. The latter poet’s personal experiences were of the social upheaval of Britain’s Great Strike of 1926 and also the widespread economic recession in Britain which followed on from the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. For

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* first published in *The Criterion* October 1922; the poet was the founder (1917) and editor of this magazine. Cited in, Stephen Greenblatt, ed., ‘T. S. Eliot’ in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), ii, p. 2287.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2287.

in Auden's early poetry politics and literature were inseparable. In this poetry Auden was excited by the novelty with which Eliot had deliberately avoided all 'merely connective and transitional passages' and the resultant construction of meaning 'through the immediate juxtaposition of images without overt explanation';⁴⁹ we see an example of Eliot's influence in Auden's almost uninterpreted bringing together of diverse presence of 'Lion, fish, and swan' in 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes'. These rich though seemingly unconnected poetic images, as we shall see, provided Britten with a source of dazzling energetic inspiration in which his music reflects upon flashes of non-narrative lyric verse.

Ultimately, Auden was catholic in his source of ideas, in addition to drawing on the work of other poets, Davenport-Hines notes that he also looked to the following disciplines for contemporary literary contextualisation: 'novelists, historians, theologians, psychologists, philosophers, political scientists and anthropologists'.⁵⁰ Through Britten's musical engagement with Auden's refining poetry, the composer gained access to the wealth and breadth of these inspirational ideas not heretofore accessible to him.

3.4.6 AUDEN ON TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

In his introduction, 'Poetry as Memorable Speech' to his poetic anthology *The Poet's Tongue*, co-edited by John Garrett, Auden identifies the particular importance of the sound of the spoken word for poetry to have effect. He proposes here that 'good poetry' is always 'when mastered' better heard read aloud than read in silence; this allows the speech rhythm of the verse to come to the fore, allowing the complementary tension of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2288.

⁵⁰ Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', p. 15. See also influences identified by Peter Porter in this same edited publication, p. 125.

emphasis, and effort and rest to be experienced by the reader and listener.⁵¹ The poetic emphasis placed on speech rhythm in poetic declamation by established contemporary writers Pound and Yeats has been noted (see 2.3.1.4). Yeats believed in a particular stylised annunciation of text in performance, such that ‘his ear for the sound of speech was so accurate that it outran comprehension’.⁵² Foster contends that Yeats had ‘developed a strict theory about the proper function of music in poetry, uninhibited by his own tone-deafness’, according to Yeats ‘music; the natural words in natural order...through that formula we go back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is the nation’s clothing of what is ancient & deathless’.⁵³ Auden was aware of these strong contemporary music and poetic theories, as was Britten. The musical equivalents of these ideas were also evident in the developments of *Sprechstimme* in Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, which Auden would have become aware of during his stay in Berlin (see 3.2.2). Britten had requested during his study at the Royal College of Music that the Library should possess a copy of this score; Carpenter suggests that this work for two decades earlier ‘was too much for the RCM’,⁵⁴ thus confirming the musical conservatism of that organisation.

Auden’s opinions highlight two pertinent fundamental musical aspects which support the validity of art-song composition: firstly, that poetry necessitates the audible projection of external sound, and secondly, that it also requires a performance context. In art song the combined traditional forces of voice and piano take the role of the reader and the audience becomes the listener. Auden also makes specific reference, in this introduction, to the importance of the poetic devices of ‘similes, metaphors of image or

⁵¹ W. H. Auden and John Garrett, eds, *The Poet’s Tongue* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1935), i, p. v. Hereafter referred to as Auden and Garrett, eds, *The Poet’s Tongue*.

⁵² Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet 1915–1939*, p. 579.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.579. Cited from W. B. Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 139 [8 Feb. 1937].

⁵⁴ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 52.

idea, and auditory metaphors such as rhyme, assonance, and alliteration' as patterns of clarification of the poetic experience.⁵⁵ Furthermore, that the poet was acutely aware of and sought to highlight specifically the sonic potential of poetry contributes to an increased likelihood that his verse will contain poetry which is musically inspiring and puts the composer on notice of this musically significant poetic feature. In addition to this general musicality of Auden's verse, Britten selected Auden texts which specifically alluded to musical genre and instruments as evidenced in the opening lines of the poem set by Britten as 'Let the Florid Music Praise' the second line of which is 'The flute and the trumpet'; these aspects will be expanded upon in the following chapter.

3.5 THE ISSUE OF CONTEMPORARY TOPICALITY: A POSSIBLE POETIC LIMITING FACTOR

Emig provides a recent and complex general assessment of Auden's poetry. He engages with the opinions of many of the literary scholars, already quoted, but considers the topical nature of much of the subject matter of Auden's poetry as being a potential diminishing factor in an assessment of the lasting value of much of his early literature. Emig considers that texts which are 'mere reflections of their context' cannot be 'firmly placed into the canon of either modernist or "post war" English literature'.⁵⁶ In comparison to Eliot and Yeats, Auden is less of an innovator as seen in his rejection of their free verse forms in favour of extant traditional stanza forms. Rather, these restricting factors are also the reason for the strength, freshness and vitality of Auden's contemporary poetry which lead to its wide appeal and popularity; these literary heights, which he himself later rejected, were never equalled in his later work. Interestingly the

⁵⁵ Auden and Garrett, eds, *The Poet's Tongue*, i, pp. v–vi.

⁵⁶ Emig, *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, p. 2.

Auden poems which Britten chooses to interact with, which highlight and express social and cultural identity in the late 1930s, retrospectively also represent a highpoint in Auden's literary output.

3.6 THE AUDEN GENERATION

The title of Samuel Hynes' monograph *The Auden Generation*,⁵⁷ as the collective naming of a group of 'upper-middle-class British artists and intellectuals' in the 1930s is retrospectively evocative of this cultural era.⁵⁸ This loose grouping includes, among others, the writer Christopher Isherwood, and poets Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice, under the significant influence of the poet and playwright W. H. Auden; this grouping does not, however, constitute an independent identifiable school of English literature or English culture. These writers developed within the 'shadow of the [still living] first-generation modern poets' such as Eliot, Yeats and Pound.⁵⁹ Common among the younger writers is that their early maturing occurred during the Great Strike of 1926 and the Depression following on from the 1929 American Wall Street stock market crash, and coming so close after World War I they inhabited a highly politicised society. These economic flash points led to widespread industrial stagnation which resulted in mass unemployment in urban centres in America and Europe. The rise of Hitler in Germany, from his election as German *Reichskanzler* in 1933, and the spread of Fascism and Nazism in Europe, with the threat of another war,

⁵⁷ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976).

⁵⁸ Philip Brett refers to 'the Auden Generation' and a derivative as a chapter heading 'The Britten Era'. Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten - Selected Essays of Philip Brett*. ed. by George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 187, 204–23. Hereafter referred to as Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*.

⁵⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, ed., 'The Twentieth Century and After' in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), ii, p. 1835.

‘deeply affected the emerging poets and novelists of the time’.⁶⁰ Auden’s early literary diagnosis of Britain’s problems used the analogy of physical illness: the nation was described as a neurotic invalid ‘now the victim of an antiquated economic system’, these ideas drawn from the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and the economic and social theories of Marx.⁶¹ However, Hynes remarks that politically fuelled literary works such as Auden’s verse-play, *The Dog beneath the Skin*, are more about the need for political action ‘than it is about the exact direction that action should take’.⁶² Through such writings Auden built up a reputation as a poet committed to the political left.⁶³ And it is this intellectual politically-leftist literary set that Britten joined when he met Auden in the mid-1930s.

Auden’s sphere of influence also had wider application and affected a whole generation of literary and politically aware individuals:⁶⁴ as captured by Charles Madge in his contemporary ‘Letter to the Intelligentsia’:

But there waited for me in the summer morning
Auden fiercely. I read, shuddered and knew.
And all the world’s stationery things
In silence moved to take up new positions...⁶⁵

This poetic quotation places Auden’s literature at the centre of a political propaganda machine. The references to the ferocity and the taking of positions in war were prophetic of the impending Second World War, therefore to ‘stand stable here and silent

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1831.

⁶¹ Greenblatt, ed., *W. H. Auden*, ii, p. 2421.

⁶² Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 185. Hereafter referred to as Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*.

⁶³ Sharpe, *W. H. Auden*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ For a succinct account of Auden’s influence on English and American poets see: Ian Sansom, ‘Auden and Influence’, in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 226–239.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Porter, ‘Auden’s English: Language and Style’, p. 123.

be' — from Auden's poem 'Look, Stranger, at This Island Now' (November, 1935), set by Britten as 'Seascape' (October, 1937) — was not an option.

Those who regarded themselves to be members of this 'Auden generation' must have considered Auden's decision to migrate from Britain to the United States,⁶⁶ with Isherwood, in 1938 to be a betrayal of the trust they had placed in him: his departure marked his acceptance that his political critique had failed. Auden's abandonment of nation may be accounted for in part by Porter's contention that the poet 'soon became afraid of [the] ...originality' and authority which others afforded his poetry.⁶⁷ Mendelson also highlights Auden's dissatisfaction with the social role, associated with the obligations of the title 'Court Poet of the Left', as being artistically inhibiting, and a chief determinant in his decision to leave Britain.⁶⁸

Similarly, Britten also felt artistically constrained by English political indecision and inactivity in relation to European affairs and he too, along with Peter Pears, followed Auden and Isherwood to the United States in January 1939.⁶⁹ Auden's disillusionment with a political social agenda fuelled his departure to the United States and this together with the declaration of war on Germany by Britain and France on 3 September 1939 effectively put an end to the cultural and artistic environment of this youthful 'Auden generation'.

⁶⁶ Auden's intention was to emigrate permanently from Britain in 1938 and he became a citizen of the United States in 1946. He did however return to Britain, during the tenure of his honorary appointment as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University (1956–61), and again in retirement to a cottage provided for his use in the grounds of Christ Church, Oxford (1972–73). Stan Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, pp. xviii–xxi.

⁶⁷ Porter, 'Auden's English: Language and Style', p. 125.

⁶⁸ As cited in Deane, 'Auden's England', p. 36.

⁶⁹ Brett also cites the following additional contributing factors in Britten's decision for sailing with Pears for the United States: 'the growing cloud of fascism over Europe; the plight of pacifists in the war that seemed inevitable;...the frantic pace of his career and the need to determine his own direction; [and] discouragement owing to patronizing or hostile reviews (Britten was the thinnest of the thin-shinned)'. Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 195.

3.7 BRITTEN AND AUDEN: MUSICAL COLLABORATION

When Britten and Auden first met in the summer of 1935, they had both recently gained contract employment at the General Post Office Film Unit, a documentary film company under the artistic direction of the innovating film maker John Grierson and the highly regarded sound-expert Alberto Cavalcanti.⁷⁰ Both Britten and Auden joined the film unit enthusiastically in order to access an expanded cultural audience through this new and exciting artistic medium. For Britten this was also his first full-time paid employment as a composer.

Their most famous and lasting documentary film with the GPO film unit was *Night Mail* (1936); Auden provided a four-verse voice-over poem for the 'End Sequence' and Britten composed the music including the simulation of 'railway sound'.⁷¹ Britten chose not to make live recordings of train sounds but rather he inventively recreated the simulated railway sounds with the limited resources of a small ensemble.⁷² This work promoted the technological advances of the postal service on the overnight non-stop mail train travelling from London's Euston Station to Glasgow. Onboard all items of mail were collected and sorted en-route, and the film depicts 'a socialist dimension' in its contrasting rural depopulation with urban industrial living.⁷³ Auden and Britten also worked together on other projects at the film unit including *Coal Face* (1936), *Calendar of the Year* (1936), and *Negroes or God's Chillun*; the latter was

⁷⁰ Britten commenced his association with the GPO film unit in May 1935 and Auden joined later in July of that year. Auden resigned February 1936 and Britten's engagement ended in late 1936 as finance was not forthcoming for future projects.

⁷¹ Britten worked on this project from 22 November 1935 to 13 January 1936. The music was recorded on 15 January 1936 and the film was released shortly thereafter. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 27.

⁷² Ensemble in *Night Mail* (1936): fl, ob, bn, tpt in C, perc (susp cymb, sandpaper, sd, bd, wind machine), harp, stg quartet. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷³ Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, p. 91.

never released.⁷⁴ They both went on to work together at Strand Film Company on *The Way to the Sea* (1937), for which Auden provided a ‘special end-commentary’ and Britten the music. Once again, this documentary film promoted the technological progress of the recent electrification of the Portsmouth railway line.⁷⁵ From the experience of these initial close professional collaborations Britten was left in no doubt as to Auden’s intelligence and encyclopaedic literary acumen and the poet was, likewise, assured as to the musically creative abilities of his younger musical collaborator.

Britten and Auden’s collaborations flourished and inspired projects outside documentary film-making. Auden requested Britten to provide incidental music for two of his full-verse plays *The Ascent of F6* (February 1937) and *On the Frontier* (November 1938), both co-written with Christopher Isherwood.⁷⁶ These were both staged by The Group Theatre, an experimental left-wing company, under the direction of Rupert Doone and Robert Medley (a contemporary gay couple).⁷⁷ These projects allowed Britten to view at first hand Auden’s political ideas unmediated this time by the editorial restriction of their earlier GPO film unit documentary projects. Allied to the continuing evolution of Britten’s political outlook was the development of his growing confidence in his emerging sexuality which was reinforced within the context of professional interaction with his new-found leftist homosexual intellectual colleagues.

Britten also set Auden texts in his choral repertoire. The subject matter of his *Ballad of Heroes* op.14 for tenor/soprano, chorus and orchestra from 1939 is a tribute to

⁷⁴ For a fuller critique of Britten’s music for film see Christopher Wintle, ed., *Hans Keller: Film Music and Beyond, Writing on Music and the Screen, 1946–59* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), pp. 137–39.

⁷⁵ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, ed. by John Evans. 3rd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 29–30. Hereafter referred to as White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*.

⁷⁶ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 34, 44.

⁷⁷ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 188.

British volunteers who had been killed in the Spanish Civil War. Evans considers that the overly specific topicality of the theme and weaknesses (dullness of tone) in the Auden text in some way account for the lack of success of this musical work; he also suggests that Britten may have completed this three-movement orchestral work in haste.⁷⁸ Evan's contention is borne out by the composition dates which Banks' research provides as 28 February to 29 March 1939.⁷⁹ Britten and Auden's collaboration on *Hymn to St Cecilia* op.27 for unaccompanied chorus with solos produced a choral work of greater musical significance and popularity in performance. Britten commenced its composition during his extended time in the United States, in July 1941, and completed it during his dangerous wartime boat journey returning to Britain in March/April 1942.⁸⁰ Retrospectively, this work effectively marks a symbolic distancing of the composer and poet and represents the end of their close collaborations on major musical works. A letter from Auden to Britten 15 July 1941 gives insight into their particular process of artistic partnership and reveals a librettist keen to tailor his text to meet the composer's specific musical requirements:

I shall be delighted too to enlarge St. Cecilia; I was only afraid of making her too fat. I will wait though till you come and I can discuss with you exactly what is best.⁸¹

Before he met with Auden, Britten had considered composing a setting in praise of St Cecilia since 1935 (whose saint day is celebrated on 22 November, Britten's date of birth). Both artists were aware of the canonic status of the preceding settings of Dryden

⁷⁸ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*. p. 76.

⁷⁹ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 46.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸¹ Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1939–42*, ii, p. 1039. Hereafter referred to as Mitchell and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, ii.

by Purcell and Handel.⁸² Interestingly, the composer's return to Britain, with its rich choral traditions and its expanded performance possibility, inspired him in returning to this genre and he commenced *A Ceremony of Carols* op.28 for treble voices and harp⁸³ while on that returning boat journey. Britten selected a collection of medieval English and Latin texts in this work; what is significant is that the model of setting Latin and English (albeit modernised) was a significant and conspicuous text-setting feature of their collaborations as seen in the symphonic cycle *Our Hunting Fathers*. In this later work we see Britten exert textual discernment within the framework of previously gained experiences.

Britten's first foray into the world of opera composition was with his collaborative operetta, *Paul Bunyan* op.17, in two acts with a prologue, to texts by Auden (composed November 1939–April 1941). The operetta initially was a performance failure; its premiere at Columbia University in May 1941⁸⁴ was received negatively by the critics and Britten's public withdrawal of the opera after its initial one-week run is described by Evans as 'suppression'.⁸⁵ Britten chose not to publish a contemporary score.⁸⁶ Brett contends that this project was doomed to failure from the outset as it represented:

a patronizing attempt to evoke the spirit of a nation not his own by W. H. Auden in which Britten was a somewhat dazzled accomplice—he [Auden] was quite vague about the exact nature of the title role's manifestation and staging only six months before it opened.⁸⁷

⁸² Edward Mendelson, 'The Making of Auden's *Hymn for St Cecilia's Day*', in *On Mahler and Britten*, ed. by Philip Reed (Woodbridge: Boydell Press/The Britten-Pears Library, 1995), pp. 186–92.

⁸³ Britten, *A Ceremony of Carols* op.28, for Treble Voices and Harp (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1943).

⁸⁴ This premiere was held at Brander Matthews Hall, Columbia University, New York on 5 May 1941, by the Columbia Theatre Associates, cond. Hugh Ross. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 54–55.

⁸⁵ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 95.

⁸⁶ Following revisions (January 1974–February 1975) the first full score was published in 1993 and was assigned a pre-existing opus number, formerly allocated to another withdrawn work. Britten, *Paul Bunyan* op.17, operetta in two acts and a prologue, libretto by W. H. Auden (London: Faber Music, 1993), ix ('Prefatory Note', Donald Mitchell).

⁸⁷ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, pp. 205–6.

There is a consensus among the contemporary critical reviews of this opera's premiere as critiqued by Seymour: that the characterisation and themes of the text were considered weak, that there was a lack of coherence in the episodic nature of the opera's dramatic action, but general agreement that the musical score was highly responsive to the eclectic nature of the musical styles required by the text. She goes on to identify the profusion of musical styles as including 'English ballad form, jazz, blues, Italian grand opera, the musical comedy of Gilbert and Sullivan, and the music theatre of Brecht and Weill' with 'stylistic juxtaposition' occurring within a single number.⁸⁸ To this overly ripe mix Jenkins adds the genres of calypso and frontier ballad.⁸⁹ Britten returned to this work and commenced its revision only in 1974, in the year after Auden's death.

It seems likely that Britten and Pears' decision to return to Britain within months of the failure of this opera is related. It also appears ironic that Auden's letter of farewell to Britten should extol, among a combination of artistic and personal advice, that 'Goodness and [Beauty] are the results of a perfect balance between Order and Chaos, Bohemianism and Bourgeois Convention. Bohemian chaos alone ends in a mad jumble of beautiful scraps; Bourgeois convention alone ends in large unfeeling corpses'.⁹⁰ The disorder and over-eclectic nature of the texts which Auden produced for this opera, and which Britten succeeded in setting, contributed to the failure of the initial production of *Paul Bunyan*. This literary experience marked a lesson for Britten and represents the first and only time when he did not involve himself fully in all stages of the process of writing opera libretti. He must have felt betrayed by Auden's texts or

⁸⁸ Claire Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: Expression and Evasion* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 20–23. Hereafter referred to as Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*.

⁸⁹ Nicholas Jenkins, 'Auden in America', in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. by Sam Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 43.

⁹⁰ Letter from Auden to Britten, probably 31 January 1942 quoted in full in Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, pp. 161–62.

'beautiful scraps' in this case;⁹¹ but the composer learned the value of objective critical discernment from this experience. For Britten this textual experience and the resultant exercise of literary independence reveals an outgrowth from his earlier literary dependency on the poet. There is no record of a direct written reply by Britten to this Auden letter.

Britten's literary discernment was to be tested again when Auden produced drafts of a text for a Christmas oratorio, later published by Auden as *For the Time Being* (1944). Porter describes this Auden work as 'another of his grand pot-pourris, a gallimaufry of ideas about the incarnation of Christ'.⁹² Given his experience with Auden's text in *Paul Bunyan* Britten recognised the unsuitability for setting to music such a miscellaneous collection of ideas as were contained in Auden's text. In discussion with Carpenter, Peter Pears confirms Britten's dismay at the progress which Auden had made with this work without sufficient consultation with him, and Pears suggests that the inappropriate number of syllables for the Fugue—'a few syllables are enough for a fugue—Wystan wrote seven stanzas of ten lines each'—were the chief determinants in Britten's decision to abandon the work.⁹³ Pears cites this unilateral decision by the composer as an example of Britten's growing confidence in his dealings with Auden;⁹⁴ perhaps Pears also equated a diminishing influence by Auden on Britten with a concomitant deepening of his own personal relationship with the composer. Coincidentally this work, commenced by Auden in mid-1941, is also obliquely referred to

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–62.

⁹² Porter, 'Auden's English: Language and Style', p. 134.

⁹³ Though not set within the poet's intended format, a portion of the large literary work *For the Time Being* was, however, later selected by Britten as the text for two minor choral works in November 1944. Britten used texts from Auden's *For the Time Being* in his November 1944 'A Shepherd's Carol' and 'Chorale after an Old French Carol', both for unaccompanied chorus. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 70–71. Both of these excerpts were removed by Auden from his final American (1944) and British (1945) publications. Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 322. Hereafter referred to as Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*.

⁹⁴ Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, p. 323.

in Auden's January 1942 farewell letter to Britten (referenced above) and implies that, at that date, Auden still considered it to be a live project and that the composer had not at that point brought himself to communicate his resolve. Therefore, if Britten's suppression of *Paul Bunyan* represents his acceptance of the possible questionability of Auden's texts as a musical source, his rejection of Auden's subsequent oratorio text marks Britten's conscious resolution to end their five/six-year period of professional collaboration.

For Auden, this practice of creative collaboration within his intellectual circle of friends was well established before the commencement of his cross-media interactions with Britten: he co-edited *The Poet's Tongue: An Anthology* (1935) with John Garrett;⁹⁵ he collaborated with Christopher Isherwood on the following politically-charged verse plays, *The Dog beneath the Skin* (1935), *The Ascent of F 6* (1936), *On This Frontier* (1938), and their joint account of their travels in China resulted in *Journey to a War* (1939). Similarly, travels with Louis MacNeice led to their joint publication *Letters from Iceland* (1939).⁹⁶ These literary collaborations arose generally at Auden's instigation and in many cases he was the dominant creative force; however, in his collaborations with Britten the nature of the interaction differed due to the necessity for independent exercise of complementary literary and musical skills and also Britten can be said to have had the final word in his musical setting of the poet's texts.

In his brief article, dealing with his collaborations with Auden, 'Some Notes on the Early Poetry', Christopher Isherwood draws attention to Auden as a scientist and a Scandinavian, a 'musician and a ritualist'. The former couplet relates both to Auden's

⁹⁵ W. H. Auden, and John Garrett, eds., *The Poet's Tongue*, Vol. I and II. Interestingly, this two-volume anthology relegated details of authorship to the index and the poems are presented in alphabetical order of their first line, thereby focusing exclusively on the poems' content without prior knowledge of their origin.

⁹⁶ Neil McEwan, ed., *The Twentieth Century (1900–Present)*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares and Michael Alexander, *Macmillan Anthologies of English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 441.

scientific outlook and approach to technique and his childhood reading material of sagas. With regard to the latter coupling Isherwood states that Auden had received, as part of his high Anglican upbringing, a ‘sound musical education’ and had valued ritual from an early age, and that if Auden could have his way ‘he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass.’⁹⁷ Auden’s inability to control, at times, the scale and complexity of his texts became a critical factor in Britten’s decision to discontinue setting texts provided by poet.

3.8 THE EVOLUTION OF A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS IN ART SONG

Before Britten met and worked with Auden, active cooperation with another artist had not been part of the composer’s working practice. Within art song, the trajectory of this working relationship can be categorised as a progression from Britten’s textual dependence on the poet to his achievement of literary independence and discernment. The duration of this process also equates to a period of intense artistic maturation for the composer, which also informed his approaches to the relationship of text and music in other vocal genres outside art song. The focus of this thesis is to establish the broad phases of this developing literary collaboration to provide a contextual framework for the subsequent discussion of the resultant musical works.

Auden is the source poet for twenty-one of Britten’s art songs which collectively represent thirteen percent of the composer’s total number of art songs written and provides the single largest contribution from an individual poet. Five settings are contained in the symphonic cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8 (1936) for voice and orchestra, two written by Auden and three devised and modernised by him (see Table 3.1); the remainder were written for voice and piano (see Table 3.2): five in *On This*

⁹⁷ Christopher Isherwood, ‘Some Notes on the Early Poetry’ in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. by Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), p. 74.

Island op.11 and are the subject of the subsequent chapter, four separate cabaret songs, three for a second planned Auden volume, and four other single songs (one of which also has an earlier duet version). Britten's text-setting practices in these final seven songs are explored in a subsequent chapter. Only *On This Island* and two of these latter eleven songs were published during Britten's life time; the remainder awaited posthumous publication.⁹⁸ Tables 3.2 and 3.3 provide listings of the art songs written by Britten to Auden texts and the dates of composition.

Table 3.2 Britten's orchestral song-cycle setting of Auden

Orchestral Song Cycle (Published 1936)	Song Title	Source
<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8	'Prologue'	W. H. Auden
<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8	1. 'Rats'	Auden modernisation of anonymous source
<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8	2. 'Messalina'	Auden modernisation of anonymous source
<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8	3. 'Dance of Death'	Auden revision of Thomas Ravenscroft
<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8	'Epilogue and Funeral March'	W. H. Auden

Both men were working at the GPO film unit when Britten approached Auden and asked him to compose a text for Britten's commission to provide a work for The Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Music Festival (1936). This marks a change in Auden's practice of initiating collaborations. Britten did not give Auden detailed criteria for the selection of a theme or subject matter, as to do so would have been presumed by the composer to be an interference in the poet's area of expertise. This commission resulted in Auden's specifically writing a prologue and an epilogue and his modernisation of

⁹⁸ 'To Lie Flat on the Back' for High Voice and Piano (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997); and 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' for High Voice and Piano version II (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1947), version I (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997)

three existing texts, two of which are of unknown origin and one poem by Thomas Ravenscroft; therefore Auden had full artistic independence in his literary task and Britten set about musically responding to Auden's completed literary work, which resulted in Britten's first symphonic song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8.

For his Auden settings in *On This Island* op.11, Britten changed the nature of their textual collaboration—he selected and set five extant Auden poems, four from the poet's most recent poetic collection *Look, Stranger!* (1936) and one from his most recently published verse play *The Dog beneath the Skin* (1935). This expression of Britten's literary discernment reveals evidence of the composer's growing confidence in his source selection; moreover it allows him textual editorial input. I will argue during the discussion of this work, in the following chapter, that Britten in this 'Auden Volume I', in his selection, ordering, and through musical emphasis, has created new possible readings of these individual poems through a consideration of all the songs—a musical synergy. The expanded poetic meaning of individual songs results from but also contributes to the creation of a cumulative literary-based song 'cycle'. The artistic coherence of this work may therefore be attributed exclusively to the composer—this was not the case in *Our Hunting Fathers*.

The other eleven individual Britten settings of Auden also reveal a composer exercising independent literary discernment in his personal selection of poems for musical setting. Many of these works, though highlighting personal, social and sexual ideas due to their relative lightness of tone and popular idiom, do not carry the same musical weight as Britten's other Auden settings; this is possibly confirmed by Britten's publication of only two of these individual songs during his lifetime.

Table 3.3 Britten's voice and piano song settings of Auden

Song Cycle/Collection For voice and piano (Date of publication)	Song Title	Date completed/ Compositional draft⁹⁹
<i>On This Island</i> op.11 (1938)	'Let the Florid Music Praise'	12 Oct. 1937
<i>On This Island</i> op.11 (1938)	'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast'	27 May 1937
<i>On This Island</i> op.11 (1938)	'Seascape'	12 Oct. 1937
<i>On This Island</i> op.11 (1938)	'Nocturne'	5 May 1937
<i>On This Island</i> op.11 (1938)	'As It Is, Plenty'	9 Oct. 1937
<i>Cabaret Songs</i> (1980)	'Johnny'	5 May 1937
<i>Cabaret Songs</i> (1980)	'Funeral Blues'	17 Jun. 1937
<i>Cabaret Songs</i> (1980)	'Tell Me the Truth about Love'	Jan. 1938
<i>Cabaret Songs</i> (1980)	'Calypso'	1939
<i>The Red Cockatoo & Other Songs</i> (1994)	'When You're Feeling like Expressing Your Affection'	1935/36
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'To Lie Flat on the Back'	26 Oct. 1937
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'	27 Oct. 1937
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'The Sun Shines Down'	May or Oct. 1937
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes'	Jan. 1938
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'What's in Your Mind?'	1941
<i>Fish in the Unruffled Lakes</i> (1997)	'Underneath the Abject Willow'	Duet Nov. 1936, solo version 1941

The ultimate and total breakdown in Britten's professional collaboration with Auden may be considered to have been caused in part by the unsatisfactory nature of Auden's texts for the opera *Paul Bunyan* and the initial drafts of the subsequent planned

⁹⁹ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*.

oratorio project. Britten's growing musico-literary discernment confirmed for him that unsetting text should indeed not be set. At this point Britten decided to distance himself from Auden by physical remove. They had initially come together through textual and musical collaboration and when this no longer worked for Britten, they drifted apart; this distancing was accentuated by Britten and Pears' decision to return to Britain in 1942. In this way Britten physically removed himself from what he considered a fully explored source of inspiration for his art song and never returned to texts by Auden after 1942.¹⁰⁰ In effect, Britten's experience of this period of rich and intense textual collaboration meant that he never again devoted himself so exclusively to any one poet after his disengagement with Auden; subsequent art-song literary interactions were intense but short-lived. Single settings or single song cycles, be they single-poet or mixed-poet cycles, became the preferred option for Britten.

For Britten, this social and professional practice set up a framework for future musical collaboration with other artists and suggests an immature social response to intractable professional difficulties. This action has contributed to the usage of the term 'Britten's corpses';¹⁰¹ another example of this inability to personally confront professional issues in a direct manner is seen in his very intense and prolonged personal and professional engagement with Eric Crozier¹⁰² as producer and librettist and their

¹⁰⁰ Britten used texts by Auden for unaccompanied chorus in November 1944 in his 'A Shepherd's Carol' and 'Chorale after an Old French Carol', Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 70–71 and also included the poem 'Out on the Lawn I Lie in Bed' as the conclusion to Part II of *Spring Symphony* op.44, for Soprano, Alto and Tenor Soli, Mixed Chorus, Boy's Choir and Orchestra from 1948–49. Auden is however conspicuous by his absence from Britten's selection for his mixed-poet song cycle *Serenade* op.31 for tenor, horn and strings (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1943).

¹⁰¹ This term is widely quoted: Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, p. 99; and in Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, p. 19. Sir Charles Mackerras states in an interview with Antony Lias for *Opera Britannia*, in relation to the origin of this term, 'I think it was Lord Harewood who invented the term'. Antony Lias interview with Sir Charles Mackerras for *Opera Britannia* 15 October 2009, <> [accessed 17 May 2010]

¹⁰² Crozier was the first producer of *Peter Grimes* op.33 (1945) and *The Rape of Lucretia* op.37 (1946), the librettist of *Albert Herring* op.39 (1947), *Saint Nicolas* op.42 (1948) and *The Little Sweep* op.45 (1949) and collaborated with E. M. Forster on *Billy Budd* op.50 (1951). Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, pp. 19–20.

subsequent estrangement.¹⁰³ The origins of this feature of Britten's professionalism can be said, to some extent, to have commenced with his Auden collaborations. Therefore, when Britten felt he had exhausted the musical-inspirational possibilities of Auden's poetry he moved on to other poets and pastures new. This pattern of a single intense absorption of a poet's literary work within a concentrated period of time became a constant feature of Britten's art-song practices. In general, one can say that the model of working practice which evolved during Britten's five/six years of Auden collaboration is replicated at the micro level with subsequent poets and librettists.

3.9 AUDEN: A DIVERSE INFLUENCE

Britten's relationship with the poet Auden occurred at a formative stage in the life and career of the composer. The poet occupies a pivotal role in the formation of Britten as a composer of vocal music, a citizen, and as a man (who was homosexual). Auden provided the diversity of intellectual and personal experiences which had been lacking in Britten's background at a critical point in the composer's development. Britten had previously observed an artistic grouping at close hand through his exposure to Frank Bridge and his colleagues, whom Britten irregularly visited for lessons in composition (1927–1933);¹⁰⁴ however, this relationship, though musically influential, was that of a mature teacher or mentor and younger student and did not have a collaborative aspect. So too, Bridge and his social circle reinforced a heterosexual model for the young composer while Auden *et al.* provided a more diverse social experience. The composer's personal acceptance of the widespread nature of Auden's influence on him can be seen in this quote from a 1960 radio interview with Britten:

¹⁰³ Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, p. 99.

¹⁰⁴ Britten initially attended Frank Bridge for composition lessons at the elder composer's homes in London and Friston, near Eastbourne, during his school holidays. This continued less frequently when Britten went to the Royal College of Music (1930–1933).

I was very much influenced by Auden, not only in poetry but in life too, and politics, of course, came very strongly into our lives in the late thirties... I think it wouldn't be too much oversimplifying the situation to say that many of us young people at that time felt that Europe was more or less finished. There was this great Nazi fascist cloud about to break at any moment and one felt that Europe didn't – nor did it have the will to resist that. I went to America and felt that I would make my future there.¹⁰⁵

Britten thus identifies the areas of Auden's particular influence on him as he sees them as being: literary, political, and social. In order to provide a background for subsequent exploration of their effect on Britten art song these aspects will be considered separately; this is not to suggest here that these aspects were independent or mutually exclusive of each other, as Auden's literature reflected upon contemporary political events; likewise social and sexual perspectives had a political dimension and also found literary expression, and therefore some cross referencing is necessary.

3.9.1 BRITTEN'S AUDEN: A LITERARY GUIDE

Britten's literary tastes before he collaborated with Auden are considered by Kildea. Research into the nature of Britten's reading practices as expressed in Kildea's review of the listing of Britten's reading of fiction in 1933 leads him to posit that the composer's tastes were 'exclusively literary' and 'heavily dependent on nineteenth-century (Romantic) masterpieces' and therefore 'predominantly conservative' and non-political in nature; this type of literary exposure was in keeping with Britten's middle-class professional family upbringing and public schooling but it underscores both his need for cultural and political expansion and, to some extent, explains his initial vulnerability to Auden's mammoth artistic force. Also in Britten's library at that time

¹⁰⁵ BBC interview by Lord Harewood with Benjamin Britten, 'People Today', BBC Radio (May/June 1960). Cited in Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 618.

are books about films and plays and Kildea notes the attraction of this material for a young artist 'still developing ideas about form and genre'.¹⁰⁶ The predominant poetic emphasis in this reading was for the 'poem's words, structure and sound'. This was all to change with Britten's exposure to Auden's verse in which idea, image and meaning take a more central role; Britten's 'conception of what poetry was "about"' was challenged and changed.¹⁰⁷ Although composer and poet's formative reading material differed in volume and author they had in common their love of and sensitivity to language.

The breadth and depth of Auden's intellect and literary learning resulted in his poetry's containing a profusion of inspirational ideas, but the identification and expression of this literary worth in music presents Britten's achievement as a composer. These works provided Britten with an ideal English-language textual partner; Auden's poetic calibre was undisputed, his verse modernist and language contemporary, and his texts had not previously been interpreted and expressed musically. This gave the young composer the freedom, which he had not previously felt, to engage with this new and exciting literary material and express it musically without immediate equivalent comparison with his contemporaries. The lack of interest by other British composers in setting Auden's poetry was, however, proved to be a difficulty in the contemporary critical reception of much of Britten's Auden works.

As much as Britten was indebted to texts which Auden wrote and devised for him, so too the poet provided the composer with both an informed and condensed guidance of other significant English and foreign-language poets, together with his own reflection of the literary influences which impressed him. In this way Britten benefited from

¹⁰⁶ Kildea, 'Britten, Auden and "Otherness"', p. 38.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

secondary distilled knowledge; the breadth and literary quality of Auden's poetic influences have been stated in this chapter and provided exemplar literary material to Britten. Again, we may look to Auden's introduction to *A Poet's Tongue* for an insightful explication of the poet's literary ethos. He proposed a definition of poetry as 'memorable speech' which has the express objective to 'move our emotions, or excite our intellect'; central to such an achievement is an awareness of the suggestibility of words.¹⁰⁸ Auden considers that, in literature, a word contains 'the sum of all possible meanings' as opposed to the restriction of a single dictionary meaning as in scientific theory. These spheres of potential meaning are mediated by the experience of the poetic audience in its reflection on the poem. In Audenesque fashion he goes on at length to list the possible subject matter of poetry and concludes that all human experiences are 'equally the subject of poetry' and that 'we do poetry a great disservice if we confine it only to the major experiences of life'.¹⁰⁹ With Britten's Auden song cycles of 1936 and 1937 we experience the composer's musical expansion and application of this artistic and poetic ethos to a wider cultural audience. The composer is given the freedom to reflect upon the potential meanings contained in the Auden poems, often dealing with surface-level mundane human interaction, and proposes a musical response to his reading of the source text.

3.9.2 BRITTEN'S AUDEN: A POLITICAL STIMULUS

By the mid-1930s, Britten's juvenilia was not 'political in conception', featured few contemporary poets, and remained artistically unresponsive to 'post-war political upheaval, economic and social restructuring'.¹¹⁰ This immature outlook is accounted for

¹⁰⁸ Auden, and Garrett, eds, *The Poet's Tongue*. i, p. v.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

¹¹⁰ Kildea, 'Britten, Auden and "Otherness"', p. 38.

by a combination of his youth, sheltered and conservative upbringing, narrowly focused college education, and his lack of life experience. Auden exercised a considerable influence on the young Britten's emerging political views but also on his socio-political artistic ethos.

The extent of domestic British and European turmoil in 1936 is described in headline fashion by Deane as:

'Stresa Front' between Germany, France and Italy; the Italian attack on Abyssinia, and imposition of League of Nations sanctions on Italy; the Hoare-Laval Pact; the Anglo-German naval agreement; and, in Westminster, the resignation of Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister, his succession by Stanley Baldwin and the re-election of a National Government under Conservative leadership.¹¹¹

To this listing should be added the commencement of the Spanish Civil War in June of that year. Hynes identifies the potential for a close relationship between the realms of literature and political history which is 'particularly close in times of crisis, when...the world of action and the world of the imagination, interpenetrate'.¹¹² Auden's verse reflected upon the extant chaos, provided Britten with texts which were politically informed and challenged him to explore the interpenetration of music and contemporary poetry.

It should, however, be recognised that not all of Auden's texts, which were either given to him by the poet or selected by Britten, are topical in subject matter. But contemporary affairs do provide at minimum a counter-subject to these works. Also musical art works which are overly dependent on contemporary references without a wider or universal appeal are unlikely to survive or gain repeated performances. Evans suggests that this is the case with Britten's little-performed choral work *Ballad of*

¹¹¹ Deane, 'Auden's England', p. 28.

¹¹² Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, p. 9.

Heroes op.14 (1938), a tribute to those British volunteers who were killed in the Spanish Civil War, which is overly didactic in purpose.¹¹³

Related to the poet's poetic ethos is his poetic intent. Auden's attitudes to the socio-political role of the artist are clarified for us in his verse essay 'Psychology and Art To-day' (1935):

You cannot tell people what to do,
you can only tell them parables;
and that is what art really is, particular stories
of particular people and experiences, from which
each according to his own immediate and peculiar needs
may draw his own conclusions.¹¹⁴

Here, Auden considers the social role of the artist as a reflector and commentator in affecting change but not as an actor in the prescription of the actual nature of social and political transformation. It should be noted that Auden rejected many of these concepts concerning the role of the artist in society in his later works but consideration of these views has validity and is useful in an assessment of both his poetry in the 1930s and Britten's art song in that period. However, Britten is, by 1940, far more aware of the concept of the autonomy of an art work: in an interview for the *New York Sun* 27 April 1940 he is reported to have said in respect of his instrumental *Sinfonia da Requiem* 'I'm making it as anti-war as possible...I don't believe you can express social or political or economic theories in music, but by coupling new music with well-known musical phrases, I think it's possible to get over certain ideas'.¹¹⁵ Brett also presents this

¹¹³ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p.76.

¹¹⁴ W. H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day' in *The Arts To-day*, ed. by Geoffrey Grigson (London: Bodley Head, 1935), p. 20. Cited in Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s*, front pages.

¹¹⁵ Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, ii, p. 705.

opinion, expressed by Britten, as an example of the composer's having 'the traditional cake of autonomy and at the same time to eat away at it'.¹¹⁶

Much of Auden's literature in the 1930s contains a critical contemporary commentary, and this act of opposition functions as a politically-informed act—much of the music of *Our Hunting Fathers* and *On This Island*, as we will see, also exhibits aspects of opposition and protest. Likewise, many of Britten's political views were informed by his exposure to Auden and his colleagues which include a leftist political outlook and an anti-war stance; however, Britten, and indeed Pears also, had strongly held pacifist views. While Auden was not a pacifist, all three were passionately anti-war.

3.9.3 BRITTEN'S AUDEN: A SOCIAL FORCE AND PERSONAL SEXUAL LIBERATOR

As much as Britten and Auden's initial interaction was professional, their relationship also developed into a personal friendship; through this singular relationship Britten gained access, as previously stated, to Auden's already expensive intellectual and political social circle. Britten's acceptance within this artistic circle was therefore initially founded on Auden's particular selection of his musical collaborator, which was in turn based primarily on Britten's talent and hard-working professionalism which he had witnessed at the GPO film unit, but also on Britten's attractiveness to Auden; Johnson describes Britten as being unconventionally attractive to the poet.¹¹⁷ Britten would not otherwise have been exposed to this liberal leftist society were it not for the closeness of his friendship with Auden; with a nod from the poet, Britten became a fully-paid-up member of the 'Auden generation'. This experience had a significant

¹¹⁶ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 176.

¹¹⁷ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 144.

impact on Britten's emerging social and moral views and found direct expression in the art song he composed.

For all of Auden's dazzling intellect and encyclopaedic literary knowledge, this resulted in Britten's deep feelings of academic inferiority, which was compounded by Auden's tendency to dominate discourse with friends and at times bully them. Auden expressed, in his literature, his resolute confident and outspoken opinions as if they were not to be questioned; these positions from which he had little difficulty changing his mind must have seemed inspirational and yet inconsistent at times to the quiet, respectful, suggestible, and sensitive composer.

In addition to being a mentor and librettist, Auden was Britten's confidant. By 1935, when the two men met, Britten was probably aware of his homosexuality, but had not, according to John Bridcut, either acted upon his sexuality or come to terms with it. By comparison Auden was by this time an 'unashamed homosexual'.¹¹⁸ Through his interaction with Auden, Isherwood and other homosexual intellectuals, Britten experienced the freedom of new socialising possibilities and artistic stimulus. 'Auden's friendship gave Britten his [artistic and] historical bearings as a homosexual' as the poet would have considered their work in the context of 'like-minded people' having their origins in 'Socrates and Plato, Leonardo and Michelangelo' along a line into modernity.¹¹⁹ Britten chose to engage directly with many of these figures of his intellectual heritage in his art song: for texts in his *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* op.22 (1940) and for subject matter in 'Socrates und Alcibiades' from *Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente* op.61 (1958), subtly confirming at once both his acknowledgement of a recognised homosexual tradition and also his place within that established tradition.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

Britten's lack of direct public verbal or written reference to his own sexuality needs to be considered in relation to his time. Homosexuality in Britain was outlawed until 1967, and explicit references in plays and performances were forbidden until 1958.¹²⁰ Therefore, in much of Britten's works there is stark ambiguity between the public presentation of universal themes and a private subtext. This dualistic aspect of Britten songs allows for fresh interpretation of his music from the ways in which it was originally received; and a changing perception and reception of this music is made possible and enriched through a fuller consideration of Britten and Auden's relationship.

Auden approached his objective of broadening Britten's artistic and sexual experiences with all the fervour of a political campaign. Auden dedicated two songs 'for' Benjamin Britten, while it was his normal practice to dedicate poems 'to'. Britten's setting of these songs, 'Underneath the Abject Willow' and 'To Lie Flat on the Back', will be considered in a subsequent chapter. Auden is not above giving his friend personal advice of the utmost sensitivity in a coded but very public fashion. Here again, the interpenetration of the public expression and the intended private intent of poet and composer is musically explored.

3.10 BRITTEN AFTER AUDEN: AN ENDURING INFLUENCE

Auden's poetic and more general influence went far beyond the actual Britten settings of the poet. Britten recognised the formative contribution and fundamental role which Auden played in the development of his literary sensitivity as evidenced in his 1960 BBC Radio interview in which he states, in relation to literature, that 'the person, I think, who developed my love [of poetry] was the poet, Auden...he it was who introduced me to the works of Rimbaud, who was only a name to me then; and he

¹²⁰ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 208.

showed me the different periods in verse'.¹²¹ Britten, through close professional and particularly social interaction, was exposed to and absorbed Auden's literary interests and influences. Though not referred to specifically by Britten, Auden's verse was influenced by Thomas Hardy's poetry and Auden played a pivotal role in a revival of interest in this earlier poet; these factors may well have influenced Britten's decision to select Hardy as his source poet for his song cycle *Winter Words* op.52 in 1953. Interestingly Eric Walter White also attributes Britten's selection of the earlier poet John Donne to Auden's influence, and Britten composed the *Holy Sonnets of John Donne* op.25 in 1945.¹²² With these examples we see the depth and indirect implications of Auden's literary influence on the composer's enduring poetic discernment, long after Britten had stopped setting Auden's source texts.

Within the genre of opera Philip Brett goes so far as to posit that Britten's portrayal of personal isolation, as an 'allegorical figure inescapably signifying "the homosexual"' in *Peter Grimes* (1945), adapted from George Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, can be 'attributed in general to Britten's being a member of the Auden generation, and in particular to his being very close to Auden himself.'¹²³ Brett's argument is that the personal and sexual liberation which Britten experienced in and around his relationship with Auden cultivated an atmosphere in which the topic of homosexuality could be artistically explored by Britten in opera. It was with this opera that Britten became internationally renowned, achieved widespread domestic acceptance, and commenced a revival of interest in English-language opera which had previously received little public performance interest.

¹²¹ BBC interview by Lord Harewood with Benjamin Britten, *People Today*, BBC Radio (May/June 1960). Cited in Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 384.

¹²² White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, p. 33.

¹²³ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 187.

Britten's revision in 1974–75 of his operetta *Paul Bunyan* op.17 (1941) based on Auden texts occurred only after the death of the poet in September 1973, and shows the measure of Britten's respect for their original collaborative efforts. This revision may respond to encouragement by Donald Mitchell as his publisher, but it may also reveal the composer's latent desire to revisit, revise and preserve this early work free from the pressures of active collaboration or the necessity to gain the librettist's acknowledgement for its subsequent publication in 1976 as a libretto.¹²⁴ Britten was in ill-health during this period of revision and may have felt that this previously failed musical collaborative project with Auden warranted completion and revision.

3.11 TO AUDEN THE LAST WORD

Given his predisposition to advise those close to him on matters literary, political and personal it is not surprising that Auden composed, within the contemporary political climate, an invocation to musicians and in particular to 'The Composer', as seen in his poem from December 1938:

The Composer

All the others translate: the painter sketches
A visible world to love or reject;
Rummaging into his life, the poet fetches
The images out that hurt and connect,

From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,
Relying on us to cover the rift;
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift.

¹²⁴ Britten, *Paul Bunyan* op.17, Opera in two acts and a prologue (London: Faber Music, 1976).

Pour out your presence, O delight, cascading
The falls of the knee and the weirs of the spine,
Our climate of silence and doubt invading;
You alone, alone, O imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.¹²⁵

By the time Auden composed this poem, composer and poet had worked together on many musical projects, had been close friends for in excess of three years, Auden had not collaborated with other composers during this period and therefore, did not have significant other experience of working with a composer; it is therefore not unreasonable to consider the possibility that its subject matter may reflect upon aspects of his actual experience of working with Britten. Although the composer is the intended primary focus of this poem, the role of the poet as his equal collaborator is recognised fully in both the first and second stanzas. The artist is seen as one who painstakingly reflects the ‘images’ that ‘hurt and connect’ in their art form and in a Christian sense is considered a provider of social redemption. The forthright declamatory authority of the opening line is typical of Auden’s style. The challenging political role of the composer is to the fore here, he/she is invoked to pour forth his/her musical presence in the current ‘climate of silence’, in which societal ‘doubt’ pervades. The poet’s fondness for simile is evident in this short poem: expressly, as in the ‘forgiveness’ of the musical work which is poured out ‘like a wine; and is implied, as in the case of the painter’s efforts which are likened to a work of translation. We also see Auden’s combined use of repetition and variation as a device of emotional persuasion; the effect of ‘only your notes’ becoming ‘only your song’ engages the power of evidence-based logic to

¹²⁵ Edward Mendelson, ed., *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 239. The punctuation of this poem indicates the more usual sonnet form of eight lines followed by 6 lines.

emotional ends, whereby the synergistic whole (the ‘song’) is greater than the sum of its individual elements (the ‘notes’). The repetition of the text ‘pour out’ of the penultimate verse in the final verse serves to strengthen the poet’s linkage of music’s ‘delight’ and its redemptive purpose in this imaginatively and inspirational rich verse. The apparent contradictory repeated singularity of ‘You alone, alone’, has the rhetorical effect of focusing and refocusing attention on the poem’s subject matter—the composer. The typical Audenesque ambiguity contained in his juxtaposition of ‘You alone’ with the earlier ‘relying on us,’ is not resolved but is personal and subjective of a love poem rather than an expression of a considered artistic distanced and objective view. This lyric poem, though not set by Britten,¹²⁶ shows Auden reaching out to the composer, from within his artistic medium, and revealing his deep appreciation of the musical potential of these poetic devices while also reflecting upon the artistic nature of their respective collaborations.

¹²⁶ This poem has been set more recently as a choral work by Judith Lang Zaimont, *Serenade: To Music* (Verona, New Jersey: Subito Music, 1981), with interpolated phrases by Zaimont.

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF TEXT SETTING AND LITERARY CONNECTIVES IN GENRE CLASSIFICATION: *ON THIS ISLAND* A SONG CYCLE?

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Britten's decision to set five separate Auden texts in 1937 as *On This Island* op.11¹ marks a progression in the evolution of his musical collaborative relationship with the poet. This work followed on closely from his previous musical and literary collaboration with Auden in the symphonic song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8 (1936), a work which was initially received with shock and criticism by a conservative hunting-class audience given the centrality of the theme of man's relations with animals in this cycle. However, this time not only are the musical forces of the orchestra replaced by piano, the more traditional recital instrument, but this later work represents Britten's 'first *major* confrontation with English verse as [an art] song-writer'.² So too his methods of text selection had changed. Whereas the texts of the former work were either written by Auden or specifically selected and modernised by him in consultation with Britten for the composer's commission from the Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Music Festival in 1936, this current work reveals the independent selection of texts by the composer exclusively from Auden's contemporary poetry. Kennedy also recognises the significance that *On This Island* op.11 was the 'first [work] in which all the words

¹ Britten, *On This Island* op.11 (London: Boosey, 1938). Hereafter referred to as Britten, *On This Island* op.11.

² Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 152.

were Auden's'.³ As with the earlier orchestral cycle *On This Island* also reflects, though less obviously, upon England's highly politicised economic and social environment and on its relationship with and within Europe in the late 1930s. Due to Britten's exclusive control of text selection in this work we are therefore presented with Auden's texts which not only necessitated the exercise of the composer's individual poetic discernment, but more importantly, due to Britten's growing literary independence and confidence, also warrant an increased level of analytical scrutiny of the meaning and the political and personal import of the words. Such a heightened exploration of the texts of these individual Auden poems will lead to the creation, by Britten, of a new coherent and cohesive collective musical work which as a unit offers us a unique glimpse into the operation of a still-evolving collaborative process between the composer and poet during the late 1930s.

4.2 RELEVANCE OF GENRE SIGNIFICATION

The determination of the status of *On This Island* op.11 as either a 'collection' of five individual songs (see Table 4.1) on texts by a single poet or as a 'song cycle' is central to achieving an enhanced understanding and attaining a fresh appreciation of this work. Britten did not give definitive clarity to this issue of genre classification as the title page of this work makes reference merely to a 'volume one' of 'words by W. H. Auden' and 'music by Benjamin Britten'; this title must be considered in the context of his use of the resounding title of 'Symphonic Cycle' for *Our Hunting Fathers*.⁴ However, it should be noted that Britten never again denoted the musical genre 'cycle' in the title of any of his subsequent song cycles, preferring rather to identify poet, poetic form and

³ Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, Stanley Sadie ed., *The Dent Master Musicians* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p. 133. Hereafter referred to as Kennedy, *Britten*.

⁴ Britten, *On This Island* op.11, score cover sheet.

poetic genre in the titles of these works, for example, as seen in the title of *The Holy Sonnets of Michelangelo* op.22 (1940). Therefore, no dictatorial importance should be placed on Britten's 'volume one' designation of *On This Island* as a signifier of genre. Although no second volume was published subsequently, three other Auden text settings have been identified as 'probably intended for a never completed second volume of *On This Island*'.⁵ These three songs were published posthumously in the collection *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes* (1997) and their musical significance is explored in Chapter 5.⁶

Table 4.1 Britten's settings of Auden poems in *On This Island*

Poetic Source Comp. date	Song title	Composition date ⁷	Comp. sketch, fiche A29	Fair copy, fiche A29	Print proof, fiche A29
<i>Look Stranger!</i> ⁸ Feb. 1936 ⁹	1. 'Let the Florid Music Praise!'	12 Oct. 1937	46–50	117–21	146–50
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Mar. 1936 ¹⁰	2. 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast'	27 May 1937	52–54	122–24	151–54
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Nov. 1935 ¹¹	3. 'Seascape'	12 Oct. 1937	56–60	126–30	155–61
<i>The Dog beneath the Skin</i> ¹² Completed by Jan. 1935 ¹³	4. 'Nocturne'	5 May 1937	63–65	132–35	162–65
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Summer 1936 ¹⁴	5. 'As It Is, Plenty'	9 Oct. 1937	67–70	135–39	166–70

⁵ Banks identifies these three settings, all from 1937, as: 'To Lie Flat on the Back', 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land', and 'The Sun Shines Down'. Banks, *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 39–40.

⁶ Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes*, ed. by Colin Matthews (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997).

⁷ Banks, *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works* (Aldeburgh: The Britten-Pears Library, 1999), p. 39.

⁸ Auden, *Look Stranger!*. Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9300428.

⁹ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹² Auden and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin*, Act II Scene V, pp. 115–16.

¹³ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

In order to enhance this assessment of the cyclic aspects of *On This Island* and to appreciate the variety of musical and literary criteria for the consideration of these songs as a song cycle, it is illuminating, firstly, to consider these five songs individually in terms of Britten's general text-setting practices in his musical response to his selected Auden texts. This approach seeks to identify musico-poetic connectives which typify Britten's style of word setting but which also bind these songs together and contribute significant evidence as to the existence of a cohesive musical work. Each song is presented in its published order in terms of both its poetic source and musical setting. Throughout the course of the following discussion, Britten's *On This Island* will be referred to as a song cycle, as this status is supported by disparate aspects of this current research which accumulate sufficient specific and relevant evidence as to justify the propriety of this musical designation.

4.3.1.1 'Let the Florid Music Praise': poetic source

This two-verse poem written by Auden was selected by Britten from the poet's 1936 poetic collection *Look Stranger!*¹⁵ Unlike the majority of poems in this collection, which are referred to only by the text of their first line, this poem is entitled 'Song', and musical imagery dominates the first two lines of the first verse but significantly is absent from the remainder of this and the subsequent stanza. The presence of these opening musical references may have influenced Britten in his choice of this source poem as his opening song but it certainly directly affected the style of the music which this text inspired. Table 4.2 shows the near-perfect rhythmic metrical regularity of both verses of this poem. However, the consistency of this structural poetic device contrasts

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, *Look Stranger!: Poems by W. H. Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 18. Hereafter referred to as Auden, *Look Stranger!*. The US title of this collection is W. H. Auden, *On This Island* (New York: Random House, 1937).

with the varying poetic means by which each verse sustains interest and achieves momentum and therefore expresses a hypermetric poetic importance which is in line with Malin's study of complex rhythmic structures (see Table 2.5). Pervasive in the first verse are alliterative words starting with a harsh 'f-' or 'fl-' sounding consonant ('florid', 'flute', 'face', 'flesh', 'from', and 'fly') and a relative absence of line-end rhyming, while this latter feature dominates the second verse and is further supplemented by an effective onomatopoeic internal rhyming with the emotional loaded text 'weeping' and 'striking' (see Table 4.2).

The subject matter and poetic meaning of this poem are not easily accessible and the sounds of the words and the images contained therein contribute significantly to its interpretation. Evans, in his monograph survey of Britten's music, does not remark specifically upon this aspect of the song¹⁶ while Mitchell focuses his attention primarily on the final song from *On This Island* in his critique.¹⁷ However, Johnson posits that this poem may be regarded as a 'hymn of praise to one of Auden's lovers' in which, however, 'praise is tempered by regret'.¹⁸ Johnson goes on to extend his interpretation of this poem as a love poem, to incorporate some political allusion where it is most conspicuous, such as the word 'striking' which may refer to the political action of the withdrawal by workers of their labour.¹⁹ However, other than such isolated references Johnson does not consider the use by Auden of the idea of love, proposed here, as a continuous metaphor for a political contemporary commentary on the state of social and moral affairs in England and in Europe. This inflamed political international situation was all the more acutely felt by the composer when he chose to set this poem in October 1937, a year after Auden's publication.

¹⁶ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, pp. 133–70.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

The existence of the pompous superficiality of transient beauty that dominates the first verse is mediated, in this verse, by an awareness of decay ‘in this land of flesh and bone’ which may also be interpreted as an awareness of declining imperialist powers in contrast to a time when ‘imperial standards’ flew proudly.²⁰ Auden’s ‘O but’ opening of the second verse serves to connect textually the contrasting ideas of these two verses, in which there is a progression from physical and geographical imagery, ‘In that land...’ and ‘Where...’, to a consideration of passing time as expressed in ‘Always; time will bring their hour’. This aspect can also be comprehended in terms of Zbikowski’s idea of a poetic ontological state which creates a blended conceptual space which is capable of musical equivalence (see 2.3.4.1). In the final stanza the power of citizens is considered rather than the power of the State, which dominates the previous verse, as ultimately and only achievable in the future; the doomed outcome resulting from political inactivity and silence in response to the rise of Fascism in Europe may be considered as representing an inevitable march towards an ‘unpardonable death’.²¹ The function of the obscurity of Auden’s final couplet ‘And my vows break / Before his look’ is to some extent explicated as a balancing poetic response to the final couplet of the first verse, in which the permanence of the natural environment, as characterised by the sun, is now despondently contrasted with the transience and decline of a nation.²² This otherwise opaque text does not seek to conclusively clarify a precise meaning but rather it seeks to expand upon poetic interpretive possibilities and typifies Auden’s poetic style.

²⁰ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Table 4.2 Auden’s poem: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’²³

V.1		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns/ Imagery
1	Let the florid music praise,	7		‘f’ alliteration, ‘florid’ a recognisable reference to baroque music
2	The flute and the trumpet,	6		‘f’ alliteration
3	Beauty’s conquest of your face:	7		‘f’ alliteration
4	In that land of flesh and bone,	7		‘f’ alliteration
5	Where from citadels on high	7	a	‘f’ alliteration
6	Her imperial standards fly,	7	a	‘f’ alliteration, ‘her’ initial female image
7	Let the hot sun	4		
8	Shine on, shine on.	4		‘shine on’ repeated, ‘sun shine’ alliteration
V.2				
1	O but the unloved have had power,	8	a	
2	The weeping and striking,	6	internal rhyme	‘weep’ a reference to musical past
3	Always; time will bring their hour:	7	a	
4	Their secretive children walk	7	b	
5	Through your vigilance of breath	7	c	
6	To unpardonable death,	7	c	
7	And my vows break	4	b	
8	Before his look.	4	b	‘his’ concluding male image

4.3.1.2 ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* op.11 no.1: musical setting

As this cycle’s opening song was composed in October 1937 together with the central song ‘Seascape’ and the final song ‘As It Is, Plenty’, and as the two remaining songs had been completed earlier in May of that year, Britten was, therefore, fully aware of the structural functionality this song has as an opening song in his cycle. Therefore the song’s historically focused decorative *fortissimo* fanfare opening in D major, of ‘Let the florid music praise’, seems appropriate to its chronological placement as the first song in the cycle but it also suggests Britten’s sophisticated response to the musical references of the opening couplet of the poem. The presence of decorative musical features such as: trills in the vocal writing in bar 21 and in the piano accompaniment in

²³ The poem was written in February, 1936. John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 151.

bars 42 and 55, acciaccaturas in bars 17 and 29, and vocal melismas and florid piano parts combined with descending ground bass octave movement (bars 26–27), allude to an intentional neo-baroque musical style, on behalf of the composer, but also to the catalyst provided by Auden’s poetic language. The initial triadic-semiquaver decorative patterns provide a structural framework which contributes to the creation and situation of the soundworld of this song; however, Britten’s use of this musical feature evolves as the song progresses. Initially these neo-baroque florid piano parts act as an introduction to and a commentary upon the vocal delivery of text; this recitative punctuating role evolves, as an equivalence of the passing of time, after the fifth phrase of the first verse when this pattern also informs the texture of the vocal line. Britten’s integration of this melodic decorative sequence into the only vocal melisma of the first verse ‘shine on’ (bars 20–28) reveals his incorporation and development of this past musical practice in an effective depiction of a past imperial glory in song. These evolving musical events may also be considered within Zbikowski’s critique as a musical discourse or ontological state which may now be considered to interact in a ‘blended space’ (see 2.3.4.1) with the poetic expression of the passing of time, referred to above.

Ivey’s contention, in reference to Britten’s 1965 setting of William Blake’s ‘The Tiger’,²⁴ that ‘although many of the musical devices [in this song] are drawn from a past era, the framework in which they appear is undeniably twentieth century’, is equally applicable to Britten’s earlier Auden setting.²⁵ This reveals, thereby, that in addition to these two settings being musical responses, to historic texts in the case of Blake and historically-focused texts in the case of Auden, these works illustrate an aspect of Britten’s consistency of compositional approach over a thirty-year period. Interestingly,

²⁴ Britten, *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74, for baritone and piano (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

²⁵ Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles*, p. 240.

this Auden setting, however, predates Britten's later compositional interest in providing completions of Henry Purcell realisations which commenced only in 1939, with Purcell's *The Knotting Song* Z 371, an interest which continued to exercise him into his final years.²⁶

Britten responds to the regularity of Auden's poetic form with a setting of equal regularity in which the last syllable in the final word of each line is expanded rhythmically (see Table 4.3). Britten's placement of a musically prominent melisma at the same position in each verse, within its final couplet and in advance of its epigrammatic terminal texts, therefore takes its cue from Auden's source. The relatively more elaborate and extended melismatic treatment of 'shine on' in the first verse (see Ex. 4.1, bars 21–28) when compared to the setting of 'break' in the second verse (see Ex. 4.2, bars 51–53) appears appropriate as there is a significantly greater amount of florid text in this verse. Britten's placement of this musical ornamentation of text may also be regarded as the composer's direct response to the text of the preceding line's suggestive text 'fly' which is delayed until 'Let the hot sun shine on': whereby, the sun's action to 'shine on' is musically characterised in the prolongation of vocal flight as a compound musical depiction of text. The protagonist's loss of conviction as suggested in the text ('And my vows break') is also specifically musically referenced by Britten, as in the concluding three bars of this elaboration the independence of the voice diminishes as it begins to double the piano right-hand quaver melody (see bars 26–28). The composer can be said to have resisted superficial word painting, or direct mimesis to use Stacey's term (see 2.3.3.2–3), at the preceding phrase ending where the text 'high' and 'flight' might have suggested that melismatic treatment was appropriate; rather, Britten inversely sets the text 'high' as a low F# (bar 16) and sets 'fly' logically

²⁶ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 176.

as an ascending octave leap (bar 19). He therefore draws musical attention to these descriptive words but not in a predictable manner; the compound effect of the text setting of these two words together with the following idea of the sustained power of the sun culminates in a vocal melisma which reflects upon multiple text references, the complexity of which proves not to be the localised word-painting that it might first have appeared to be and contributes to the mood of the work.

Example 4.1: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bars 21–28

The musical score for Example 4.1 consists of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a melisma over the words "Shine on Ray" and "ome,". The piano accompaniment is marked *sf colla parte* and *f*. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with markings for *molto marcato* and *cresc.* in both parts. The piano part includes a large number '8' at the beginning of the second system.

Example 4.2: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bars 51–53

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, the middle staff is the right-hand piano accompaniment, and the bottom staff is the left-hand piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (Bb major/G minor). The vocal line has a melisma with a 'break' and 'voix' marking. The lyrics 'Be -' and 'S'é -' are written below the vocal line. The piano accompaniment features a 'dim.' marking and a 'rall.' marking leading to a 'pp' dynamic.

The shift of the emphasis of other poetic features, such as the move from the alliteration of the first verse to the rhyme endings in the second verse, is also recognised in Britten’s *AB* binary form setting. Therefore the form of Auden’s poetic presentation may now be recognised structurally in the composer’s musical discourse. The binary form of this song is also a musical response to the contrasting ideas of this two-verse poem. Britten’s dualistic musical treatment of these two verses is heard in: the fast tempo constant *marcato* accentuation of the first verse which contrasts with the second verse’s 6/4 time in a slower and freer tempo, the lower *piano* dynamic, and in the modulations to Bb major and ultimately to G minor tonalities. Likewise, the transition from poetic declamation to relative contemplativeness is also musically underscored in a number of other ways. As the voice has developed from predominantly crotchet movement (save in the case of the melisma) to more varied rhythms, so too the piano’s role has changed from ornamental punctuation to firmer accompaniment. It is interesting that this vocal freedom occurs only after the liberating effect of the vocal melisma in the first verse. The second verse is dominated by three-note-step and triplet-step motifs which also derive directly from the text. Britten’s only text alteration from

his poetic source, a single repeat of the text 'Always' seems to suggest this three-note motif in which the initial vowel ('al...') is set to an ascending three-note figure and the final diphthong ('..ways') is set to a descending three-note figure (see Ex. 4.3a, bars 39–40). Dunsby's idea of 'vocality' is a useful way of considering this text-setting practice (see 2.4.2). Britten's sequential setting of the repetition of this emotive word draws our attention to the text and its placement on a strong beat; its expressive marking and *mezzo-forte* dynamic all serve to heighten the emphatic musical effect of the composer's singular text alteration of this timeless reference. Resulting from the identification of Britten's deliberate presentation of this three-note figure as a motif, we now become aware of its presence in varied forms throughout the second verse: firstly, as ascending triplets for weak-beat connective words 'had' (see Ex. 4.3b, bar 35) and 'and' (bar 37); secondly, as an ascending three-note figure for the first syllable of '*children*' (bar 45); later as a rhythmically altered three-note descent at 'unloved' (bar 34) and again for 'vows' (see Ex. 4.3c, bar 50); and finally as an exact modulation of the sequence on 'always' which sets the song's final text '*before his look*' (see Ex. 4.3d, bars /54–55). This motivic repetition reveals the formulation of a musical idea which is derived from a consideration of text and which is in turn varied and applied to the setting of blocks of related texts, and provides a further example of Zbikowski's poetic and musical blending. The occurrence of these patterns in the piano's final coda section evidences the further structural application of this text-based musical motif to the piano. The brief concluding piano's coda cyclic 'a tempo' reference to the song's opening and the piano's ornamental trills serve to combine the musical features of the two verses, as the three-note and the triplet motifs of the second verse are juxtaposed and integrated with the semiquaver floridity of the first verse and function as the song's closing musical statement. With the identification of Britten's varied and contrasting treatments of text

in these two verses comes an awareness of the important role which the absorption of his texts played in the composition process of this song.

Example 4.3a: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bars 39–40

mf espress.

Al - ways, — al - ways; —
Un — jour; — tou - jours; —

mf

Example 4.3b: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bar 35

have had — power,
la puis - sance

Example 4.3c: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bar 50

mf espress.

And my — vows —
Et — là — ma

(arpeggiando)

mf *sonore*

Table 4.3 Britten's song: 'Let the Florid Music Praise', *On This Island* no.1

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	1 bar		triadic semiquavers	
Verse 1 /Line 1	3	Long note 'praise'		
L2	3	long note 'trumpet'		
L3	3	long note 'face'		
L4	3	long note 'bone'		
L5	3	long note 'high'		
L6	3	long note with octave leap 'fly'	sequential perfect 4ths	
L7	9	florid decoration 'shine on'	melisma	
L8	2			
Interlude	3			
V 2/L1	3	long note 'O' and 'power',	3-note step ↓ 'unloved', 3-note triplet step ↑ 'had'	
L2	3	long note 'weeping' and 'striking'	3-note triplet step ↑ 'and'	
L3	3+2	long note 'always' and 'hour'	3-note step sequence ↑ 'al...' ↓ '...ways', 2-note leaps ↑ 'time' and 'bring'	'always' is repeated
L4	2	long note 'walk'	3-note step ↑ 'child'	
L5	2	2 long notes 'breath'	7-note ↑ chromatic scale 'vigilance'	
L6	2	2 long notes 'death'		
L7	4	decorate 'break'	3-note step ↓ 'vows' and in the melisma 'break'	
L8	2	long note 'look'	3-note step ↑ 'before' and ↓ 'his'	
Coda	4		includes 3-note triplet step ↑	

Key to Table no. 4.3, 4.5, 4.7, 4.10, and 4.12: ↑ an ascending figure, ↓ a descending figure

Example 4.3d: ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’, *On This Island* no.1, bars /54–55

----- a tempo

pp

Be - fore his look.
S'è - touffe en moi.

pp

p espress. e cresc.

tr

sonore

4.3.2.1 ‘Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast’: poetic source

This five-verse poem written by Auden was also selected by Britten from the poetic collection *Look Stranger!*²⁷ The four-square nature of the form of this poem is, in part, a reflection on the near-perfect metrical regularity of all line in each verse (see Table 4.4). However this aspect together with the opening line ‘Now the leaves are falling fast’ should not be taken as an indication of the presence of a typical Romantic-period nature poem; rather this is Auden’s biting satirical contemporary social discourse on European affairs in the mid-1930s. The political reality of the presence of a continental ‘Fascist menace’ is also remarked on by Stephen Banfield.²⁸ The topical nature of this poetic commentary is highlighted for us in the first word of the poem, ‘now’; this conspicuous placement in time demands the reader’s immediate and urgent attention. The presence of unrelenting line rhyme-ending couplets can, on first hearing, dominate one’s appreciation of this poem and the gravity of the ideas contained can be diminished by the relative strength of this strongly rhyming text. The drive and impulse which are inherent in these rhyming line endings present Auden’s poetic reflections on the social

²⁷ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 24.

²⁸ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 388.

scene upon which he seeks to comment, and they contribute to the overall sense of helplessness and the inevitability of a disastrous outcome which are expressed in this poetic impetus. This poem presents many of the reasons why Auden felt politically and artistically despondent in both Britain and Europe in the mid-1930s and why he emigrated to the United States in 1938 and why Britten also left Britain and followed him there in January 1939.

Significant alliterations arise only in the framing first and last stanzas of this poem. The first verse's disparate harsh 'n' and 'f' sounding alliterations of 'now', 'nurse's', 'nurses' and 'falling fast', and 'flowers' contribute to the barren satirical social terrain of this poem and contrast with the more lyrical 'whose white waterfall' alliteration of the final stanza. Auden's lexicographic interests are evident in his prominent utilisation of word inflection in the opening verse, with his pedantic selection of textual variants such as: the possessive and the plural of the word nurse ('nurse's' and 'nurses') but in this setting he keeps this aspect in check unlike the final setting of this song cycle. This variant repetition or difference of punctuation contributes to a logical creation of conviction of the text, so too, the exact repetition of 'and' as the first word of the fourth verse's lines three and four 'and the nightingale is dumb / and the angel will not come' seeks to accumulate evidence as in a logic-based persuasion of political intent.

The profusion of human imagery, which is presented with close negative associations of decay, represents the metaphorical extension and application of nature's life cycle and its implied renewal to the human life cycle (see Table 4.4): the 'active hands must freeze', 'the separate knees' are 'lonely', and the 'arms are raised stiffly to reprove'. This latter quotation is characteristic of Auden's use of a covert reference to the alternative meaning of the word 'arms' to include military weapons. In the final

verse of this poem nature takes on human form in the personification of the ‘mountain’s lovely head’. This juxtaposition contributes to the change of mood in the poem and sets the current verse apart from its preceding four verses.

Political analogy is ever present in this Auden poem. Johnson identifies the demise of the ‘nurse’ or nanny and the baby’s unattended perambulator, and equates it with the poet’s social comment on the failure of a Victorian political and moral order to provide a fairer distribution of wealth among peoples.²⁹ The ‘whispering neighbours, left and right’ may refer either to international relations between Britain and Europe (left and right) or Britain’s role as a mediating force between the United States and Europe (left and right), but they may also allude to the lack of constructive political dialogue between Left-wing and Right-wing politics. This text also creates a cross-reference and a textual connection with the penultimate song ‘Nocturne’, a setting of a chorus from the play *The Dog beneath the Skin OR Where Is Francis?* by Auden and Isherwood which follows on directly, in the play, from a politically charged dialogue between ‘Alan’s left and right foot’, representing an educationally divided and unfair society.³⁰ The inversion of the usual ordering of right and left may reveal the poet’s left-wing personal political outlook but this re-ordering is more likely to be accounted for by poetic textual reasons as the line ending ‘right’ rhymes with the succeeding line ending ‘delight’. Auden’s anti-war stance is revealed in what is probably an historical reference to the futility of the ‘Great’ War in ‘dead in hundreds at the back’. The close proximity to the First World War in Britain’s national memory may, in part, account for the delay and lack of enthusiasm to initiate a politically-motivated intervention in continental European affairs. For this politically-aware poet such inactivity effectively

²⁹ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 150.

³⁰ Auden and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin OR Where Is Francis?*, pp. 112–16.

has allowed the Fascist ‘Trolls [to] run scolding for their food’ unchecked. The increasing realisation of the hopeless political desolate scenario of the ‘leafless wood’ of this fourth verse contrasts with the cyclic ‘leaves are falling fast’ of the opening verse with its implied rejuvenation and motion which are now dashed.

Table 4.4 Auden’s poem: ‘Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast’³¹

		Metric	Rhym.	Word patterns/ Imagery
V.1		Foot	Scheme	
1	Now the leaves are falling fast,	7	a	‘f’ and ‘n’ alliterations
2	Nurse’s flowers will not last;	7	a	‘f’ and ‘n’ alliterations
3	Nurses to the graves are gone,	7	b	‘Nurse’ repeated, death
4	And the prams go rolling on.	7	b	
V.2				
1	Whispering neighbours, left and right,	7/8	c	Dual/political image
2	Pluck us from the real delight;	7	c	Reference to flowers
3	And the active hands must freeze	7	d	Body, freeze
4	Lonely on the separate knees.	7/8	d	Body, isolation
V.3				
1	Dead in hundreds at the back	7	e	Death
2	Follow wooden in our track,	7	e	
3	Arms raised stiffly to reprove	7	f	Body/military
4	In false attitudes of love.	7	f	
V.4				
1	Starving through the leafless wood	7	g	Barren
2	Trolls run scolding for their food;	7	g	Frenzy
3	And the nightingale is dumb,	7	h	Image of nightingale
4	And the angel will not come.	7	h	‘and’ repeated
V.5				
1	Cold, impossible, ahead	7	i	Barren,
2	Lifts the mountain’s lovely head	7	i	Natural boundary
3	Whose white waterfall could bless	7	j	‘w’ alliteration, frozen
4	Travellers in their last distress.	8	j	Faceless protagonists

The rapid pace of the four previous verses is abruptly halted in the final verse by Auden’s punctuated first line ‘Cold, impossible, ahead’. This change in pace is to an extent prepared for by the climactic final couplet in the fourth verse ‘And the nightingale is dumb, / And the angel will not come’, whereby traditional images of the

³¹ The poem was written in March, 1936. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 157.

public expression of truth (the nightingale) and spirituality (the angel) are used to reinforce the effects and implications of continued governmental silent and inaction. Again, we see evidence of Auden the wordsmith at work as the text ‘angel’ is a respelling of the last five letters of nightingale. The use by the poet of the word ‘could’ in the final couplet allows for an element of political hope or redemption for the ‘travellers in their last distress’; this is however tempered by the image of a frozen natural landscape (‘white waterfall’), thereby, allowing Britten the opportunity to interpret musically this satirical but non-closed poem.

4.3.2.2 ‘Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast’, *On This Island* op.11 no.2: musical setting

The form of Auden’s poem significantly impacted the structure of Britten’s song setting and the four lines of text in each verse remain intact in the song’s phrase structures; within Stacey’s terminology the text remains in ‘prime condition’ in the song (see 2.3.3.2–3). The presence of the metric regularity of this poem (see Table 4.4) might have suggested a strophic musical setting to Britten but he chose the following melodic modified strophic form for the four phrases of the first three verses: verse 1 (*A,B,B1,C*), verse 2 (*A,B,B1,D*), and verse 3 (*A,B,B,B*). The fourth verse primarily continues the phrase patterns of the preceding verses while the fifth verse is subdivided into two phrases, each containing a two-line couplet. These modified musical forms respond largely to the change of mood highlighted in the poetic source in the last verse which is textually anticipated in the final couplet of the penultimate verse. Table 4.5 shows the close correlation between the phrase lengths and the form used by Britten, whereby the regularity of the 1,1,1,2-bar phrase lengths are modified only in the fourth and final verses to 1,1,1,3 and 2+3,1+3. This song’s dynamic changes also reflect Britten’s

musical reading of the intensification of the changing poetic mood of his text, whereby the first and second verses' uneasy *pianissimo* gives way to the increasing alarm *più forte* of the third verse and the finally frantic *forte* of the fourth verse before stark futile realisation takes hold in the bemused *tranquillo* of the final verse. These dynamic intensifications and subsequent relaxation appear to emanate organically from Auden's text. Britten's establishment of a firm dynamic mood before he introduces increasingly changed patterns in his latter verses serves to highlight his new musical material and refocuses the listener's attention on the associated texts.

Analysis of the regularity of the metrical feet of the five quatrains in this poem reveals the near-perfect presence of heptameter in all lines with the exception of the first and last lines of the second verse and the final line of the poem each of which contains one additional syllable (see Table 4.4). In each of these three lines there are eight syllables in Auden's text. In his setting of the second verse Britten chooses to abbreviate the words 'whispering' to 'whisp'ring and 'separate' to 'sep'rate' but retains the three syllables of the word 'Travellers' in the final line of the poem through the insertion of a grace note, the sole occurrence of this decoration, for the central syllable of this word (see Table 4.5). The significance of these isolated alterations to Auden's text is that Britten has, in effect, either perfected the line syllabic count of the first four verses of this song (for the singer), or at minimum made conscious and corrected the implied metric imbalance of the original text; in either case we observe the acute sensitivity of the composer to poetic metric detail. Britten's decision not to truncate the text 'Travellers' in the final line of the song is therefore further shown in relief given his earlier textual deliberate abbreviations. The musical effect of these considerations is that the final phrase of the song is given special metric attention and the identity of the

protagonists is thus revealed and highlighted. This musically stressed text setting provides further evidence as to the presence of a political sub-text in this song.

The fast speed and rhythmic strength apparent in reciting this poem appear also to have deeply affected the template which Britten used in making this song, as the compelling pace of the text is directly reflected in the *legato* agitated fast-flowing tempo marking of the song. This urgent pace appears appropriate and responsive to the time-locating first word of the text 'Now' (bar 3). The rigidity of Britten's setting of each syllable to two semiquavers contributes to the pace of the song and reflects upon the politically heightened tension of its subject matter. The style of word setting of this early work varies greatly from the instructions in song composition which Britten received from John Ireland, at the Royal College of Music, which encouraged the setting of one note per syllable;³² Britten's rejection of the rigidity of this practice experienced during his recent studies at the college and his expansion of text-setting techniques is evident in his text setting in this song. Therefore, when he returns to the more general practice of setting one syllable to one note in the final verse, this has a dramatic musical impact and contrasts starkly with the preceding music. Britten's setting of the final words of the penultimate and last lines, 'bless' and 'dis-*tress*', each to two notes recalls the nature of the previous music but this time within a new musical context. However, the perfect fourth intervallic leap in the final word of the song (bar 32) is an expansion of the established preceding final melodic leaps of an ascending major third (bars 6 and 11) followed by a minor third descent (bars 8 and 13) in the first and second verses; this musical alteration draws attention to the urgency of the predicament of these 'travellers in their last *distress*'.

³² Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, ii, p. 384.

Britten resists the temptation to use a recurring simple musical depiction of falling leaves in his setting, in spite of the relative strength of this initial nature-based poetic image; that is not what either Auden's poem or Britten's song is about. Britten writes in a letter to Ursula Nettleship 4 December 1937: 'I'm so glad you got the "Leaves" – it's easily the best of the lot, & no one seemed to get it'.³³ This informal remark made by Britten, to a musically informed colleague, within weeks of the premiere and relayed first radio broadcast of *On This Island* op.11, confirms the composer's intentionality and also acknowledges the presence of extended levels of meaning in this song.³⁴

Poetic references to contemporary political events contained in Auden's poem are clarified and presented in a musically explicit discourse in this song. From the outset Britten's melodic line ascends and climaxes on hermeneutically important words. In general these local highpoints relate to negative images of decay and isolation, for example: 'falling fast' (bar 4), 'will not last' (bar 5), 'graves are gone' (bar 6), 'pluck us (from real delight)' (bar 10), 'hands must freeze' (bar 11), 'lonely' (bar 12), 'arms raised stiffly' (bar 16), 'in false' (bar 17), 'starving' (bars 18–19), 'is dumb' (bar 21), and 'will not come' (bars 22–23). The firm association of negative textual images with pitches which are high in register has the impact that other local melodic climaxes assume a similar sinister quality, so much so that even by the fourth vocal phrase of the first verse of this song, the climax on the text 'the prams' has acquired a menacing tone. This song's ultimate climax occurs during the final couplet of the fourth verse (see Ex. 4.4, bars /19–23). The text speaks specifically to the dangers of silence and a resistance to take decisive political action as follows: 'and the nightingale *is dumb*, and the angels

³³ Ursula Nettleship (1886–1968) was a singer and choral director whom Britten first met at Crantock in 1936 through his friendship with Lennox Berkeley. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed eds, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976*, i, pp. 526–528.

³⁴ *On This Island* op.11 was premiered 19 November 1937 at the Broadcasting House Concert Hall, London, Sophie Wyss (S), Benjamin Britten (pf), and relayed on BBC National also on that day. Banks ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 39.

will *not* come'. Britten applies two sequential vocal climaxes, firstly on the words 'is dumb' reaching the high 'aflat²' for the first time in this song, only to immediately follow this with a subsequent ascent to a high 'bflat²' on the word 'not' of 'will not come', thereby driving home in resounding musical terms his interpretation of the political message of Auden's text. The *forte* climactic musical depiction of the idea of being silent or 'dumb' initially appears to contradict the text at this point but Britten's music states loudly that governmental silence is not an acceptable political option. These textual and musical highpoints are anticipated and heralded in the vocal descending tritone, 'f²' to 'b¹', of the preceding phrase ending (bar 20).

Example 4.4: 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast', *On This Island* no.2, bars /19–23

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system covers bars 19-23. The vocal line begins with a *poco f* marking and features a descending tritone from F² to B¹ in the first measure. The piano accompaniment also has a *poco f* marking. The second system continues from bar 20. The vocal line starts with a *f* marking and includes the instruction *espressivo senza dim.* The piano accompaniment has a *f* marking and includes *senza dim.* and *Ped.* markings.

Starv - ing_ through the_ leaf - less_ wood Trolls run_ scold - ing_ for_ their_ food;
 Par - mi_ les_ fo - rêts_ fan - tômes La_ faim_ fait_ cri er_ les_ gnômes,

And the_ night-in - gale is_ dumb, And the_ an - gel_ will not_ come...
 Et le_ ros - si - gnol s'est tu, Et l'an - ge_ ne_ vien - dra_ plus.

Britten responds to textual detail in his extensive use of descending scales outlining an octave, a sixth, and a fifth in this song's vocal melody. The octave scale, in

particular, conveys the poetic ideas of movement and motion. Initially this is heard in the direct simple word-painting of text as in ‘and the *prams go rolling on*’. Later in the song this same melodic feature takes on an increasing complexity in ‘Starving through’ (bars 18–19) and its subsequent phrase ‘trolls run scolding’ (bar 20) (see Ex. 4.4). Here again the apparent ordered musical completeness of an octave run contrasts starkly with the idea of chaotic Fascist ‘trolls’ scavenging and savagely destroying a social establishment unchecked. At the same time Britten’s use of such a strong musical figure underlines the perceived strength and momentum of this political movement. Conversely his use of a meandering interrupted octave descent to set the text ‘lonely on the sep’rate knees’ (bars 12–13) musically represents the comparative isolation and weakness of un-coordinated unilateral governmental action. The musical framework for this ending of verse three and the enhanced meaning of the fourth verse have been prepared by the repeated descending sixth melodic shape of bars 4, 5, 10, 11, 15, 16, and 17. These initial phrase figures are replaced by phrase ends with descending fifth melodic shapes in verse four (bars 19 and 20); this transformation corresponds with the climactic nature of the text as musically presented in stepwise octave runs reaching out beyond the range of the stepwise runs of a sixth or a fifth.

The final verse of Auden’s poem and Britten’s song is set apart poetically and musically from the preceding verses; transient poetic images of urgent movement are replaced by large-scale stable and static ideas. Britten represents this increase in scale in his first abandonment of the use of four separate phrases, as seen in each preceding verse, for a new structure with two couplets in the final verse. This has the effect of lessening the strong cross-rhyming impact of line endings within each couplet, which is prominent in the other four verses, but it also creates an enlarged canvas on which to complete the song. The expansive mood of this music for voice and piano also contrasts

with the contrary motion compression of the piano's introduction (see Ex. 4.5a, bar 1–2). The compositional framework of the penultimate phrase is based on the augmentation of the piano introduction's opening four minim chords which descend in thirds from 'g²', via 'e²' and 'c²' to 'aflat¹' over a stepwise ascent in octaves in the bass, which are rhythmically doubled as semibreves in this *tranquillo* section (see Ex. 4.5b, bars 25–29 and Ex. 4.5a for comparison). Whereas the compression of the opening two bars of this song does not find the modal 'F' pitch, the 'd-natural' in bar 5 reveals that although the song has F aeolian tendencies at the beginning it moves beyond. The augmented chords of this first couplet in the final verse arrive with a held semibreve 'F' in both voice (f¹) and piano (f) in bar 29. The modality of this music is confirmed with the presence, throughout the song, of an unaltered 'Eb' seventh note (bars 2–6) rather than an 'E-natural' designation of an F minor harmonic tonality, as alluded to in bars 3–4 before and after the voice begins (see Ex. 4.5a, bars 3–7). However, in the final strophe Britten allows a diminished triad above a sustained bass E-natural (bar 29) to present dissonantly the apparently consonant final text 'Lifts the mountain's lovely head'.³⁵ The voice then reverts to the aeolian mode, though there are notes which conflict with it in the accompaniment. Musically this represents the moment of ultimate realisation, which interestingly arises six bars after the dynamic and emotional climax of the song (bars 22–23). Whittall also considers that the music of this section (bars 25–29) provides the 'final transformation of the main material'.³⁶ Here, the vocal melody is characterised by descending octave leaps followed by ascending major sixth leaps; though *tranquillo* in performance indication, it contrasts with the preceding music's stepwise movement. Britten's musical reading of Auden's open-ended poem is revealed

³⁵ This provides an example of what Stacey terms as an 'anti-contextual relationship' between music and text (see 2.3.3.2).

³⁶ Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques*, p. 44.

in his cyclic use of his opening musical material, which has been associated with chaos, to commence the song's closing. His attainment of musical closure (F aeolian mode in the voice) with the text 'last distress' leads one to conclude that what looms 'ahead' appears 'Cold, impossible' in terms of social and political contemporary life; both composer and poet share this ironic and despondent contemporary outlook.

Example 4.5a: 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast', *On This Island* no.2, bars 1–7

Lento *Più mosso e comodo* *pp legato ma agitato*

Now the_ leaves are_ fall - ing_ fast,
 Lors les_ feuil - les_ tom - bent_ vite;

pp sostenuto *pp poco marcato*

Nur - se's_ flow - ers_ will_ not_ last; Nur - ses_ to_ the_ graves are_ gone, _____
 Nur - ses_ et_ flueurs pé - ri - clitent; Nur - ses_ bien loin_ sont par - ties, _____

Example 4.5b: 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast', *On This Island* no.2, bars 25–29

Tranquillo *p*

Cold, im - pos - si - ble, a - head Lifts the moun - tain's love - ly head
 Un froid im - poss - ible, en tête, Des monts re - lê - ve le faite

p sostenuto

Table 4.5 Britten's song: 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast', *On This Island* no.2

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	2 bars		contrary motion	
Verse 1 /Line 1	1	all syllables set to 2 semiquavers except final vowel	semiquavers in voice with quavers in pf	
L2	1	as above	as above	
L3	1	as above	as above	
L4	2	as above	as above	
V 2/ L1	1	as above	as above	Whisp'ring (abbreviated)
L2	1	as above	as above	
L3	1	as above	as above	
L4	2	as above	as above	sep'rate (abbreviated)
V 3/ L1	1	as above	as above	
L2	1	as above	as above	
L3	1	as above	as above	
L4	2	as above, long final note 'love'	as above	
V 4/ L1	1	break in practice opening word 'striving' expanded by up-beat crotchet	as above	
L2	1	all syllables set to 2 notes except final vowel	as above	
L3	1	as above	as above	
L4	3	as above, long final note 'come'	as above	
V 5/ L1 & L2	2+3	semiquavers abandoned for natural syllabic rhythms	pf held chords	
L3 & L4	1+3	syllables are set to 1 quaver; rising semitone 'bless', leap 'distress'	as above	tra-ve-llers (not abbreviated)

4.3.3.1 'Look, Stranger, at This Island Now': poetic source

As with the two preceding songs, Britten selected this three-verse Auden poem from the poet's 1936 British publication of *Look Stranger!*³⁷ It is from this poem that Auden took the title of his poetic collection and its subsequent publication in the United States as *On*

³⁷ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 19.

This Island in 1937.³⁸ For Britten, the first line of this song also inspired the title of his song cycle *On This Island* and interestingly he entitles this third song ‘Seascape’ rather than taking its first line as its title as its title, thereby differentiating it from the larger musical work. Therefore the title of Britten’s individual song ‘Seascape’ differs from the title of revisions of Auden’s individual poem, which by 1966 has the title ‘On This Island’.³⁹

Initially the printed three seven-line stanzas of this poem appear largely regular in length and form (see Table 4.6). However, due to the two conspicuous enjambments in the second verse, caused by the mid-sentence punctuation of the second line and the hyphenation of the final word of the fifth line, it becomes problematic as how best to phrase successive lines. The poem’s line structure as shown in Table 4.6 is prepared based on the structure which pertains in the first and last stanzas; this approach results in the production of three six-line stanzas for analysis. The propriety of such a literary combination of lines three and four of this poem into one line, the two shortest lines of each verse, more importantly, is based upon what Britten does in his musical setting (see Table 4.7). Consideration of the resultant metrical structure of this poem reveals a common metric foot count in each verse: first line, 8 metric feet; the penultimate line, 7 metric feet; and the last line, 7 metric feet extended to 11 feet in the final verse. Otherwise all verses reveal a relative expansion of this metric count in their second lines followed by a subsequent reduction in the syllabic count of the third and fourth lines.

The three-verse poetic structure of Auden’s poem also reflects upon the changing perspective of each successive stanza. The increasing distancing of the subject matter under consideration is achieved in a progressive movement from an immediate looking

³⁸ Auden, *On This Island*.

³⁹ W. H. Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Short Poems 1927–1957* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966). Hereafter referred to as Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Short Poems 1927–1957*.

‘at this island’ in the first verse, to an awareness of the island’s boundary with the sea ‘where the chalk wall falls to the foam’ of the middle verse, to the ultimate presentation of the distanced oceanic view of the final verse. Urgent and immediate focus is created in the attention-grabbing command-like opening of the first line of the poem ‘Look, stranger, at this island *now*’, and this sense is maintained by the use of the connective and locating opening word ‘Here’ in the second verse; the apparent loss of immediacy of the opening reference to ‘Far off’ in the final verse is soon refocused with the repetition of the earlier textual reference to ‘*now*’ in this verse’s fourth line. The seascapes in question are not the conventional description of contrasting views of the sea but rather an ever-changing view of land from the sea, albeit in memory and mirror image in the final stanza, thereby representing an outsider and removed view of internal affairs.

The wealth of aural, sensory and visual imagery contained in this Auden poem contributes to its suitability for setting to music. Table 4.6 identifies the specific presence of the poetic devices of alliteration and assonance which are conspicuous in this poem. Of particular note are the primary pervasive ‘s’ alliterations which occur with increasing complexity as follows: simply as ‘sheer side’ in the second verse and ‘seeds’ and ‘ships’ in the final verse, in combination with assonance sibilance as ‘stand stable and silent be’ in the first verse and ‘summer’ and ‘saunter’ in the last verse, and ultimately with an onomatopoeic effect as heard in the ‘swaying sound of the sea’ of the first verse and the ‘shingle scrambles after the suck/ing surf’ of the second verse. The poet reserves these most complex poetic devices not for a description of the sea but rather for a verbal depiction of its essence—the sound of the sea—the sound of nature. Secondary to these primary ‘s’ sounding alliterations are the ‘l’ alliterations of verse one (‘leaping’, ‘light’, ‘delight’), the ‘f’ alliterations of verse two (‘field’s’, ‘falls’, ‘foam’),

and the ‘m’ alliterations of verse three (‘move’, ‘memory’, ‘mirror’). The sensory effect of these alliterations is heightened by their concentrated use in the depiction of an individual image of the sea and the poet’s associations with the sea.

In addition to these internal-rhyming words Auden emphasises and creates textual flow through his use of line-ending cross rhyming in each verse of this poem. Table 4.6 details the presence of these line-ending rhymes which reveal the presence of the overall *ABA* line-ending rhyming structure of the poem: the first and final verses have an *abab* structure while the second verse has an *abcabc* structure. This three-verse *ABA* poetic structure is also supported by the presence of a typical Audenesque poetic feature, an explicit simile in the first verse and explicit and implied similes in the last verse, and by the absence of this device in the second verse. In each case the poetic device is used at a central point in the poem and achieves a cohesion throughout otherwise diverse imagery: ‘wander *like a river*’ (verse 1), ‘far off *like* floating seeds the ships’, and ‘and move in memory *as* now these clouds do’ (verse 3). Britten was sensitive to such details of his poetic source and responds to them in his setting.

The linguistic consonances which are present in the strength of Auden’s frequent textual rhyming, alliterations, and assonances are to some extent counter-balanced by his use of relatively dissonant texts, which is presented in the second lines of the second and third stanzas. The ‘chalk wall falls’ of verse two, and ‘diverge on urgent voluntary errands’ of verse three, contrast with the consonance of their surrounding texts and require attention in an expressive poetic recitation and provide a challenge to the composer and to a singer in his/her interpretation in performance.

The imagery contained in this poem often contains a strong element of binary opposition in which an image or idea is developed more completely through this complex view. In the first verse there is a series of these binary contrasts in which the

movement and playfulness of 'leaping light for your delight' gives way immediately to the contrasting stoic 'stand stable and silent be' which in turn evolves into 'may wander like a river/The swaying sound of the sea'. In the last clause of this verse we also experience the expansion of a diverse fluid, physical and geographical perspective, as the poet progresses in expanded scale, from the 'channels of the ear', to 'a river' and finally to 'the sea', this tripartite imagery is a reflection on a local scale of the three-verse larger-scale expansion of these ideas. Auden may also have intended the possible ambiguity of the reference to channel which may represent the English Channel, in addition to its denoted meaning within this line of text. The second verse contains the following examples of oppositions: the geographical 'small field's' and 'tall ledges', the cross-rhyming 'oppose the pluck and knock', and the isolation of 'the [singular] gull' in comparison with the sheer size of the tall cliffs and the power of their interaction with the ebb and flow of the tide.

Tony Sharpe considers that Auden's poem 'Look, Stranger' 'observes a real island: the Isle of Wight, representing England'⁴⁰ and John Fuller reveals that this poem was originally written to be included in Marion Grierson's documentary film *Beside the Seaside* 'but the film used no more than a few phrases from' the text.⁴¹ The cinematic purpose for which Auden intended this poem may have contributed to the clarity of the imagery contained and to the importance of sound in the full realisation of its meaning. Here it is proposed that the presence of a continuous subterranean political analogy in this poem becomes all the more credible given that Auden was aware of the expanded audience which was available to him in this documentary film commission. Edward Mendelson writes, that 'from the end of 1935 to the end of 1938' whenever

⁴⁰ Sharpe, *W. H. Auden*, p. 81.

⁴¹ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 153.

Auden wished to express social or historical isolation 'he invokes the solitary island...the island supplanted the border as Auden's geographical sign of entrapment and enclosure', and also that Auden's imagined innocent island of the early 1930s had become a 'guilty' one by mid-decade.⁴² These comments are presented as an appropriate political contextualisation and interpretation of this poem as pertains to its genesis when composed in November 1935.⁴³

From the outset isolated liminality is presented as a primary theme in this poem, and the perspective of the solitary 'stranger' is sought, to consider the wider political implications of standing 'stable' and being 'silent' in response to the rise of Fascism in continental Europe. The poem suggests that Auden wishes to shine a 'leaping light' on these political affairs to reveal the dangers of inactivity and political silence. In the first verse he presents the sound of the sea as a symbol of the relative strength of the English Channel as a physical boundary which has effectively deafened the senses of the inhabitants of 'this island now'. In the second verse, again, the sound of the 'pluck and knock' of the tide and the sound of the 'shingle' both represent an incessant political threat which is juxtaposed with the seeming impenetrability and permanence of the 'chalk walls' of England's coastline. The lone gull's cry may represent the warnings of a left-wing political outlook, perhaps the poet's voice, which is neither heard nor acknowledged. Mendelson's identification of the influence, on Auden's poetic style, of Hardy's 'hawk's vision, his [Hardy's] way of looking at life from a great height',⁴⁴ gives enhanced meaning to this poem.⁴⁵ A sense of realisation is eventually achieved in

⁴² Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 333. Hereafter referred to as Mendelson, *Early Auden*.

⁴³ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ So too the idea of aerial height is remarked upon by Davenport-Hines as a 'running metaphor [in Auden's poetry] for homosexuality in terms of aviation'. Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's life and character', pp. 17-18.

the third verse, after the effect of the initial image of ships moving away on an 'urgent' common purpose is softened by the text 'far away' and 'voluntary'. However, the outcome of this 'urgent' and paradoxically 'voluntary' situation is ultimately left unresolved as to whether the 'full view' of reality is ultimately fully realised, as Auden uses words of conditional uncertainty, '*may enter*', and it is unclear if political realisation is based on a nostalgic clouded 'mirror' image of reality or the actual reality. The power of memory is evoked in the penultimate line of the poem but its accuracy may be questionable, given the nation's inclination to ignore the political clouds that loom 'far off' and to tread water as 'all the summer through the water saunter'. This serene final image contrasts with the poem's opening urgent call-to-action and reflects on political and social threats ignored rather than assimilated.

Table 4.6 Auden's poem: 'Look, Stranger, at This Island Now'⁴⁶

		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns/ Imagery
V. 1				
1	Look, stranger, at this island now	8		'now' present tense
2	The leaping light for you delight discovers,	11		'l' alliteration, variant of text light
3	Stand stable here		a	'stand stable' 'silent'
	And silent be,	8	b	alliteration and assonance
4	That through the channels of the ear	8	a	
5	May wander like a river	7		simile
6	The swaying sound of the sea.	7	b	's' onomatopoeic alliterations
V. 2				
1	Here at the small field's ending pause	8		'here', physical boundary
2	Where the chalk wall falls to the foam, And its tall ledges	13	a	physical boundary 'wall'/'falls'/'tall' internal rhyming
3	Oppose the pluck And knock of the tide,	9	b c	to oppose the 'pluck' /'knock' assonance 's' alliterations
4	And the shingle scrambles after the suck-	10	b	
5	Ing surf, and the gull lodges	7	a	's' assonance
6	A moment on its sheer side.	7	c	's' alliteration
V. 3				
1	Far off like floating seeds the ships	8		distance, simile, 'far'/ 'floating' 'seeds'/'ships' alliterations
2	Diverge on urgent voluntary errands;	11		relative dissonance
3	And the full view, Indeed may enter	9	a b	full view
4	And move in memory as now these clouds do,	11	a	'm' alliteration, simile
5	That pass the harbour mirror	7		reflected view
6	And all the summer through the water saunter.	11	b	'summer'/'saunter' alliteration, '...er' assonance

4.3.3.2 'Seascape', *On This Island* op.11 no.3: musical setting

Britten selected the title for this song cycle '*On This Island*' from a variant of the opening line from this song; which, together with his placement of 'Seascape'⁴⁷ as the

⁴⁶ This poem was written in November, 1935. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

central song of this five-song cycle affords permission to question and interrogate this song particularly for evidence of meaning which may enhance our understanding of the cycle as a whole. Britten's close professional and social engagement with Auden and his working familiarisation with Auden's poetry meant that Britten was aware of the political associations which the image of an island had in Auden's poetry as an idea of physical isolation and social entrapment.

Britten responds musically to the form of Auden's three-phase changing perspective three-verse poem with a song in ternary form in which the relative metric and line-ending regularity of the source is directly reflected in the *ABA'* structure of this art song (see Table 4.6). The composer shows his respect for the precise poetic structure of his source as he applies a musical phrasing which aligns with textual phrasing, with one notable exception, in addition to his accommodations of the two enjambments of the second verse (see Table 4.7). This exception occurs in the first verse and involves Britten setting lines four and five as one continuous musical phrase, thereby bringing together two lines of text, 'That through the channels of the ear/May wander like a river' (bars 12–14), which are linked by the poet in this extended simile, which is dramatically clarified in the succeeding line, 'The swaying sound of the sea' (bars 15–17). Britten's conscious punctuation of successive vocal phrases, which are marked with intervening rests, highlights the clarity with which he approaches the setting of each unit of text as an individual melodic phrase, and also shows his explicit awareness of the performer's requirement for an intake of breath in preparation for the next phrase, but does not in any way disjoint the flow of delivery of his text, as he aligns musical units with grammatical syntax. In the case of the two enjambments contained in the second verse, Britten includes the terminal text of the second line with his third musical phrase

⁴⁷ 'Seascape' was composed by Britten in October 1937. Britten, *On This Island* op.11, p. 16.

and appends the hyphenated text of the fifth line with the associated text of line four (see Table 4.7). These two amendments to the type setting of the poem are not needed to clarify the sense and flow of the text as poetry but are required if the text is to remain intelligible in its musical setting; the clarity and audibility of the text is always paramount for Britten.

Rather than compose a setting which responds to or depicts the wealth of diverse, yet related, visual imagery of Auden's poem, in a series of superficial word-painting correlations, Britten chooses simple musical means which encapsulate the essence of the poem—the 'swaying sound of the sea'—as a bracing motivic structure to combine vocal line and piano accompaniment. A two-part motif is set up in the piano's one-bar introduction as a combination of continuous semiquaver oscillations (referred to as x) in the treble and a four-note syncopated stepwise motif (referred to as y) in the bass (see Ex. 4.6a, bar 1). Interestingly, Johnson considers the former unrelenting movement (X) suggestive of the 'swirling' movement of waves and that the latter syncopated element (Y) represents the 'opposing tug of the tide'.⁴⁸ Evans remarks, in his otherwise cursory consideration of this song, on the presence of this 'wave figure' and the rhythmic opposition which arises in respect of an irregular (3+3+2) quaver [syncopated] subdivision of the piano bass line with the treble's regular four beats of semiquavers.⁴⁹ Furthermore, what will be referred to as the 'wave' motif (X) is partially structurally built on, what will be referred to as the 'tide' motif (Y) as the piano bass part is incorporated in the rhythmically altered semiquaver treble part. Britten's achievement is that he combines these two inseparable elements in nature as one musical motif (X, Y), to be referred to as a compounded 'sea' motif, as if to recognise in music the

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 151.

⁴⁹ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 75.

transformational role of the tide in creating the power of the waves (see Ex. 4.6a); whereby (X) is a musical elaboration of (Y) and yet rhythmically independent of it.

Example 4.6a: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bar 1

The image shows a musical score for the first bar of 'Seascape' from 'On This Island' no. 3. The tempo is 'Allegro molto'. The score is in 4/4 time. The piano part is marked 'p legatissimo'. The bass line starts with a held note 'C' (labeled 'Y') and a melodic line in the right hand (labeled 'X') that incorporates the bass motif. The piano part is marked 'p legatissimo'.

‘Seascape’, Strophe 1 (bars 1–17)

Britten establishes in the opening bar of music his syncopated ‘sea’ motif over a held ‘CC’ ‘tonic’ pedal. The interesting melodic and rhythmic shape of the piano bass accompaniment is incorporated, though rhythmically altered, as part of the piano top line, as outlined above. The presence of the motif in the outer and more prominent textures of the piano reflects, in the clearest musical terms, the call-to-attention of the song’s opening text ‘Look, stranger...now [!]’ and seeks to provide ‘leaping light’ to illuminate the contemporary state of Britain (‘this island’). This basic motif and its variant are used sequentially in twelve of the remaining sixteen bars of the current section of music. The intervallic relationship of the stepwise four-note bass ‘tide’ motif, and by consequence its part in the ‘wave’ motif (see Ex. 4.6a), is not fixed rigidly to the pattern of the ascent of a tone followed by another ascending tone followed by a semitone descent (tone, tone, semitone), as in the initial statement of the motif. Example 4.6b (bar 7) offers an intervallic variant of this motif (tone, tone, tone). The ascending sequential presentation of the motif in this verse, rising stepwise from ‘g’, contrasts with the stepwise piano pedal-note descent from a ‘tonic’ ‘CC’ to a ‘dominant’ ‘GGG’,

reflects the binary opposition inherent in the song's primary 'Sea' motif but it also responds to both, a surface-level land and sea conflict, and also a wider political unease (on and off 'this island').

Example 4.6b: 'Seascape', *On This Island* no.3, bars 6–7

The musical score for Example 4.6b consists of a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics: "your de-light dis-cov-ers, que t'of-fre la lu-mière". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and includes a "cresc." marking and a "vcl" marking. The score is divided into two systems, with a double bar line between them. The first system covers bars 6 and 7, and the second system covers bars 8 and 9. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic motif that is repeated throughout the piece.

In spite of the rigidity of this ever-present motif in the piano accompaniment, or perhaps because of it, Britten displays melodic and rhythmic freedom in his voice part within this context. These aspects are heard in the first vocal phrase (bars 2–4) of the song, which reveal a syllabic setting of text with the accentual rhythmic extension of poetic accented key words of text, which is rhythmically independent of its accompaniment. The change from 'b' to 'bflat' in the piano treble clashes harmonically with a 'b¹' in the vocal line, and augurs that all is not well 'on this island'. The upward octave leap from 'g¹' to 'g²' in the second vocal phrase (bars 4–5) is a direct word-painting response to excited physical movement, 'the leaping light for your delight...' and is an example of direct mimesis. Britten, however, uses this same musical gesture in the succeeding phrase (bars 8–11) to suggest the contrasting idea of stability and quietness: 'stand stable here/And silent be'; interestingly the octave ascent from 'f¹' to

'f²' and subsequent return to that pitch is reserved for the two-syllable action words in the text 'stable' and 'silent'. In both cases, Britten responds similarly in his setting of highly alliterative assonances in Auden's poem. The meaning of these two clauses is also underscored by Britten's dynamic change from his *forte* setting of 'stable' followed by a literal *diminuendo* onomatopoeic dynamic for the text 'silent'.

As stated, Britten sets the fourth and fifth lines of Auden's poem as one phrase (see Table 4.6). It seems appropriate that this phrase deals with the motion of wandering as expressed in sensory dizziness, as it heralds the first incidence of the voice entering into the syncopation of the four-note 'sea' motif (bars 12–13) (previously the territory of the piano), though rhythmically altered, and the stepwise four-note motif with final descending semitone ending characterises the idea of the movement of fluid in the inner ear. Conversely the phrase also exhibits the first incidence of new material in the piano bass (triadic-quaver octave descent) (bar 13), which underlays the text 'may wander like a river'. The variation of the established musical material at this point in the song must be considered to respond to the impetus of the central idea of the text. Much of this material functions as a musical preparation for Britten's setting of the epigrammatic final line of this verse, 'The swaying sound of the sea' (see Ex. 4.7, bars 15–17). In these bars the song's opening 'sea' motif returns in a sequential presentation, but crucially this time the voice is in unison with the syncopated accompaniment both melodically and rhythmically. On hearing this first *pianissimo* phrase we are also left to ponder if this four-note motif was developed from Britten's recitation of the initial emotive words '*the swaying sound of the sea*'. Also at this point the four-note cell (G, A, B, Bb) is extended in a linear progression to a fifth note 'A' as if only now, when voice combines with its piano accompaniment, can the identity of the mesmerising source be revealed as 'the sea'. The importance of this musical transformation is further

accentuated by the dominance of the ‘wave’ motif, as the voice ends this verse, initially heard at the original register of the song’s opening music and then subsequently displaced in register (one, two, and three octaves). This allusion to aerial height as depicted in the piano part is prophetic of the essence of the following verse.

Example 4.7: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bars 15–17

The musical score for Example 4.7 consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and a fermata over the final note, then continuing with an *Animato* tempo. The middle staff is the piano right hand, starting with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and featuring a *cresc. molto* (crescendo molto) section. The bottom staff is the piano left hand, starting with a piano (*pp*) dynamic and concluding with a sforzando (*sf*) dynamic. The lyrics are: "The sway - ing sound of the sea. / Le son ber - ceur de la mer."

‘Seascape’, Strophe 2 (bars 18–36)

Again, as in the first verse, the vocal melodic line of this verse initially is rhythmically independent of its accompaniment. The almost exclusive syllabic text setting in this verse is disturbed in the first line, in which the words ‘small field’s’, are set to pairs of quavers; closer investigation of these four notes reveals an inversion of the original ‘tide’ motif (see Ex. 4.8, bar 19), thereby creating a musical linkage between this new section of music and the previous music, but it also rhythmically accents the text being set. These coastal ‘small’ fields represent the extent of human liminal activity at the boundary with the sea and Britten’s elaboration of these diminutive words reinforces the contrasting power of the sea which he chooses to musically underscore.

Example 4.8: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bars 18–21

The image shows a musical score for Example 4.8, 'Seascape', from *On This Island* no.3, bars 18–21. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in the upper staff, starting with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The piano accompaniment is in the lower staff, starting with a fortissimo (*fp*) dynamic and a marcato marking, followed by a crescendo (*cresc.*). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in English and French. The English lyrics are: 'Here at the small field's end - ing pause Where the chalk wall falls to the'. The French lyrics are: 'Vois tout au bout du pe - tit champ Le mur qui s'ef - frite en l'é -'.

Britten creates a new musical texture for the second verse of ‘Seascape’ (section B); these close-position block chords played in close-octaves high in the piano’s register, though different in texture from the former verse (section A), retain the syncopation of this earlier music (see Ex. 4.8, bars 18–21). Even the pictorial look of the score at these structurally-complete root-position B major triads which include an added 6th note ‘g#²’, from bar 20, when heard high in the piano’s register musically suggest the physical stability of the geographical feature presented in the second line of this verse, ‘the chalk wall[s]’ of the English coastline. The added 6th note in the piano prefigures the subsequent vocal leap from the tonic ‘b¹’ to ‘g#²’ in the subsequent bar (bar /21). Further evidence of the relative importance of this text is provided by the composer’s *crescendo* and the individually accented following words ‘...chalk wall falls to the...’, the relative insignificance of ‘to the’ rhythmically pointed-up by quavers. The reference to the sea (‘foam’) in the final word of this phrase allows for a momentary presentation of the music of the ‘sea’ motif with a ‘DD#’ pedal (bars 22–23). This ‘DD#’ pedal note then takes on the role of the structural bass note from which the piano commences its spread-out chromatic piano-pedal re-accent from ‘EEb’ (an enharmonic equivalent) to ‘EE-natural’, ‘FF’, ‘FF#’, and ‘GG’ in bars 27–32. This three-octave descent in the register of the piano treble depicts dramatically the physical movement,

contrasts with the elevated music of the ‘chalk’ cliffs and musically effects a textual transition from the land to the sea.

The subsequent reference to the ‘tall ledges’ of the cliffs necessitates, for Britten, a return of the block-chord musical figure in the accompaniment. But this time it is the four-note ‘tide’ motif which informs the vocal melody (bar 24). This return to solid land after the momentary reference to the sea’s foam musically involves a one-bar piano link (bar 23) which utilised the model of the three-octave semiquaver figure ascent as occurred previously in the transition from the first to the second verse (bars 16–17), here again musically representing the figurative ascent from the sea to the cliffs. Once again the final word at the end of Britten’s third phrase ‘and its tall ledges/Oppose the pluck/And knock of the tide’ invites a full return of the ‘sea’ motif, which subsequently replaces the block-chord figure. As in the first verse Britten chooses to highlight words with particular sound qualities. Here in bars 25 and 26 he musically accentuates the onomatopoeic and assonant quality of the words ‘pluck’ and ‘knock’ in a number of ways: they are the only *staccato* notes in the song, they are accented by *tenuto* marking, and they are placed on strong beats over a syncopated piano accompaniment. The precise vocal delivery of these two expressive words, which have strong ‘ck’ terminal consonants, is ensured by Britten’s insertion of quaver rests between each word even though they form part of a larger continuous phrase, clear evidence of Britten’s heightened awareness of the concerns also proposed for the term ‘cantaparolation’ (see 2.4.3). Here again the composer musically highlights the action words (‘pluck’ and ‘knock’) in the text which encapsulate the very active physicality ‘of the tide’.

Example 4.9: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bars 30–32

The image shows a musical score for three bars. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef. It begins with a *più f* dynamic. The lyrics are: "and the gull lodg - es A mo - ment on its sheer side. et les go - - è - lands un mo - ment sur le ri - - vage." There is a *marcato* marking above the second bar. The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment in bass clef. It features a complex texture with a *f cresc.* dynamic in the first bar and a *f* dynamic in the third bar. The piano part includes a prominent ascending semiquaver sequence in the right hand and a two-note 'Db' and 'Bb' sequence in the left hand.

The fourth phrase of this verse is accompanied by an alternating two-note ‘Db’ and ‘Bb’ ascending semiquaver sequence spanning two octaves. This motif was previously developed as a linkage between textual phrases, such as the musical link from the first verse to the second verse and the link from the second to the third phrases of this second verse. However, Britten uses it here to new effect, as the piano’s ascending register supports the largest span of rich alliterative and assonant vocal melody (bars 27–29) ‘And the shingle scrambles after the sucking surf’ leading to the *forte crescendo* vocal climax of the song to ‘aflat²’ in bar 29. Again this climax occurs on an action word, in this case on the unstressed second syllable of ‘sucking’. In the contrasting final phrase of this second verse Britten musically captures the action of ‘the gull lodges /A moment on its sheer side’ (see Ex. 4.9, bars 30–32) and continues to create original music within the context of his ‘sea’ motif. The composer repeats the pitch of ‘eflat²’ for eight of the twelve syllables of this line to depict the momentary inactivity of the lone sea bird, while the accompaniment outlines contrasting ascending figures including semitone shifts in bass pedal notes rising from ‘EE’ via ‘FF’ and ‘FF#’ to ‘GG’. The essence of this line, a momentary delay, is further expressed with the inclusion of rhythmic time-altering triplet crotchets, for the syllables of ‘lodges a’

which musically describe the text. Britten then allows the gull the flight implicit in the text (bar 32) with a triadic descent from the 'g¹' attained in the piano accompaniment. This swooping flight from the sheer side of the cliff face is initially accompanied by the 'wave' theme which is replaced by a retrograde version of the four-note 'tide' motif. Johnson describes the resultant high pitches which conclude Britten's second verse as the 'wailing' of the seagull in flight (bars 35–36).⁵⁰

'Seascape', Strophe 3 (bars 37–60)

Britten is not content, in this final verse of 'Seascape', to replicate exactly the musical structures of his first verse. Indeed, the music of the opening 'sea' motif returns but it has been subtly modified to take account of the essence of the new ideas contained in the intermediary blended text and music space. The parallelism between piano treble and bass in the motif is maintained; however, in response to textual ideas concerning impaired clarity of vision, such as expressed in '...the full view/Indeed may enter' and references to clouded memory and mirror images, this parallelism is now relatively equally obscured in an inner voice in the piano treble; heretofore this parallel movement was presented in the upper more audible soprano part of the piano treble. This hidden effect is heightened by Britten's textural addition of an upper descant quaver incorporated in the semiquaver 'wave' theme (see Ex. 4.10, bar 37). This modification may also be considered as a result of the predominant block harmonic texture of the second verse, and in this way the transformed 'sea' theme may be considered to develop organically from the music of the preceding two verses. The semitone chromatic descent of the piano pedal from the 'tonic' 'CC' to the 'dominant' 'GGG' further accentuates these adjustments in register.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 152.

Example 4.10: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bar 37

Molto tranquillo
pp *legato ed espress.* \flat

Far off like float - ing
 Pe - tits points, au loin

8^{va}

pp

The opening text reference to the related idea of distance in ‘Far off like floating ships’ is musically reflected in the piano’s treble two-octave rise in register, thereby increasing the aural distance between both bass and treble, and voice and accompaniment. Again in this verse Britten uses the octave leap as a musical expression of text, and is effective in depicting the syllables of the verb ‘Diverge’ with an ascending octave leap (bars 39–40) in the vocal line and a symmetrical balancing octave descent in the singer’s succeeding phrase ‘full view’. Britten may be relying intentionally on the emotive effect of the use of this musical feature in the first verse of his song to characterise stability and now it has come to represent clarity of mind and vision; if so this would represent an arbitrary association in line with Stacey’s mimetic terminology (see 2.3.3.2–3).

The stepwise movement of the ‘tide’ motif is transformed in this verse, firstly to include a final minor-third descent in bars 43, 44, and 45 and then compressed in a three-note cell in bars 48 and 50 (see Ex. 4.11, bar 48). The return of the full four-note motif in the voice part (now rhythmically altered), during the first incidence of this three-note truncation, represents a strong logical musical response to the text ‘And

move in memory as now these clouds do’ as we are reminded simultaneously of the earlier music while also cognisant of the altering effects of memory (see Ex. 4.11, bars 47–49).

Example 4.11: ‘Seascape’, *On This Island* no.3, bars /48–49

The musical score for Example 4.11 consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, marked with a piano (*P*) dynamic. It contains the following lyrics:

English: And move in mem - o - ry as now these clouds do,

French: Et se mou - voir dans la mé - moir(e) tel ce mi - age

The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, also marked with a piano (*P*) dynamic. It features a melisma on the tonic C in the voice, supported by piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a dominant pedal and a return of the opening motif.

So too, Britten may have taken his musical cue for the placement of a melisma from Auden’s only verse which has a metrically-extended last line (see Table 4.6), thereby musically highlighting this rhythmic alteration and textual expansion. Here, the composer decorates the last of the three assonances in the poem’s final line ‘And all the summer through the water saunter’; this expressive impressionistic image is portrayed in a simple calm *piano subito* elaboration of the tonic C in the voice, which is fully supported by piano accompaniment (for the first time without syncopation) which outlines this tonic, in root position and inversions (bars 53–54). The stress and strain of this questioning and politically-charged poetry as metaphorically encapsulated on the opposing forces of the ‘sea’ motif are temporarily relieved. This momentarily clouded vision is replaced by a return of the ‘full view’ of reality, represented by the song’s opening motif in the piano, this time with a dominant pedal. However, Britten immediately achieves the full five-note cell of the first verse with ‘through the water

saunter' (G, A, B, Bb, A), in his only repetition of text in the song (see Table 4.7); with this we are reminded of the earlier setting of 'The swaying sound of the sea'. The traditional stability of the final perfect cadential pedal move from dominant to tonic (bars 56–57) is characteristically undermined by the presence of a strong 'A' in voice and piano which concludes in a tonally-unclarified open octave on 'C' in the bass. Here again, Britten may be considered to reflect in musical terms on the unresolved open-ended nature of Auden's poem.

Table 4.7 Britten's song: 'Seascape', *On This Island* no.3

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	1 bar		4-note stepwise motif in pf bass and sop, alternating semiquavers, syncopation	
Verse 1/ Line 1	3			
L2	3			
L3	4	Semibreve 'silent <i>be</i> '		
L4 & L5	2+1	quaver text setting, triadic quavers 'wander like a'	rhythmically altered 4-note stepwise motif now in voice	poetic phrases combined
L6	3		expansion to 5-note stepwise motif unison in voice and pf bass and sop	
V 2/L1	3	2 quavers on each of 'small field's'	syncopated triadic chords in accompaniment	
L2	3		ref. to 4-note motif	
L3	1+3	2 notes 'tide'	ref. to 4-note motif	enjambment of text
L4	2+1		quaver triplet	enjambment of text
L5	1		ref. to 4-note motif, crotchet triplet	
L6	3	decorate 'sheer', expanded 'side'	triadic 'sheer'	
Interlude	3		retrograde inversion of 4-note motif	
V 3/L1	3		4-note stepwise motif in pf bass and inner part	
L2	3			
L3	4		4-note altered motif in pf bass and inner part	
L4	2	2 quavers on each of 'clouds do' also triadic	stepwise parallel movement in pf bass and sop	
L5	1		voice moves in parallel with pf bass and sop	
L6	4+3	Decorate 'saunter'	extended melisma, sequential move from 4-note motif to 5-note motif in voice and pf	repeat final text 'through the water saunter'

4.3.4.1 ‘Now through Night’s Caressing Grip’: Poetic source⁵¹

The poetic source of this song differs from that of the other four songs of *On This Island*, in relation to literary context, poetic form, and source. Whereas the remaining four texts represent Britten’s selection of complete poems from Auden’s poetic collection *Look Stranger!*, this song (‘Nocturne’) was selected and adapted by the composer from Act II, Scene v, of Auden and Stephen Isherwood’s collaboratively written play *The Dog beneath the Skin*.⁵² However, both literary works date from the mid-1930s, are topical of the highly political environment and reveal much of Auden’s left-wing opinions and by extension also inform our view of Britten’s political outlook as expressed in these songs. Though not in the form of poetic prose the text of ‘Now through Night’s Caressing Grip’ is presented, in this Auden play, as block-form punctuated poetry and is therefore distinguished, from the other Auden poetry set by Britten, by its lack of authorial predetermined versification.

Britten’s close personal friendship and professional engagement with Auden and Isherwood from the mid-1930s confirm that the composer was fully aware of the literary and politically didactic context from which he selected his source for ‘Nocturne’. Britten had also composed, earlier in 1937, the incidental music for the politically-aware stage play *The Ascent of F6*, again with texts by Auden and Isherwood.⁵³ Given Britten’s working knowledge and understanding of this Auden textual source it is worthwhile giving brief consideration to the literary and dramatic context of his adaptation for ‘Now through Night’s Caressing Grip’, in order to present a more complete range of possible meanings contained in this ‘poem’. Such secondary

⁵¹ Auden and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin or Where Is Francis?*, pp. 115–16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.

⁵³ The play *The Ascent of F6* was first performed 26 February 1937, Mercury Theatre, London. Hedli Anderson (S), Group Theatre, Brian Easdale (cond). Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 34.

research does not seek to undermine the artistic autonomy of Britten's song, nor indeed the poetic integrity of Auden's poem, but it does serve to illuminate the political background to this work, which will in turn contribute to the identification of the presence of meaningful textual connections between the five songs of *On This Island* as a whole. In the play this text is delivered by two chorus leaders in advance of the curtain-fall ending of Act II, which ends the 'night interlude'⁵⁴ of Scene v, and offers a reflection upon this preceding short scene's imaginary dialogue between the protagonist Alan's Left and Right feet. The context of the social and political environment is prepared for the audience with bald unequivocal statements such as:

'Night. And crooked Europe hidden in shadow' and the related 'Night has fallen, we have lost our way'.⁵⁵

The use by Auden of such highly politically-informed metaphor, the Left Foot representing a socialist stance and the Right Foot presenting a conservative outlook, is confirmed in the style of delivery of the former part characterised by 'a cultured accent' and the latter by 'a Cockney accent'.⁵⁶ The initial exchange between these two imaginary parts of the one body politic encapsulates the essence of their interaction, but it also gives voice to a wider extant British and European political debate, as expressed:

Right Foot: Why are you pushing me, Left?
Left Foot: Cos yer tiking [sic] up all the room, that's why.⁵⁷

Of particular relevance to the text of Britten's song 'Nocturne' is that we hear the reiteration of a constant argument in favour of social equality in which 'Lord and Link-Boy' should 'forget their own importance', to which the Right Foot retorts 'But the fact remains that without standards a fellow just goes to pieces. One saw enough of that in

⁵⁴ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 139.

⁵⁵ Auden and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin or Where Is Francis?*, pp. 111–12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

the War'.⁵⁸ The war referred to here is the Great War of 1914–18 (retrospectively known as the First World War).

The block-form presentation of this twenty-three line Auden poetic verse relies on the punctuation of comma, colon, and full-stop for phrasing and the separation of poetic ideas and imagery rather than on versification which distinguishes it from the poetic source of Britten's other settings in this song cycle. The division of the poem into full-sentence phrases would result in an irregular six-line, twelve-line, and five-line structure (see Table 4.8). The mesmerising and dominating presence of the near-perfect heptameter of this poem contributes significantly to the text's energy and drive (see Table 4.8); related to this, regular and syllabic metric-count accentual stress occurs invariably on the first, third, fifth, and final syllables of lines (trochee). Allied to this metric regularity is the emotive effect of strong line-ending rhyming couplets (see also Table 4.8). The binary nature of these poetic couplets may be considered to have its origin in the oppositional dialogue between Left Foot and Right Foot which precedes the text of 'Nocturne' in Auden's play. Indeed, many of Auden's couplets may be structurally explicated as containing a relationship based on cause and effect, or statement and consequence, as seen in the following lines of text:

Line 1: Now through night's caressing grip (*a*)

Line 2: Earth and all her oceans slip, (*a*)

Line 13: While the splendid and the proud (*g*)

Line 14: Naked stand before the crowd (*g*)

The relative strength of Auden's rhyming scheme and metric regularity may account for the lack of cross-rhyming within couplet lines, with one notable exception: 'power's'

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 112–14.

(line 23) and 'hours' (line 24). Depending on the articulation of these two words the metric count of these lines may vary with the regular heptameter (see Table 4.8).

The text of 'Nocturne' explored the related realms of night, sleep, and dreams whether pleasant or nightmarish. Sleep is personified as female (lines 2, 4 and 6) and 'our [sleeping] friend'⁵⁹ is finally revealed as male in the last line of the poem. Johnson alludes to the possibility that this poem may also be considered, at a surface level, to be a 'beautiful hymn addressed to an anonymous lover' in addition to its wider political discourse.⁶⁰ In this latter context the male 'friend' may also represent the memory of soldiers who lost their lives in military action in the Great War, 'Awkward lovers lie in fields/Where disdainful beauty yields'. Images of shifting geographic and political boundaries dominate the first six lines of 'Nocturne' ('Earth...oceans', 'Capes of China', and 'Coasts' of America) and are bound together within the transformative sleep metaphor. Auden's repeated conspicuous use of 'Now' at the opening of sections of text, in typical Audenesque manner, reveals a topical call-to-attention. Conversely, the present tense denoted meaning of 'Now' also gives this poetry a timeless quality.

The text of the second section of Auden's 'Nocturne' (lines 7–13) engages with the binary juxtapositions of 'ragged vagrants'/'awkward lovers', 'holes to sleep'/'lie in fields', and 'Just and unjust, worst and best'. These paired images suggest a level of enforced equality in sleep (or death in war) between different social groupings, as presented in Auden's play. The direct quotation of '*crooked* holes' (line 8) sourced from the text of the opening of Scene v of *The Dog beneath the Skin*, which states '*crooked* Europe hidden in shadow' appears to be a confirmatory and unambiguous political allusion.⁶¹ Ambiguity also pervades the obtuse nature of the third section of this poem's

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 153.

⁶¹ Auden and Isherwood, *The Dog beneath the Skin*, pp. 111–16.

text (lines 13–16). The reader is propelled through the text of these lines by confirmatory conjunctions in the form of the repetition of ‘and the’ (three times) and the superficially convincing effect of Auden’s oxymoron ‘losing gambler gains’.⁶²

Table 4.8 Auden’s chorus: ‘Now through Night’s Caressing Grip’⁶³

		Metric Foot	Rhyming Scheme	Word patterns/ Imagery
1	Now through night’s caressing grip	7	a	‘now’ present tense
2	Earth and all her oceans slip,	7	a	sleep as a female image, opening ref. to ocean
3	Capes of China slide away	7	b	physical boundary
4	From her fingers into day	7	b	
5	And the Americas incline	8	c	
6	Coasts towards her shadow line.	7	c	physical boundary
7	Now the ragged vagrants creep	7	d	‘now’ present tense
8	Into crooked holes to sleep:	7	d	
9	Just and unjust, worst and best,	7	e	two sets of opposites
10	Change their places as they rest:	7	e	
11	Awkward lovers lie in fields	7	f	alliteration ‘lovers lie’
12	Where disdainful beauty yields:	7	f	
13	While the splendid and the proud	7	g	
14	Naked stand before the crowd	7	g	ambiguity of ‘splendid’ ‘proud’ and ‘naked’
15	And the losing gambler gains	7	h	alliteration ‘gambler gains’, oxymoron ‘losing’/ ‘gains’
16	And the beggar entertains:	7	h	
17	May sleeps healing powers extend	7/8	i	assonance ‘ow’/‘ou’
18	Through these hours to our friend.	6/7	i	diphthongs, the sleeper
19	Unpursued by hostile force,	7	j	
20	Traction engine, bull or horse	7	j	
21	Or revolting succubus;	7	j	historical reference
22	Calmly till the morning break	7	k	first adverb
23	Let him lie, then gently wake.	7(3+4)	k	‘him’ a concluding male image

The poet’s plea ‘May sleep’s healing powers extend/Through these hours to our friend’ comes as a surprise at this point in the poem and operates as a poetic half-close (lines 17–18). This is the first specific subjective reference to a protagonist in the poem as all previous references have been both anonymous and plural. There follow three

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Act II Scene V, pp. 115–16.

lines of demanding dissonant text (lines 19–21) in which the sleeper is again drawn into the unreal world of nightmare. This imaging world is characterised by the irrational juxtaposition of images of modernity ‘traction engine’, images of pre-mechanisation ‘bull or horse’, with the deliberately obscure ‘revolting succubus’. The previous plea is now transformed into a hopeful request for a gentle awakening to complete the poetic closing.

This Auden poem presented Britten with a poetic source which, though rich in physical and emotive inspirational imagery, also contains many binary contrasts and great metric and rhyming regularity but it also posed questions for the composer as to musical versification for his setting of the above highlighted conspicuously demanding text.

4.3.4.2 ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island* op.11 no.4: musical setting⁶⁴

‘Nocturne’ was composed by Britten in May 1937 as the first song written of this five-song cycle and was therefore the first independently selected Auden lyrics which Britten set in a song cycle.⁶⁵ Christopher Wintle lists succinctly, in his recent monograph on Britten’s solo piano work *Night-piece* (1963), the composer’s principal works which engage with the topic of ‘night’ in all compositional genres; however, the song ‘Nocturne’ notably is missing from this otherwise comprehensive listing.⁶⁶ The correction of this apparent omission is important as this song represents the first time that Britten specifically used ‘Nocturne’ in the title of a musical work. More

⁶⁴ Of the five songs in *On This Island* and indeed of all of Britten’s Auden voice and piano settings only ‘Nocturne’ is featured in the following collections of twentieth-century English song: W. Radford, ed., *A Heritage of British Song* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1977), iv, pp. 20–23; and Carol Kimball, ed., *Art Song in English: 50 Songs by 21 American and British Composers* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 2006), pp. 52–55. Both collections exclusively feature music for which the copyrights are held by Boosey and Hawkes and therefore cannot be taken as a measure of all English art song composed during this period.

⁶⁵ Composition dated 5 May 1937. Britten, *On This Island* op.11, p. 20.

⁶⁶ Christopher Wintle, *All the Gods: Benjamin Britten’s Night-piece in Context*, ed. by Julian Littlewood (London: Plumbago Books, 2006), p. 20 note 8.

importantly, the additional distinct yet related themes, of sleep and dreams, are also present and accented musically in this song.

Britten's direct musical response to the poetic forms and rhetorical devices contained in this Auden poem are startling. For example the composer assimilates fully the tight measured metric stresses and rhyming-scheme couplets of this poetry and musically builds on these ideas in 'Nocturne'. Britten approaches the near-perfect heptameter of 'Now through Night's Caressing Grip' as seen in Table 4.8 and perfects it, in that he abbreviates the five syllables of Auden's 'the A-mer-i-cas' (line 5) into four 'th'A-mer-i-cas' (bars 13–14) which has the effect of clarifying a heptametric line from an otherwise eight-syllable count. Similarly he extends the diphthong contained in the word 'hours' (bar 50) by one note into three notes to balance the assonance of the word 'power' in the preceding line (bar 48) (see Table 4.10).

The block-form presentation of 'Now through Night's Caressing Grip' required Britten to make decisions as to verse length, which has a resultant impact on the work's musical phrasing and the creation of textual units of meaning. The consideration in the preceding section of this chapter, of the subject matter of Auden's poem and its subdivision into six distinct sections, is based solely on a subjective approach to this poetry and may be summarised as seen in Table 4.9. The form of this poetic textual analysis is replicated precisely by Britten in his setting of 'Nocturne', with the exception that he combines sections three and four above to create a third six-line strophe; but as this author will show, Britten retains a musical distinction even within this consolidation. The particular need for these musical decisions is specific to this poem as it was sourced from a play while versification was clear in all of the remaining Auden poems which Britten set in *On This Island*.

Table 4.9 Analysis of themes in Auden’s ‘Now through Night’s Caressing Grip’

Section 1	lines 1–6 (6)	(bars 1–19)	Shifting political and geographic boundaries
Section 2	lines 7–12 (6)	(bars 20–37)	Binary oppositions
Section 3	lines 13–16 (4)	(bars 38–46)	Ambiguity
Section 4	lines 17–18 (2)	(bars 47–51)	Plea
Section 5	lines 19–21 (3)	(bars 52–60)	Nightmare
Section 6	lines 22–23 (2)	(bars 61–76)	The awakening

Britten focuses on the prominence of the strong poetic rhyming couplets in his construction of a structural musical motif around which he composes ‘Nocturne’. He builds each opening vocal antecedent phrase upon a seven-note linear ascending arpeggiated figure spanning an octave (see fig. (X) in Ex. 4.12, bars 1–7) in which the strong verbal stress of first, third, fifth, and final syllables are musically accented on strong and semi-strong beats and as minim notes which alternate with shorter crotchets—this recurring phrase structure perfectly aligns with the trochaic stresses of its heptametric source, which allows for the setting of stressed opening and closing syllable of each line (S u S u S u S) as a long note (musically stressed). The consequent phrase contains a ten-note descending meandering figure (see fig. (Y) Ex. 4.12) in which Britten achieves an expansion of the seven syllables of the text through his setting of the first, third, and fifth syllables each set to two notes, thus creating a modified symmetric musical motif containing two distinct yet related musical elements. Given the metric rigidity of the source text Britten creates two separate techniques of textual accentuation, each of which responds flexibly to text. The binary nature of these conjunct phrases reflects upon many aspects of the text. This feature of poetic duality has been identified in this poem’s juxtaposition of political and geographical boundaries

(lines 1–6), binary oppositions (lines 7–12), ambiguity (lines 13–16), cross rhyming (lines 17–18), modern and historic imagery (lines 19–21), and finally the transformation from sleep to ‘gently wake’ as expressed in the metaphoric transition from night to ‘morning break’ (lines 22–23).

Example 4.12: ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island* no.4, bars 1–7

The musical score for 'Nocturne' from 'On This Island' no.4, bars 1-7, is presented in two systems. The first system (marked with a box 'X') shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first two lines of lyrics. The tempo is 'Andante piacevole' and the dynamics are 'pp legato' for the vocal and 'pp sostenuto' for the piano. The second system (marked with a box 'Y') shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the next two lines of lyrics. The key signature is G major and the time signature is 6/8.

Also the shape of the two parts of Britten’s continuous phrase appears to reflect the nature of the text set. The second meandering and descending part of the phrase, usually encompassing an octave, perfectly characterises the poetic idea of the incessant physical movement inherent in nature as heard in ‘caressing grip’, ‘oceans slip’, ‘slide away’, and ‘incline’; all of these images are contained in the first sentence/stanza of the poem. The first part of the phrase, by comparison, builds a preparatory balancing stability as musically characterised in its triadic construction. Stability and subsequent descent are also characterised by the over-arching low register of the harmonic shape of the song whereby the first parts of phrases are predominantly supported by static pedal

notes; initially the tonic C# of a modal C# aeolian is pervasive, while stepwise harmonic shifts accompany the latter part of phrases. In the strophic first and second verses exceptional leaps to the dominant (G#) in the piano's harmonic bass, may be accounted for by textual references to 'day' (bar 13) and 'changing places as they rest' (bars 30–31), as both texts refer to change or modulation.

At a deeper level the overall shape of these combined phrases may be considered a musico-poetic representation of a two-part action of sleeping, in which inhalation necessitates the expansion or rising of the rib-cage which is followed by exhalation which involves physical descent. The extended time taken in the latter activity appears appropriate and is present in Britten's phrasing. I would go further and note that this dual action also replicates the breathing action undertaken by a singer in performance of each musical phrase, thereby revealing Britten's acute sensitivity to the performance requirements of this work. The organic nature of Britten's compositional process appears as a useful selective example of Kramer's concept of song's capacity to contain pure 'songfulness' (see 2.4.1). It is also likely that this song represents an early example of Britten's use of body music which Daniel Albright identifies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as:

We hear the rising scale as an intake of breath, the falling scale as an exhale: the opera begins with a musical snore.⁶⁷

Johnson has identified the particular difficulty which this 'most taxing vocal piece' presents in achieving a one breath-per-phrase breathing strategy,⁶⁸ again a key concern of cantaparolation. The possibility of this musical poetic equivalence is addressed variously by other musicologists: Evans does not mention it and Banfield considers it 'a

⁶⁷ Daniel Albright, *Musicking Shakespeare: A Conflict of Theatres* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), p. 268. The opera referred to here is Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* op.64, texts adapted from William Shakespeare by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears (London, Hawkes, c.1960).

⁶⁸ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 153.

witty and outlandish possibility',⁶⁹ whereas Johnson welcomes its probability⁷⁰ and Mitchell comments that this motif 'encapsulates one of the principal images of the poem'.⁷¹ Certainly the circular recurrent nature of the imagery contained in Auden's poem also becomes central to Britten's song, which he expresses in his cyclic sequential treatment of this simple body-music theme.

Allied to the simplicity and propriety of his expressive ascending and descending motif is the economy with which Britten intentionally uses this musical unit to convey changing yet related ideas, thereby creating musical unity while avoiding predictability. Particularly in this song, but also in 'Seascape' *On This Island*, Britten develops further his interest in economical use of musical material, which Kennedy considers to be an 'economy of invention'.⁷² In this way Britten seeks to encapsulate the essence of a poem in a musical motif shared at times by voice and accompaniment, as musical synthesis. In 'Nocturne' both elements of Britten's 'sleep' motif (see Ex. 4.12) are initially presented three times in combination in the first and second strophes. The recurring pattern of presentation of the X motif followed by the Y motif is broken in bar 38 by an ascending sequential presentation of three statements and one variant of the X 'sleep' motif sets four lines of related text (see Table 4.9). This logical musical linkage reflects upon the textual connectivity of the words; the two couplets of text are syntactically linked by the conjunction 'and' (bar 42), but more conspicuous is the hermeneutic continuity created by recurring text, albeit variant 'while the' (bar 38), 'and the' (bar 39), 'before the' (bar 41), 'and the' (bar 42), and again 'and the' (bar 44). The effect of these four ascending arpeggios, which alternate root and inversion harmonic shifts from C# minor, B minor, D minor, and F major, is that they musically

⁶⁹ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, ii, p. 384.

⁷⁰ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 153.

⁷¹ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936*, p. 149.

⁷² Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 133.

reinforce the increasingly emphatic (though obscure) text (see Ex. 4.13, bars 38–46). The increased pace of harmonic change heard in these passages of music is facilitated by use of only the first part of the melodic motif, thereby accentuating the declamatory effect of the dramatic text ‘standing naked before the crowd’. Each phrase is further directly interlinked as the final word of each vocal arpeggio provides the root note of the subsequent harmonic chord (‘the proud’ line 13 is set to B, ‘the crowd’ line 14 is set to D, and ‘gam-*bler gains*’ line 15 is set to F) (see also Ex. 4.13).

Example 4.13: ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island* no.4, bars 38–46

The musical score for Example 4.13 consists of two systems of music. The first system (bars 38-46) features a vocal line in G major with a piano (p) dynamic and a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The piano accompaniment starts with a pianissimo (pp) dynamic and a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The lyrics are: "While the splen - did and the proud Na - ked stand be - fore the crowd And the Ten - dīs que le somp - tu - eux Se dé - pouille a tous les yeus, Et que". The second system (bars 47-54) continues the vocal line with a piano (p) dynamic and a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The piano accompaniment includes a "più f" marking. The lyrics are: "los - ing gam - bler gains And the beg - gar en - ter - tains: le mal - chan - ceux gagne Et que l'on rit dans les bagnes." The score is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time.

The mention of ‘sleep’s healing power’ consequently initiates two sequential descending statements of the second part of the ‘sleep’ Y motif after a clever move of tonal centre to Db major⁷³: the enharmonic major equivalent of the predominant C#

⁷³ Interestingly Db major is also the opening key which Britten uses in the first song ‘Pastoral’, words by Charles Cotton, in his orchestral song cycle on the related theme of evening leading into night. Britten, *Serenade* op.31 for Tenor, Horn and Strings (London: Hawkes & Son, 1944).

tonality. The actual shift from bar 45 to bar 46 represents a move from a 6/3 F major chord to a 6/4 Db major chord. This local climax is notated in the ascent of the piano right-hand accent into the treble clef, as if to draw attention to sleep's power in a higher register. This two-phrase descent expresses the plea that deep sleep will soon visit our 'friend'. These two sections of music (four phrases followed by two phrases) create a combined third six-line strophe of music based on the modified re-ordering of the two-part 'sleep' motif which contrasts with its preceding two strophes and yet is musically linked to them.

Striking contrast is evident in Britten's setting of the only non-binary section of text (lines 19–21). The allusive content of this text may represent a jumbled nightmare scene in which the tension caused by the juxtaposition of powerful mechanical and natural images of power, modern and historic, is to some extent allayed by Auden's calming poetic introduction 'Unpursued by...'. Britten responds musically to this initial rhetorical poetic direction with a striking extended eight-bar static monotone 'C' setting of the vocal part which is accompanied by piano stepwise harmonic movement. This section of the song not alone contrasts with its preceding music, as the melody of the 'sleep' motif is absent, but its static vocal *pianissimo* dynamic also shows in relief the physical violence which the text depicts. It is the presence of the rhythmic element of the seven-note motif, in these three phrases, which maintains musical cohesion (bars 52–59).

The epigrammatic nature of the text of Auden's final couplet 'Calmly till the morning break/Let him lie, then gently wake', inspires Britten further to develop and inventively use his 'sleep' motif. The musical expectation created by the return of the original ascending arpeggiated figure in the voice in bar 61, this time with a C minor chord and confirmed in the piano (bar 62), has a startling effect, achieved by the

extension of this line beyond the octave range which previously has always framed and contained this melody. The change from the previous pattern of setting text syllabically for the setting of the work 'break' with two notes heightens this pre-climactic ascent and further develops the 'sleep' motif melodically as well as rhythmically. The arrival of the song's climax is heralded dynamically with the vocal *crescendo* from 'g²' to 'g²#' which marks the poignancy of 'Let him lie'. The smoothness and dynamic control of the harmonic return from a C minor chord to the original C# modality (confirmed by B-natural rather than B# in bars 64 and 67), in which all parts rise a semitone over a semitone passing descent in the bass from 'C' via 'BB' to 'AA#', contribute to the musical intensity of this passage. The metaphoric action of regaining consciousness after sleep transfers into the piano as the voice remains silent. For the first time the piano presents a full statement of the ten-note descending 'sleep' motif; previously this motif has been the exclusive terrain of the singer. This leads to a follow-on sequence of the final seven notes of the original motif (bars /69–70). Energy and forward movement are assisted by Britten's extended chain of 7–6 chords in the piano tenor part (see Ex. 4.14, bars 66–73) over a stepwise bass descent from 'A#' eventually to 'CC#'; these descending figures contribute to the musical realisation of sleep. The voice returns with an act of waking (bar 70) as it responds by repeating the piano melody just heard, but on this occasion an open tonic C# note is present in all parts. The clarifying comment of the full C# aeolian chord is reserved for the piano which reflects on the departure of sleep with a full statement of the opening of the 'sleep' motif which has been transformed in the two-octave register ascent into the piano treble clef in an act of wakefulness.

In the final sixteen bars of 'Nocturne' Britten has shown control of economical musical material in his achievement of expressive purpose; voice and piano enter into a

new form of dialogue. The ‘inhalation’ rising element of the ascending motif is developed by upward vocal extension, while his use of the ‘exhalation’ descending component of this motif is expanded by partial repetition, firstly in the piano and subsequently in the voice. Finally the piano’s closing appropriation of the ascending C# minor figure underscores a musical transformation from night to day, from sleep to ‘gently wake’, with a contradictory sleep motif in the bass creating musical interest.

Table 4.10 Britten’s song: ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island* no.4

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	2 bars			
L1+L2	3+2.5	syllabic phrase followed by 2 notes per syllable on stresses 1, 3, 5	7-note triadic octave ↑ arpeggio leading to 10-note ↓ phrase	‘thro’ abbreviated
L3+L4	3+2		above in sequence	
L5+L6	3+2.5		as above	‘th’Americas’
	2			
L7+L8	3+2.5		strophic repeat	
L9+L10	3+2			
L11+L12	3+2.5			
	2			
L13	2	syllabic phrase	7-note arpeggio ascent	
L14	2		sequential 7-note arpeggio octave ascent	
L15	2		as above	
L16	3		as above	
L17	2	2 notes per syllable on stresses 1, 3, 5	10-note octave ↓	MS ‘power’ ⁷⁴ source ‘powers’
L18	2.5	As above, ‘hours’ has 3 notes	sequential 10-note octave ↓	
L19+L20	2+2		7-note static vocal line	
L21	2		as above	
L22	2	‘break’ 2 notes	extends beyond octave	
L23	3+4 (interl.) +2		sequential presentation of vocal motif by the pf	
Postlude	4			

⁷⁴ The text in Britten’s composition sketch is ‘May sleeps healing power extend’, while Auden’s text is ‘powers’. Britten, ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island*, MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, p. 64.

Example 4.14: ‘Nocturne’, *On This Island* no.4, bars 66–73

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The piano part begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes a *dolcis.* marking. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "then gen - tly wake..." and "Et puis s'é- veille...". The piano accompaniment in the second system includes a *pp* dynamic and a *pp cresc.* marking.

4.3.5.1 ‘As It Is, Plenty’: poetic source⁷⁵

Britten returns to Auden’s poetic collection *Look Stranger!* (1937) for the poetic source of the final song of his cycle; ‘As It Is, Plenty’ is a slender three-verse poem (see Table 4.11).⁷⁶ Johnson identifies that Auden’s central idea for this poem came from Somerset Maugham’s short story *His Excellency*;⁷⁷ in later revisions of Auden’s poems he applies Maugham’s title to his poem.⁷⁸ In summary, Maugham’s short story involves an anonymous British ambassador who has a love affair with a music hall acrobat while on a foreign posting.⁷⁹ In Auden’s hands this material takes on a broader outlook and becomes an expression of the poet’s social and political commentary on life in Britain in the mid-1930s. The poet is disillusioned with the rise of capitalism as seen in increasing

⁷⁵ This poem was written in summer, 1936. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 162.

⁷⁶ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 32.

⁷⁷ W. Somerset Maugham, *His Excellency*, Vol. 3, *W. Somerset Maugham: Collected Short Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963), pp. 156–88.

⁷⁸ Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957*, p. 96.

⁷⁹ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 154.

consumerism and advancing mechanisation, and its destructive effects on both the family unit and conventional social interaction. These political views are expressed by Auden in his intensely satirical verse through his use of the close contrasting of negative and positive imagery, rhyming and metric schemes, rhetorical repetition, and poetic syntax.

The profusion of negative images which are contained in these concentrated poetic stanzas contributes to the poet's satirical tone, for example: verse one, 'thinning hair'; verse two, 'as not, is not', 'nothing was enough', 'rough future', 'intransigent nature', 'betraying smile', 'is not, is not'; and verse three, 'not', 'spacious days', and 'loss as major/And final' (see Table 4.11). The pervasive extent of the despondency expressed here has the effect of colouring ideas which ordinarily have primarily positive associations, whereby 'children happy', 'wife devoted', 'thanks', 'but love', 'success', 'bless', and 'profits' are parodied and tainted by the proximity of other negative textual associations. There is a relative absence of overt negativity in the first verse; however the mediation and interspersing of the human images of 'children' and 'wife' with the economic images of 'car' and 'banks' initiate an uneasy materialistic tone. These uncomfortable juxtapositions raise questions as to the purity and value of family life in both a witty and a mocking sense. Auden's repeated use of the definite article in 'the car' and 'the work and the banks' when combined with an inversion of general order of noun and adjective in 'the children happy' and 'the wife devoted' serves, in the context of this poem, to further demean the value of the mores and the social relations described.

Consideration of the metric regularity of Auden's three stanzas of 'As It Is, Plenty' reveals similarities between the first and last verses in which five metric feet dominate with some expansions to six metric pulses, whereas the central stanza contains

a more varied pattern of metric stresses (see Table 4.11). This *ABA* metric form is also supported by both the shift from the present tense in verse one ‘As it *is*’, to the past tense in verse two ‘All that *was* thought’, and returning to the present in the final verse ‘as it *is*’, but also by the increased philosophically-minded content of the second verse when compared with the individual focus of the surrounding verses. The relative brevity of lines in this poem when compared with the other Auden poetry set by Britten in *On This Island* also adds to the poet’s creation of satire. Whereas a strong rhyming scheme can also be seen in ‘Seascape’ (see Table 4.6), which results in poetic conviction, in ‘As It Is, Plenty’ this same poetic device has the opposite effect and the reader is challenged by the subtle contradictions. Notably the line-end rhyming of ‘plenty’ with ‘happy’, ‘banks’ with ‘give thanks’, ‘to praise’ with ‘spacious days’, and ‘success’ with ‘bless’ produces a witty ironic questioning of the expanding capitalist and consumerist society which Auden wanted to highlight. The moral component of these juxtapositions further accentuates the vacuous intent of Auden’s mocking tone and content. Revealingly, Auden does not provide line-ending rhyming for lines four and ten of the second stanza; here he relies rather on repetition and punctuation by comma to provide balance and motion; the conditional ‘but love, but love’ (line 4) and the bald ‘forget, forget’ (line 10) of this verse both offer momentary reprieve from the present dilemma.

Closely related to this poetic rhyming device, Auden’s use of textual repetition seeks to achieve a similar consistent satirical effect on his reader. Immediate and exact replication can have an emphatic impulse as in each of the verse endings ‘Give thanks, give thanks’, ‘Forget, forget’, and ‘And final, final’ (suggesting humour as the last word) or less emphatic as in ‘the car, the car’, ‘is not, is not’ and ‘let him bless, let him bless’. Repetitions may also be immediate but a variant of the original ‘as not, is not’, and ‘betraying smile, /Betraying, but a smile’. These textual variations have the dual

effect of introducing an apparently high level of intellectual discourse, while at the same time presenting obscure inconclusive ideas. Repetitions may also assist in achieving structural continuity in a verse, as seen in the first and last verses. The verse one ‘*As it is*’ (line 1), ‘*As it’s*’ (line 2), and ‘*as it is*’ (line 7) and the third verse ‘*Let him not*’ (Line 1), ‘*let him bless*’ (line 4), ‘*let him see*’ (line 5), and ‘*Lest he see*’ (line 8), seek to add unity and structure to these framing verses. Auden’s use, in each case, of a variant form of repetition appears to syntactically support further his expressed views. Auden’s contrasting use of the abbreviated ‘*it’s*’ brings a contemporary vernacular tone to the text. However, the actual effect of these over-used imitations is not to convince the reader of the explicit truth of the meaning of the words but rather to subvert the text with an implicit level of meaning—this is Auden’s satirical intent in this poem.

Auden’s ‘*As It Is, Plenty*’ offers a composer formidable difficulty in its musical setting. The strength of the surface-level paradoxical ideas and associated imagery provides an obstacle to the production of an objective interpretation. The presence of widespread negativity, facile rhyming, and exhaustive repetition in pursuance of a political outlook contributes to this challenge. This poem, as witty-didactic satire, is a clever but superficial reflection on life ‘*as it is*’ in Britain in the 1930s which is expressed in a persuasive modern popular idiom.

Table 4.11 Auden's poem: 'As It Is, Plenty',⁸⁰

		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns/ Imagery
V.1				
1	As it is, plenty;	5	a	'as it <i>is</i> ' (present tense)
2	As it's admitted	5	b	'as it's'
3	The children happy	5	a	
4	And the car, the car	5	c	'car' repeated, definite article
5	That goes so far	5	c	
6	And the wife devoted:	6	b	
7	To this as it is,	5	with L1	'as it is'
8	To the work and the banks	6	d	use of definite article, economy
9	Let his thinning hair	5	e	Aging
10	And his hauteur	5	e	
11	Give thanks, give thanks.	4	d	'give thanks' repeated
V.2				
1	All that was thought	4	a	'all that <i>was</i> ' (past tense)
2	As like as not, is not;	6	b	'not' repeated with variation
3	When nothing was enough	6	a	eye rhyme 'thought'/'enough', 'was'
4	But love, but love	4	internal	'but love' repeated
5	And the rough future	5	c	
6	Of an intransigent nature	8	c	
7	And the betraying smile,	6	d	use of definite article
8	Betraying, but a smile:	6	d	'betraying smile' varied repeat
9	Then that is not, is not;	6	b	'is not' repeated
10	Forget, Forget.	4	internal	'forget' repeated (the past)
V.3				
1	Let him not cease to praise	6	a	'let' repeated
2	Then his spacious days;	5	a	
3	Yes, and the success	5	b	'ess' assonances
4	Let him bless, let him bless:	6	b	'let him bless' repeated
5	Let him see in this	5	c	'let him' repeated
6	The profits larger	5	d	
7	And the sins venal,	5	e	
8	Lest he see as it is	6	c	'lest he' variant; 'as it is' present tense
9	The loss as major	5	d	
10	And final, final.	5	e	'final' repeated

⁸⁰ Written in summer, 1936 and published in Auden, *Look, Stranger!*, p. 32.

4.3.5.2 ‘As It Is, Plenty’, *On This Island* op.11 no.5: musical setting

‘As It Is, Plenty’⁸¹ was composed by Britten in early October 1937 together with ‘Let the Florid Music Praise’ and ‘Seascapes’ and provide the opening, closing and central songs of his five-song cycle *On This Island*. The over-arching shape of the music in these songs was therefore largely formed when Britten chose to set Auden’s challenging witty and satirical lyrics as the final song of this cycle. This song’s poetic source delivers wide contrasting comparison with the preceding songs both in terms of Auden’s modern condensed style of language and also the absence of traditional poetic imagery which is replaced here with images of a modern industrial society: the images of the preceding four songs, sun, leaves, the sea, and sleep contrast starkly with this final song with images of ‘the car’ and success measured in terms of economic profitability rather than as expressed in social morality. For Britten, the contemporary nature of the content and subject matter of this text suggested an equally up-to-date musical language.

Britten had engaged with the genre of musical cabaret earlier in 1937, in his piano and voice settings of Auden’s ‘Johnny’⁸² and ‘Funeral Blues’.⁸³ And it is to these recent experiences of the cabaret idiom that the composer returned to for inspiration for his setting of ‘As It Is, Plenty’. Britten and Auden’s collaborations in this particular kind of ‘vernacular music’⁸⁴ may be considered to have their artistic precedence in the musical and textual partnership of Kurt Weill (1900–1950)⁸⁵ and Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)⁸⁶,

⁸¹ The composition draft of this song is dated 9 October 1937. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 39.

⁸² Composition completed 5 May 1937 (the same date as ‘Nocturne’). *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸³ Composed 17 June 1937. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁴ Donald Mitchell, and Philip Reed, ‘For Hedli: Britten and Auden’s Cabaret Songs’, in *W. H. Auden: The Language of Learning and the Language of Love*, ed. by Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 61.

⁸⁵ David Drew and J. Bradford Robinson, ‘Weill, Kurt’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), xxvii, pp. 220–32.

⁸⁶ Franz Krautwurst, ‘Brecht, Bertolt’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), iv, pp. 301–02.

who collaborated actively from 1927 to 1930.⁸⁷ Further, Mitchell identifies two works with music by Weill and texts by Brecht which ‘directly influenced’⁸⁸ Auden and Isherwood in their writing of *The Dog beneath the Skin*, which is the play from which Britten selected his text for ‘Nocturne’, the penultimate song of *On This Island*. Britten was therefore personally and professionally aware of the purpose and music content of these politico-theatrical motivated works and the recent expansion of the Lieder tradition in this new direction.

Evans identifies dissonance and rhythmic patterns in this song as evidence of the presence of ‘pre-war sophisticated dance music style (rather than of jazz)’,⁸⁹ while in 1952 Mitchell’s remarks upon Britten’s ‘highly ironic use of a fairly straight-faced jazz idiom’;⁹⁰ these latter remarks are replaced in 1981 with Mitchell’s more generalised reference to this song’s “‘cabaret” style...the only cabaret-like song to be published during his life time’.⁹¹ Cooke clarifies, though not specifically in relation to this song, that Britten had by 1936 assimilated any musical idiom required by his work at the GPO film unit and that his ‘stylistic boundaries broadened to the extent of absorbing jazz elements’.⁹² These new musical styles afforded Britten enhanced artistic freedom but also challenged him to explore new musical devices and to develop new methods of text setting, which were appropriate to a genre in which frivolous musical expression underscores serious subject matter. Britten’s musical eclecticism and incorporation of this ‘other’ genre within the context of his art-song oeuvre represents a brave and

⁸⁷ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 158.

⁸⁸ *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1927–29). *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁸⁹ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 75.

⁹⁰ Donald Mitchell, ‘The Musical Atmosphere’, ed. by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 18.

⁹¹ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 146.

⁹² Mervyn Cooke, *Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press/Britten-Pears Library, 1998), p. 23.

intentional expansion of art song on the part of this young composer in response to continental European developments in Lieder composition.

Britten's artistic identification with Auden's observations and reflections upon a rapidly decaying social and political reality in a changed musical environment is seen in the composer's 1939 setting of Auden's 'Dance Macabre', together with texts by Randall Swinger (also of leftist political outlook), in another Britten work *Ballad of Heroes* op.14 for tenor or soprano solo, chorus and orchestra. The first verse of this fifteen-verse Auden text states:

It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilized cry,
The professor's sensible whereto and why,
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb,
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.⁹³

The juxtaposition of these incongruous images seems startling but they show clearly the highly politicised content of much of Auden's poetry in the mid-1930s, which retrospectively now serves as a contemporary social document of its time. In this setting, as in 'As It Is, Plenty' and in other works, Britten gives musical expression to socially and politically charged literature.

From the outset, in this song, Britten provides clear musical signifiers of the presence of a modern idiom. The piano introduction, though sparse in texture, is ironically rich in its presentation of the musical fingerprints of Blues inflections which is characteristic of a stride piano style. Firstly the repeated 'oompah crotchets of ragtime'⁹⁴ rhythms are presented which are largely maintained for the duration of the song, and secondly the consecutive added-note chords sound an added #9th note followed by the added b9th note, 'E#' and 'Eb' in the context of 'D', the second of

⁹³ Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets*, pp. 67–69.

⁹⁴ Alyn Shipton, *A History of Jazz* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 172.

which creates a diminished chord with an added E# above (see Ex. 4.15a, bars 2–3); instead of the Eb Britten could have written a D# as a 6th, which is how it sounds. These musical features are characteristic of the rhythms and dissonance which Evans identifies as music hall. Shipton identifies another key feature which links piano stride style and ragtime as follows:

the “broken” or “backward tenth”, in which the left hand strikes intervals of a tenth at *slightly different times*, so that the little finger carries a strong bass line, the thumb (playing the upper note) sets up a counter-melody to the main tune...In addition to creating an unusually full sound this also adds to the sense of motion in the piece.⁹⁵

This musical figure is used by Britten as a distinguishing feature in the third verse of this song. Britten’s score directs that the interval of a tenth, ‘f#’ (the third of the chord) over the ‘D’ major chord, be played in the left hand as a spread chord (bars 30–35), whereby the spread-chord effect achieves the aural delay characteristic of a ‘backward tenth’. The chord is always a complete D major by the time we reach the 3rd and 4th beats (bar 31). Britten’s identification and incorporation of these core elements of an evolving style of jazz provides additional evidence of his broad stylistic eclecticism and his artistic willingness to cross the musical boundaries of classical and popular styles in pursuit of an effective musical response to his chosen challenging text.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Example 4.15a: 'As It Is, Plenty', *On This Island* no.5, bars 2–3

pp *leggiero*

As it is, plen - ty;
C'est bien a - bon - dance;

Example 4.15b: 'As It Is, Plenty', *On This Island* no.5, bars 5–8

The chil-dren hap - py And the car, the car That goes so far... And the wife de - vo - ted:
Les en - fants qui dansent Et le car qui va Si loin, la bas, — Et l'é pou - se fi - déle:

pp

The brevity and satirical mood of Auden's text is musically responded to in Britten's equally brief melodic motif (see Ex. 4.15a, bars 2–3); the rhythm of this syncopated alternating dotted quaver and semiquaver figure dominates the song's vocal line and at times also transfers into the piano accompaniment. This initial five-note phrase, which is present in the melodic line of each verse of the song, mirrors the metric syllabic count of Auden's concise first line of text is also the title of the song. This motif is at times musically extended but never substantially developed, as seen in the third vocal phrase of the first verse, when the final descending stepwise interval is simply repeated before this two-note descending motion is itself replicated, until the melody

reaches the octave below the phrase's climax 'e²' (see Ex. 4.15b, bars 5–8). This expansion of the ending of the song's core motif does not, of itself, constitute a motivic development. The rhythmic rigidity associated with these melodic phrases creates a musical predictability which reflects upon the smug banal tone of the poem. The inflexibility of this word rhythm pattern and the dominance of its primary melodic shape affect the composer's ability to colour particular words by conventional methods. However, review of Britten's rhythmic treatment of line-end rhyming, which has musical and hermeneutic significance, reveals Britten in full control of his setting of this text. He sets the majority of the final two syllables of each line of text as trochaic stresses in which the rhythmic element of his motif, dotted-quaver followed by a semiquaver, is a direct musical equivalence of the actual text's stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as seen for example in '*ple-nty*' (bar 3), '*ha-ppy*' (bar 6), and '*fu-ture*' (bar 21).⁹⁶ However, Britten does not apply this formula inflexibly in his setting; a review of the stressed rhythm of terminal words in each line of the poem reveals that the composer also identifies the presence, in this text, of the less common two-syllable iambic words and he rhythmically underscores their inverted order of unstressed syllable followed by stressed syllable. Britten's acute attention to this matter of textual detail shows this young composer's textual sensitivity, and his respect for spoken-word rhythms is heard in his inversion of his firmly established trochaic rhythmic order, to set '*e-nough*' in a semiquaver followed by a dotted-quaver (bar 19) or iambic rhythm. Malin also notes the role of occasional substitution of a predominantly trochaic pattern with an occasional iambic foot, but he considers its effect at the beginning of a phrase rather than at the end (see Table 2.5). In spite of the role which rhythmic control plays in Auden's text, this example shows Britten the

⁹⁶ Italicised text identifies stressed syllables, represented musically as dotted-quaver notes.

independent competent wordsmith at work. The composer was not prepared, in this case, to subvert the sound of the pronunciation of the word ‘enough’ to comply with his own strongly established rhythmic scheme. Interestingly, the text ‘enough’ does not have as strong cross-rhyming effect with ‘through’ as presented in other surrounding line-end rhyming, as these words provide cursory eye-rhyming value only; perhaps Britten considered this as a poetic justification for his text-setting treatment.

Repetition in this song is used as a means of reflecting upon the superficiality of the text and the poem’s line-ending cross-rhyming scheme: whereby Britten, due to the repeated use of a fixed melodic phrase, set almost all line-ending words as a descending stepwise tone interval. The uniformity of this terminal melodic shape attracts particular attention to these rhyming words which are further accentuated by the unconventional use of clipped phrase endings, semiquaver following a dotted-quaver; whereby the voice is denied the possibility to resonantly linger on vocal phrase endings. These idiomatic trochaic rhythmic stresses (long—short) in line-ending patterns are linked by Britten to the words of his source (see Ex. 4.15a, bars 2–3). Rhyming in phrases which are punctuated by rests is therefore particularly audible. Britten is able, even within this strict musical frame, to control the relative impact of the poem’s rhyming schemes through his musical phrasing even where a number of lines of text are phrased continuously. In effect rhyming in the first verse, ‘admitted’ (line 2)/’devoted’ (line 6, consolidation lines 3+4+5), and the final verse’s ‘larger’ (line 6)/’major’ (line 9, consolidation lines 7+8) is further accented by the continuous phrasing of intermediary lines of text (see Table 4.12 for line phrasing). We may now consider that Britten’s musical consolidation of lines of poetic text into vocal phrases aligns directly with the textual rhyming of his source.

Auden's practice of using exact and varied poetic repetitions in the text of 'As It Is, Plenty' was also identified by the composer. Britten responded to this poetic device with his own musical equivalence: he places the final descending interval of a tone from his basic melodic motif (see Ex. 4.15a) as the final interval of the vast majority of phrase endings, with some exceptions, (for example in the opening verse, all of the following comply: 'plen-ty' (bar 3), 'ad-mit-ted' (bar 4), 'hap-py' (bar 6), 'far' (bar 7), 'is' (bar 9), 'banks' (bar 10), 'thin-ning' (bar 11), and 'hauteur' (bar 11)). Britten's breaking of this repetitive sequence for the ending of this verse is conspicuous. He chooses not to set the poet's repeated words 'give thanks, give thanks' mimetically as one might expect, given the musically-repeated element of the vocal motif, but rather he inverts the intervallic descent of a tone with an ascending tone. Britten further subverts his established musical ending of phrases in his setting of the first pair of 'give thanks' which is set with an ascending perfect fifth (bars 11–12). He also uses a repeated descending tone in his established rhythm (a dotted-quaver followed by a semiquaver) in the two final melismas with which he ends the song. The seven 'c#²–'b¹' bald vocal repetitions of 'major' from the text 'The loss is major' musically strike at the core of Auden's satirical and mocking poetic tone. So too, Britten's musical decision to repeat four times further the already repeated poetic ending text 'Final, final' which also expresses musically the irony of his text—his driving home of the final word 'final'. Here again, this extended melisma is composed around the descending tone but this time Britten allows limited variation in his *forte* octave displacement and subsequent sequential treatment of the descending melodic tone (bars 43–49).

The final section of this song requires specific consideration as a lightly-handled musical treatment of an ironic setting of a text, which contains a serious subject matter. Subsequent to his dynamically resounding, yet hollow unison melismatic treatment of

the word ‘final’, Britten bravely inserts a three-beat rest before presenting a *pianissimo* conventional perfect V7–I cadence in D major, which is itself punctuated by rests. The final dialogue between the voice and piano’s *forte/pianissimo/fortzando* dynamic creates a musical joke, which shows Britten in firm control of his representation of the final ironic word ‘final’ in an almost onomatopoeic gesture. The timing, dynamic change and ironic word repetition of this song’s ending contribute to what Johnson remarks on as ‘something which often raises a laugh in performance’⁹⁷—albeit cynically humorous; in this way Britten has musically engaged his audience fully in an appreciation of the ironic intent of Auden’s poem.

Consideration of the poetic form of Britten’s source as an *ABA* poetic structure has been referred to and is based upon the following: firstly, that movement from the present to the past and a subsequent return to ‘as it is’ arises sequentially in these three stanzas, and secondly, that the shift of focus from the individual level of the first stanza to a higher philosophical level in the second and final return to the personal sphere in the last stanza. Britten’s ternary form song replicates this poetic structure in his musical form. The predominance of a D major tonality and D major tonic chords in the piano left hand in the opening and closing verses contrasts with material in the central verse, in which the harmony outlines G major, Eb major, and finally E major (with a C-natural superimposed on it, underscoring ‘betraying’ in the text), thereby reinforces the ternary form of this song. Britten also underscored the song’s form by exclusive use, in the central verse, of the rhythmic element of the melodic motif in the piano accompaniment. Here, the role of the piano changes from a chordal accompaniment to a regular melodic commentary on the preceding vocal delivery of text; see lines four (bar 19), six (bar 22), and eight (bar 24). Interestingly, given the general prominence of the line-end rhyming

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 155.

scheme, these particular line endings do not rhyme. With this change Britten chooses to highlight musically the following texts: ‘but love’ (bar 19), ‘intransigent nature’ (bar 22), and ‘betraying but a smile’ (bar 24), thereby revealing his musical summation of important words in the text—that love does not conquer the effects of obstinate human falsity. In each case this altered form of dialogue between voice and piano also serves to connect vocal phrases. The initial leap of a major ninth in these three-note cells masks their simple structure of a note followed by an ascending tone, removed in register by an octave, followed by a descending tone, which again incorporates the pattern of the vocal line-ending motivic descent of a tone (see Ex. 4.16, bars /22–23). Britten, in opposition to the identification of simple ternary form in this song, develops the structure of the piano accompaniment throughout as follows: closed-position dissonant clusters are heard in the first verse, which expand into open-position dissonant clusters in the second verse, and dissonance is open-position and displaced, as spread chords, in the final verse.

Example 4.16: ‘As It Is, Plenty’, *On This Island* no.5, bars /22–23

The musical score for Example 4.16 consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line has lyrics in English and French. The piano accompaniment features dissonant clusters and dynamic markings like 'poco animando' and 'p'. The score is divided into three measures corresponding to the lyrics.

Vocal line lyrics:
 Of an in - tran - si - gent na - ture And the be - tray - ing smile, Be -
 D'un monde en proie au dé - sar - roi Et dans les faux sou - rires Reste

Piano accompaniment markings:
poco animando (above the staff)
f (D#) (above the staff)
p (below the staff)
poco animando (below the staff)

Britten’s success in aptly setting Auden’s demanding lyrics in ‘As It Is, Plenty’ has assisted in the initial and subsequent reception of this song. Among musicologists there is near unanimous agreement that this is the weakest song of the cycle: Evans

considers that it ‘may appear a disappointment’,⁹⁸ Kennedy holds that it ‘has not worn well’,⁹⁹ Whittall regards it to have been ‘one of the miscalculations of immaturity’,¹⁰⁰ and Johnson posits ‘that it does not seem to fit in with the rest of the cycle’.¹⁰¹ Even comments by Pears, who became the prime interpreter of this cycle, are not wholly positive in relation to this closing song, as evidenced in his unconvincing statement that it ‘rounds off the volume amusingly enough’. Humour is not however a feature of the preceding songs; humour and the provision of literary contrast are not of themselves sufficient to validate the significance of a song, particularly a final song.¹⁰² To some extent Mitchell attempts to address and respond to these widespread criticisms in his consideration of this song as a ‘skilfully evolved’ setting of a topical text which ‘escapes [the] triviality’ of the ‘false values’ which the text identifies.¹⁰³ In his introductory contextualization of *On This Island* Mitchell remarks insightfully that Britten’s ‘nervousness in the presence of [Auden’s] hyper-articulateness made it difficult for him to distinguish between the brilliant but profound insight and the clever but superficial comment’.¹⁰⁴ Though not specifically stated, one feels that Mitchell may have formed this opinion particularly from his analysis of ‘As It Is, Plenty’. However, nowhere in extant research has significant consideration been given to the textual interconnections which exist between this song and the preceding four songs, nor indeed has an appraisal been undertaken into the role of this song as the final song or closing song of this song cycle.

⁹⁸ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 75.

⁹⁹ Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁰ Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques*, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 154.

¹⁰² Peter Pears, ‘The Vocal Music’, in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists*, ed. by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), p. 64.

¹⁰³ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

Table 4.12 Britten's song: 'As It Is, Plenty', *On This Island* no.5

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	2 bars			
V.1/L1	1		5-note P5 vocal motif	
L2	1		above repeated	
L3-6	3		5-note P5 vocal motif end extended	
L7	1			
L8-10	3		5-note P5 vocal motif start extended	
L11	1			
Interlude	4		pf unison in vocal rhythm	
V.2/L1	1		5-note P5 vocal motif	
L2	1		above repeated	
L3	1			
L4	1			
L5	1		5-note P5 vocal motif start extended	
L6	1		5-note P5 vocal motif end extended	
L7-8	2			
L9	1			poem 'then that' is 'that that' in score ¹⁰⁵
L10	4	long note on 2 nd syllable of <i>forget</i>		1 additional repeat of 'forget'
Interlude	1		Spread chords in pf bass	
V.3/L1	1		5-note P5 vocal motif end extended	
L2	1	'days' 2-note tone ↓ repeat	5-note P5 vocal motif end extended	
L3	1		5-note P5 vocal motif start extended	
L4	2	'bless' 2-note tone ↓ repeat		
L5	1			
L6	1			
L7-L9	4	'major' 2-note tone ↓ melisma	5-note P5 vocal motif start extended	
	1		pf contrary motion	
L10	7	Extended range of melisma on 'final'	pf in octave unison with voice	4 additional repeats of 'final'

¹⁰⁵ The text in Britten's composition sketch is 'That that is not, is not', while Auden writes 'then that'. Britten, 'As It Is, Plenty', *On This Island*, MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, p. 68.

4.4.1 BRITTEN'S *On This Island*: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ITS CLASSIFICATION

Whether *On This Island* should be considered to be either a song collection or a song cycle is the focus of the current phase of this research.¹⁰⁶ Awareness of the political environment of the mid-1930s as pertained in Britain and Europe, and a consideration of its direct impacts upon Auden, his poetic style during this period, and of the broad artistic influence which Auden exerted upon Britten in their artistic collaborations (as set out in Chapter 3), leads me to be predisposed as to the probability of the achievement of a politically-informed literary song cycle. Such subjective conjecture, of itself, is of limited value to either our reception or classification of Britten's *On This Island*, or to the advancement of knowledge of his evolving text-setting practices. The argument proposed here does not claim to provide conclusive irrefutable proof of the presence of a song cycle but it re-opens a debate, invites a discourse, and presents evidence of significant primarily musico-literary connectives.

The reference to *On This Island* in a contemporary review of the first performance of this work, as a 'set of songs to poems by W. H. Auden',¹⁰⁷ was not surprising given Britten's title for the work as, 'Volume One' of poems by Auden.¹⁰⁸ This review contextualised the 1937 work in terms of the preceding Britten/Auden collaboration in *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8 in the previous year; Britten had assigned the title of 'symphonic cycle – for soprano voice and orchestra' to that earlier work. Of more recent musicological comment, Johnson's passing references to *On This Island* as a 'cycle' appear to have been made without classificatory justification, perhaps because

¹⁰⁶ For the purposes of clarity and economy of expression the individual songs in Britten's *On This Island* will be referred to, for the most part of the remainder of this chapter, as follows: 'Let the Florid Music Praise' as song no. 1, 'Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast' as song no. 2, 'Seascape' as song no. 3, 'Nocturne' as song no. 4, and 'As It Is, Plenty' as song no. 5.

¹⁰⁷ 'London Concerts – BBC Contemporary Concerts', *Musical Times*, 78/1138 (December 1937), 1067–68.

¹⁰⁸ *On This Island* was first performed 19 November 1937 at BBC Broadcast House Concert Hall, London (BBC Concert of Contemporary Music) Sophie Wyss (S), Britten (pf). Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 39.

that author considers this to be a musical fact and therefore not requiring extended justification.¹⁰⁹ Whittall contends, however, that ‘*On This Island* does not employ thematic cross-references between songs, nor, apparently, is there any overall tonal scheme’ but he accepts that the shared tonality of the first and final songs ‘provides a frame within which there is freedom of movement, rather than a sequence of fixed, logically related centres’;¹¹⁰ this research seeks to contribute to a more complete view of the tonal framework presented in the song cycle. Likewise, Banfield clearly identifies the existence of literary connections within these five songs when he states ‘Britten may have felt uneasy about their [these five song’s] loose interrelationship, for they stand or fall as an anthology of moods, stylistic essays, and poetic structures and versifications’.¹¹¹ Woodward identifies that these songs do not present a continuous narrative ‘but instead offer contrasts of mood and, indeed, technique’, while specifically identifying the musical influences of these songs as: Purcell in the opening song, Debussy in the central song, Fauré¹¹² in the penultimate song and Walton¹¹³ in the closing song.¹¹⁴ Only Kennedy states categorically that these songs are ‘often wrongly called a song-cycle, implying a formal unity they do not possess’;¹¹⁵ this current research seeks to update this now-dated absolutist statement. Finally, Evans uses the collective designation of cycle throughout his critique of this work as a generic term,

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 154.

¹¹⁰ Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques*, p. 44.

¹¹¹ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 385.

¹¹² It is possible that Woodward is referring to the use by Britten of opening repeated harmonic tonic chords in ‘Seascape’ which is also a stylistic feature of the following songs by Gabriel Fauré: ‘Au Cimetière’ op.51 no.2, ‘Green’ op.58 no.3, ‘Le Parfum Impérissable’ op.76 no.1, ‘Prison’ op.83 no.1, in *Album of Twenty Songs (Vingt Melodies)*, (New York: Belwin Mills, 1973).

¹¹³ Woodward may be referring to jazz idioms of William Walton’s song ‘Old Sir Faulk’ as a stylistic model for Britten’s ‘As It Is, Plenty’. William Walton, ‘Old Sir Faulk’, in *Three Songs, Songs with Piano* (Edith Sitwell) (London: Oxford University Press, c1932).

¹¹⁴ Woodward, ‘Music for Voices’, p. 262.

¹¹⁵ Kennedy, *Britten*, p. 133.

but he does not specifically address his justifications for this usage.¹¹⁶ The variety of these significant and considered musicological views presented here shares and expresses some level of doubt as to the propriety of considering *On This Island* to be a song cycle; this current research seeks to engage with, contribute to and thereby re-ignite this debate.

4.4.2 BERNHART'S APPROACH TO SONG-CYCLE CLASSIFICATION

Apart from Johnson, none of the preceding musicological commentaries referred to above deals exclusively with Britten's art songs, rather they form part of larger-scale discussions of his total music oeuvre. Walter Bernhart's 2001 monograph is unique in that it is devoted exclusively to the identification and classification of Britten's song cycles.¹¹⁷ Bernhart credits the research of Cyrus Hamlin in respect of the latter author's definitions on the classification of song cycles.¹¹⁸ In summary Bernhart considers Britten's art-song collections (totalling seventeen) to be either posthumous editorial collections (two) or song cycles (fifteen), which he lists chronologically in an unclassified appendix (see Table 4.13 for a chronological tabulation of these works which is based on Bernhart's categorisations). This latter category of song cycle is further subdivided into three sub-categories, designated by the author as 'loose song cycle' (see Table 4.13, Category B1), 'literary song cycle' (see Table 4.13, Category B2), and 'musical song cycle' (see Table 4.13, Category B3),¹¹⁹ thereby recognising that a song cycle may be loosely-, literary-, or musically-based. The primary determinants of

¹¹⁶ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, pp. 73–75.

¹¹⁷ Walter Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles: The Variety of Britten's "Charms"', in *Word and Music Studies 3*, ed. by Walter Bernhart and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 211–26. Hereafter referred to as Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles: The Variety of Britten's "Charms"'.¹¹⁸ Cyrus Hamlin, 'The Romantic Song Cycle as Literary Genre', in *Word and Music Studies 1*, ed. by Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 113–34.

¹¹⁹ Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles: The Variety of Britten's "Charms"', pp. 214–21.

Bernhart's classifications are the form and the strength of the literary and musical cohesion of the work. Musically coherent factors are defined as the recurrence of basic musical motifs or other musical links between songs including tonal connectives. Literary cohesive elements require the presence of some or all of the following: a continuous theme rather than merely a common subject matter, a specific 'mental disposition' or 'lyric attitude' on behalf of the poet or poetic source, a cyclic connective element, or a 'storyline' narrative or physiological journey.¹²⁰ A literary-based song cycle does not preclude the presence of musical cohesive devices, but these features remain secondary in this particular classification.

A major weakness in Bernhart's otherwise useful contribution to this debate is the indeterminate nature of his final 'catch all' category of 'loose song cycle': song cycles which do not have strong literary or musical cohesion fall into this residual category, and therefore he does not take account of, or distinguish, the existence of a song collection whose only claim to the status of song cycle is perhaps a single poetic source in a single poet. Thereby, this oversight by Bernhart diminishes the otherwise usefulness of the classifications he identifies. It is into this latter category of 'loose' song cycle that Bernhart incorrectly places Britten's *On This Island*. This author agrees with Bernhart, insofar as the presentation of contrasting and alternating tempi fast/slow/fast/slow/fast of these songs is insufficient, of itself, to fulfil the requirements of formal musical unity. So too, neither the composer's accentuated repetition of 'final' as the last word of the closing song, nor the presence of 'a typical Audenesque diction' in these poems, is cumulatively sufficient for literary cohesion. However, I argue that within the terms, as defined by Bernhart, and after musical and textual exploration of Britten's *On This Island*, that it should be considered as a literary-based song cycle. My research shows

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 216–19.

that this musical work qualifies, to an extent, on each of the qualifying criteria. The acceptance of the cumulative presence of these cohesive elements warrants renewed interest in these songs and supports a claim for their reclassification as a literary coherent song cycle. This research is presented in the context of Bernhart's own critique, and uses his threefold consideration of form, text and poetic meaning to oppose that author's classificatory conclusions. These same three aspects serve to identify poetic and musical features in the preceding exploration of individual songs, and in this current context again provide a useful framework to approach this body of work as an artistic whole.

4.4.3 POETIC FORM IN MUSICAL UNITY

Britten at all times adheres to the over-arching poetic forms and versification of his source. For example, the binary form of the first song and the ternary forms of the central and final songs have been shown to reflect directly upon the poetic forms of his source. Britten shows his compositional sensitivity to the requirements of the performer and allows the singer time to breathe between phrases in his frequent writing of rests between vocal phrases. Decisions such as the consolidation of subsequent lines of text into one musical phrase, as in the second verse of 'Seascape', reveal Britten's specific musical solution to the difficulties of setting the two poetic enjambments in this verse. Britten's responsiveness to the metric count and stress of the lines of Auden's poetry has been shown to affect the structure of the song; this is particularly the case in this central song in which the sound of the text in the epigrammatic 'the swaying sound of the sea', has been revealed as suggestive of the rhythmic element of the song's basic motif. Related to this aspect, Britten shows his acute awareness of the metrical count of Auden's poems in his correction of the near-perfect heptameter of 'Now through

Night's Caressing Grip' as shown in Table 4.8. These examples show Britten's consistent musical response to the 'lyric attitude',¹²¹ as defined by Bernhart, which is presented in Auden's verse. Although identification of these musical equivalents of poetic source reveal much about the composer's literary acumen and show that many of Britten's text-setting practices have developed in response to his deep absorption of his poetic texts, they do not of themselves unify these disparate poems into a song cycle.

4.4.4 THE CONTRIBUTION OF TEXTUAL ASSOCIATION IN THE CREATION OF MUSICAL UNITY

Conspicuous textual connectives run throughout the songs of *On This Island* which contribute significantly to Britten's creation of a common literary theme for this work. These initially discrete literary references take on a unifying role for the listener whether an audience is consciously or subconsciously aware of the presence of these exact or varied word repetitions. It is Britten, not the poet, who is responsible for the unifying effects of this shared vocabulary, as it is the composer who, in this cycle, has selected and ordered the language of the music's final framework. Of particular prominence are the song's opening lines which unify the songs through their forthright consistent call for immediate attention as follows: no.1, 'Let the florid music praise'; no.2, 'Now the leaves...'; no.3, 'Look, stranger at this island now'; no.4, 'Now through night's...'; and no.5, 'As it is, plenty'. These opening texts repeatedly drive home a consistent message. The central importance of a poem's opening word, line or couplet, to present the subject matter and create the sound world in Auden's poetry, should not be underestimated. Peter Porter's observation has been presented as to the literary Audenesque characteristic practice of achieving an elevated level of authority, by his

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

use of a memorable ‘attention-grabbing’ text in the opening line of the poem.¹²² In the third song we see Britten’s musical response to this poetic device as he creates musical motifs based on the initial line of text, in which a ‘sea motif’ combines the piano’s alternating semiquaver ‘wave motif’ in the treble and the rhythmic syncopation of a ‘tide motif’ in the piano bass part (see Ex. 4.6a). The inspirational significance of an initial text is not exclusive to Britten at times Arnold Schoenberg engages with his text as catalyst only,¹²³ and argues that the initial impact of the opening words of a poem may provide sufficient inspiration for his song composition.¹²⁴

In addition to the relative strength of these opening lines is the inclusion of text which also serves to locate the poetic subject matter within time. Each of the three central songs includes the word ‘now’ in the first line of the text. These intentionally conspicuous references bring textual cohesion to the song cycle; they also contribute in commanding the listeners’ attention, and put them on notice of a situation which is of imminent contemporary importance. Interestingly, equally the word ‘now’ has a timeless denoted meaning, affording the songs more than a mere topical contemporary importance; thereby providing evidence of poet and composer’s cognisance of the relative issues discussed by Hayden White (see 2.3.4), as to the ‘aestheticizing’ requirement of an artwork to ‘transcend the social conditions’, and a ‘politicizing’ imperative to reflect upon context ‘of specific social groups and classes at specific moments of historic conjecture’.¹²⁵ The first and last songs may also be considered to have an implied ‘now’ in their first lines, as if Britten were saying ‘let the florid music

¹²² Porter, ‘Auden’s English: Language and Style’, pp. 130–31.

¹²³ Paul Driver, ‘Preface’, *Contemporary Music Review: Music and Text*, V (1989), iv. Cites Arnold Schoenberg, Stein, ed., ‘The Relationship to the Text (1912)’, in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, pp. 141–45.

¹²⁴ Dunsby’s view on the validity of this idea expressed by Schoenberg has been considered in Chapter Two (see 2.3.4). Dunsby, *Making Words Sing*, pp. 62–63.

¹²⁵ White, ‘Form, Reference, and Ideology in Musical Discourse’, p. 290.

praise [now!]’ in the opening song and the present tense allusion of ‘as it is,...[now!]’ in the final song. Variations in the use of this latter text in the first verse of the final song ‘as it’s’ have been identified as embodying an increasing focus of attention on contemporary political and social affairs. In song no.4 the text ‘now’ introduces both the first and second verses of Britten’s song. It is not alone the use of this time-locating word ‘now’ which creates such a textually-unifying effect but rather the persistence of text which reinforces the present tense of the context of these songs—further evidence of a continuous literary theme in Britten’s selected texts (Tables 4.2, 4.4, 4.6, 4.8, and 4.11 show the incidences of indicators of present and past tense). Heretofore, these aspects have been overlooked in extant analysis of this collective work.

Insofar as these songs are specific in relation to their placement in time, so too they are also specific as to their location, albeit geographical or historic. Here again, the framing first and last songs are differentiated from the internal songs (this distinction between the opening and closing songs and the remaining three inner songs will be shown to have tonal implications). The second song is situated in a winter wooded scene which proposes a continuous metaphoric representation for a changing society. The third song presents an ever-changing perspective of England viewed from the sea. While the fourth song is ostensibly located in the psychological land of sleep and dream its opening verse is concerned with shifting geographical imagery (‘Earth and all her oceans slip/Capes of China fade away’) confirms a complimentary political subtext. Deane has identified the importance of the poetic ideas and images of liminality in Auden’s poetry from the 1930s in relation to social and geographic boundaries; Britten, through his exercise of poetic discernment, shows that he clearly identifies with this

consistent poetic attitude.¹²⁶ The opening and closing songs differ from the central three songs as they represent a time shift from a consideration of a past society in the opening song to the modern social environment of the final song, but always within the context of a political commentary on life styles.

Closely related to the ideas of physical and geographical boundaries, these songs also engage consistently with more personal emotions of isolation and being alone. The first song includes those 'secretive children'; the next song 'whispering neighbours' and 'nightingale is dumb/ And the angel will not come'; the central song uses images of an island and the lone gull as metaphors for political isolation; the penultimate song 'ragged vagrants creep'; and the final song engages with the social isolation of a capitalist market economy. Edward Mendelson has identified Auden's frequent use of the image of an island as a metaphor for isolation in the 1930s.¹²⁷ One wonders if Britten intended a textual and musical linkage in the three central songs, between the 'Travellers' (quaver ascent C to Db, bar 31) of the final line of the second song 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast', the 'stranger' (quaver descent D to C, bar 2) of the first line of 'Seascape' and the 'ragged vagrants' (bar 21) of the fourth song 'Nocturne'. The prominence of these recurring images of transitory social estrangement contributes to Britten's setting of a consistent 'specific mental disposition' as defined by Bernhart.¹²⁸

Similarly, the unifying effect of these textual connectives also contributes to the ascertainment of depth of meaning contained in the song cycle. A particularly sharp political discourse is presented in Auden's poetry and subsequently musically revealed by Britten in his chronological ordering of these five songs. Britten moves forward in time from times past to recent times and finally to the present day. The opening song

¹²⁶ Deane, 'Auden's England', p. 25.

¹²⁷ Mendelson, *Early Auden*, pp. 333–35.

¹²⁸ Bernhart, 'Three Types of Song Cycles: The Variety of Britten's "Charms"', p. 217.

may be considered to reflect, in the first verse, upon a time in which imperialist power was absolute; this is followed in verse two by an increasing awareness of the power of the individual in society, thereby encapsulating the scope of the entire cycle within the first song. While the next song, by contrast, provides a bleak view of a chaotic political Europe and of international relations, song no.3 may be considered a direct plea ('Look, Stranger...') to stand firm, take political action and not to be swayed by emotionally-charged images of past nationalistic nostalgia (such as the implied false security of tall cliffs) and the fourth song departs the physical world for the world of sleep, or more particularly the world of nightmare, while the closing song returns to reality and engages satirically with a modernist society in which all values and social mores are questioned and found to be false and vacuous. The final realisation of the extent of social and political decline, as presented in the five songs, is reserved for the final song. However, Britten's use of a popular stylistic idiom in this closing song reflects a musical equivalence of the cynicism and sarcasm of Auden's verse. The view expressed by many musicologists that this final song fits badly with the preceding four songs has been acknowledged. This current critique of *On This Island* suggests that the work transcends the topicality of the surface-level subject matter of these poems through an informed interpretation and reading of the deeper-level themes of these texts.

The composer's lack of any specific written reference to the political nature of *On This Island* should not be taken as justification for ignoring both surface level and deeply-embedded references, as Britten's practice of not referring specifically to a musical work's political content and message was already established in his own programme note for the premiere of *Our Hunting Fathers*;¹²⁹ a work for which there is

¹²⁹ Mitchell, and Reed, eds, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, pp. 444-45.

widespread acceptance of a continuous political and social message. An understanding of the intellectual respect with which Britten held Auden provides further artistic evidence for why Britten might reserve his views on the contemporary subject matter of the text for his music.

4.4.5 A UNIFYING TONAL SCHEME: *On This Island* RECONSIDERED

An essential element of musical cyclicality in song-cycle classification is the notion of a return or a completed journey, albeit stylistic, rhythmic, melodic, motivic, or tonal. The presence of a literary completed time journey in *On This Island* has been evidenced consistently in this research, as expressed in a progression from past to present, both in Auden's text and in Britten's stylistic musical idioms of his opening and closing songs. On a number of occasions distinctions have been drawn, based on musical and literary content, between these framing first and last songs and the central group of three songs. As we have seen, musicologists including Whittall (see 4.4.1) identify the structural unifying capacity of the predominance of D major tonality in the opening and closing songs, but rightly this, in itself, is insufficient to constitute musical cyclicality. Though tonally linked these songs in effect span three centuries stylistically—from neo-baroque to twentieth-century popular idiom—a brave move on the part of a twenty-three-year-old emerging composer. Therefore, the central three songs remain to be understood within a complete tonal scheme, as they are not conventionally interlinked. The view proposed here is that the second, central, and penultimate songs of this work are intellectually tonally linked.

Firstly, within this central group of songs the second and fourth songs are both aeolian modal in nature. An F aeolian mode is confirmed in song no.2 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast' by a consistent presence of 'Eb' rather than an 'E-natural' leading note

to a possible F minor tonality. This is seen in bars 2–7 in which the bass confirms F in dominant-to-tonic rhythmically displaced quavers, while ‘Bb’ confirms F as an aeolian modal (see Ex. 4.5a). Likewise, song no.4 ‘Nocturne’ is also modal, as C# aeolian is confirmed by the presence of ‘B’, rather than a ‘B#’ designation of a possible C# minor tonality (see Ex. 4.12). The subject matter of these two songs is also uniquely linked in this cycle, as both deal with differing aspects of physical darkness as symbolic representations of political unrest, expressed as a hopeless barren winter forest in the second song (F aeolian) and an uneasy sleeping night scene in ‘Nocturne’. Therefore, these songs may now be considered to be tonally as well as textually linked, and provide an internal aeolian modal framing symmetry within the context of the external framing D major songs. As such, they may represent an expression of Britten’s display of musical intellectuality for an aficionado audience and be considered as his response to Auden’s literary intellect (discussed in the preceding chapter). Secondly, the central song remains surrounded, almost palindromically by tonally related songs. Tonally centred around C major song no.3 ‘Seascape’ depicts political isolation as an island surrounded by sea. That this central song is tonally isolated from the other songs now seems appropriate from an intellectual standpoint rather than having exclusive aural significance.

4.5 *On This Island*: A SONG CYCLE

The absence of a recurrent musical motif throughout these songs, when compared with Evans’ identification of motivic-thematic cross referencing in the symphonic song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers*,¹³⁰ explains, in part, why *On This Island* is not considered by Bernhart, and others, to be a musically-based song cycle. Britten may have considered

¹³⁰ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 69.

that larger-scale symphonic motivic presentation and development were not appropriate for these relative miniatures as his first venture into English song. Rather, Britten uses musical motifs as the structural framework within an individual song as seen in the inventive composite 'sea' motif of the central song and the opening vocal motif of the closing song; in each case, these musical motifs are a response to a literary source. Also in relation to textual rhythm, Britten applies a development of his practice of setting each syllable to two semiquavers in the second song, to his incorporation of this technique in setting the strong beats of the descending characteristic phrases of the penultimate song. This 'binary' approach to text setting is also applied to the alternation of the rhythmic pattern semiquaver and dotted-quaver in the final song. However, the quasi-motivic rhythmic features in these three songs together with the propriety of the initial vocal crotchet movement of the opening declamatory song and the conventional melodic style of vocal writing in the central 'Seascape' song, are likely to account for Banfield's accrediting the songs as 'stylistic essays'¹³¹ and for Woodward's view that they offer 'contrasts of mood and technique'.¹³²

In addition to the tonal cyclicity and framework proposed above, Britten's claim for literary cohesion in *On This Island* has been offered. Indeed, the opening phrase of the first song '*Let the florid music praise*' is cyclically responded to in the first line of the final verse of the closing song which declares falsely '*Let him not cease to praise*'. The significance of the transition from the contrasting neo-baroque style of the opening song to the cabaret/jazz style of the closing song is mediated only by a common text. These framing songs also share the presence of epigrammatic final couplets both of

¹³¹ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, p. 385.

¹³² Woodward, 'Music for Voices', p. 262.

which express hollow ultimate realisation, but achieved by very different musical means.

Britten's musical achievement in *On This Island* is that he brings together five self-contained poems by Auden into an artistic unit in which an enhanced interpretation is possible of these heretofore separate poems. This current research seeks, within the terms of Bernhart's own critique, to reclassify *On This Island* as a literary-based song cycle in terms of form, text and meaning, which are founded on the unifying effects of a shared lyrical and political vocabulary, in which lexical links and musico-literary connectives express the political analogy and social role of this work.

Table 4.13 Tabulation of Walter Bernhart's classifications of Britten's song collections and song cycles

Category A: Editorial Collections¹³³

Ref. No.	Year of Composition	Work title	Year of Publication¹³⁴
1	1928–31	<i>Tit for Tat</i> , for Voice and Piano [five settings from boyhood of poems by Walter de la Mare].	1969
2	1937–39	<i>Cabaret Songs</i> , for Voice and Piano [words by W. H. Auden].	1980

Category B1: Loose Song Cycles

Ref. No.	Year of Composition	Work title	Year of Publication
1	1937	<i>On This Island</i> op.11, for High Voice and Piano [words by W. H. Auden].	1938
2	1947	<i>A Charm of Lullabies</i> op.41, for Mezzo-soprano and Piano [five poems by various poets].	1994
3	1957	<i>Songs from the Chinese</i> op.58, for High Voice and Guitar [six poems by various poets, Eng. trans. by A. Waley].	1959
4	1969	<i>Who Are These Children?</i> op.84, for Tenor and Piano [lyrics, rhymes and riddles by William Soutar].	1972
5	1975	<i>A Birthday Hansel</i> op.92, for High Voice and Harp [poems by Robert Burns].	1978

¹³³ The categorisations used here represent a tabulation of Bernhart's non-classified chronological listing. Bernhart, "Three Types of Song Cycles. The Variety of Britten's "Charms", pp. 211–26 (223–24). Notably the posthumous publication of Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings W. H. Auden, for High Voice and Piano* is absent from Bernhart's listing of Britten's song collections and song cycles.

¹³⁴ Publication dates have been sourced in Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*.

Table 4.13 continued

Category B2: Literary Song Cycles

Ref. No.	Year of Composition	Work title	Year of Publication
6	1939	<i>Les Illuminations</i> op.18, for High Voice and Strings [poems by Arthur Rimbaud, in French].	1940
7	1940	<i>Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo</i> op.22, for High Voice and Piano [in Italian].	1943
8	1943	<i>Serenade</i> op.31, for Tenor Solo, Horn and Strings [six poems by various poets].	1944
9	1945	<i>The Holy Sonnets of John Donne</i> op.35, for High Voice and Piano.	1947
10	1953	<i>Winter Words</i> op.52, for High Voice and Piano [Lyrics and ballads of Thomas Hardy].	1954
11	1958	<i>Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente</i> op.61, for High Voice and Piano [in German].	1963
12	1965	<i>The Poet's Echo</i> op.76, for High voice and Piano [poems by Alexander Pushkin, in Russian].	1967

Category B3: Musically Based Song Cycles

Ref. No.	Year of Composition	Work title	Year of Publication
13	1936	<i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> op.8, Symphonic Cycle for High Voice and Piano [texts devised by W. H. Auden].	1936
14	1958	<i>Nocturne</i> op.60, for Tenor Solo, Seven Obbligato Instruments and String Orchestra [eight poems by various poets].	1959
15	1965	<i>Songs and Proverbs of William Blake</i> op.74, for Baritone and Piano [selected by Peter Pears].	1965

CHAPTER 5

POETRY AS IMPETUS FOR THE EXPRESSION OF SEXUAL AWAKENING AND REALISATION IN SONG

Coldest love will warm to action,
Walk then, come,
[No longer numb,]
Into your satisfaction¹

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Britten created a body of intensely personal individual songs for solo voice and piano; these songs respond to Auden's interest in the development of this young European composer's artistic and emotional life and his awareness of sexual identity. Written between 1937 and 1941 (see Table 5.1), these songs represent Britten's musical confrontation with his homosexuality ('no longer numb') and the beginnings of his coming to terms with his sexual orientation (walking into his 'satisfaction'). Auden wrote texts specifically for this purpose and Britten responded to these literary initiatives, in his setting of certain of these poems,² and also with his independent selection of additional Auden poems, therein showing his awareness of Auden's intentions but more importantly also revealing his own personal desire to explore these topics within a musical artistic medium. A consideration of these songs as a body of work does not claim musical cyclicality for them; rather, it is based on a consistent fore-

¹ The final lines of Auden's poem 'Underneath the Abject Willow'; this poem was set by Britten as a duet with piano in November 1937 and later in 1941 as a solo song with piano (Britten's solo version of this song excludes the third line of text shown here). See Table 3 for the full text of this poem. Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 54.

² Auden dedicated two poems 'For Benjamin Britten': they were 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (see Table 5.7) and 'Underneath the Abject Willow' (see Table 5.3); Britten set both of these poems to music. Auden, *Look Stranger!*, pp. 53–54.

ground theme of sexuality, which runs throughout, and the explicit and unambiguous homoerotic nature of certain of these songs, which not only reveals alternative interpretations of these particular songs but also allows for an expansion of our understanding of the other settings which initially appear less sexually explicit. The interpretative approach proposed here arises out of the insights which were gleaned from the beneficial application of this methodology, in the preceding chapter, to *On This Island*. Cyclicity is proposed for that latter work, not so for these individual songs; however, textual connectives are presented and a common lyric attitude is identified, above the level of being the work of a single poet, which enhances our interpretation of each song. Furthermore, these songs provide a unique glimpse into the composer's artistic concerns which, by the mid-1930s, were strongly motivated by personal considerations. Justification for the validity of this approach is to be found in Britten's actual text setting of significant key words, images and ideas contained in these songs which reflects directly upon the young composer's growing levels of emotional and social confidence. My specific focus upon aspects of sexual awareness and its expression in these songs emanates solely from a close reading of these songs and their poetic source and a consideration of surface-level themes, rather than on an attempt to impose a pre-determined external construct on the meaning of these songs. Likewise, biography is engaged with primarily as a means of providing context for song interpretation

The text setting contained in these individual works has heretofore received scant musicological comment, as either contemporary social and historical documents or as musical expressions of contextualised biographical detail. However, Graham Johnson in his Britten song monograph does consider briefly this latter aspect in relation to many of these songs, although he does not explore the possibilities presented by allusive or

ambiguous textual references or their impacts on Britten’s musical work. Evans does not engage with this present musical repertory as his analysis and commentary is restricted to Britten’s compositions which were published before 1989.³ Mention of these songs is also notably absent from Bridcut’s book *Britten’s Children* (2006), a recent monograph which post-dates their posthumous publication; many of these works are closely linked to a period of Britten’s maturation. Hence, these songs have been under-explored in musicological research; however, the particular focus of this chapter is firstly to identify Britten’s text-setting practices as they were affected by his sexual orientation, and more importantly to consider how this recognition then informs our interpretation of these songs.

Table 5.1 Britten’s art-song settings of texts by Auden for solo voice and piano (excluding song cycles and cabaret songs)⁴

Poetic Source Comp. date	Song Title	Composition Date	Published by Britten	Year Publish.	MS Sketch fiche A29 ⁵
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Mar. 1936 ⁶ ‘for BB’	Underneath the Abject Willow	Duet version Nov. 1936. Solo version 1941.	1937	1997	216–18
<i>Look Stranger!</i> ?1933 ⁷	To Lie Flat on the Back	26 Oct. 1937	(see f/n ⁸)	1997	220–26 ⁹

³ Therefore, Peter Evans’ silence is regrettable in relation to the song ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’ composed in January 1938 and published in 1947.

⁴ Fuller also identifies that Britten’s music for Auden’s poem ‘I’m a Jam-tart, I’m a Bargain-basement’ has been lost. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 190.

⁵ Britten, MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch microfiche A29.

⁶ Philip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. by George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 190. Hereafter referred to as Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*.

⁷ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 168.

⁸ There appears to be a typographical error in the following source which dates the publication of ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ to 1937, whereas it was published posthumously in 1997. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 39. That Reed does not mention a 1937 publication, in his otherwise factual detailing of these works, supports the probability of this factual inaccuracy. Britten, Philip Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, ed. by Colin Matthews (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997), p. i. Hereafter referred to as Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*.

⁹ This MS is a fair copy. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch microfiche A29.

<i>Look Stranger!</i> Mar. 1936 ¹⁰ 'for BB'	Night Covers Up the Rigid Land	27 Oct. 1937		1997	106–08
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Jul. 1932 ¹¹	The Sun Shines Down	May or Oct. 1937		1997	109–13
<i>Look Stranger!</i> Mar. 1936 ¹²	Fish in the Unruffled Lakes	Jan. 1938	1947	1997	299–304 ¹³ 306–13 ¹⁴
<i>Poems</i> Nov. 1930 ¹⁵	What's in Your Mind?	1941		1997	331–35
Attributed to Auden ¹⁶	When You're Feeling like Expressing Your Affection	?1935/1936		1994 ¹⁷	

5.2.1 A FRAMEWORK FOR A SEXUALLY INFORMED READING OF SONG

In order to contextualise the presentation of sexuality in song, and more specifically to identify its presence and assess the effects of Britten's sexual orientation on his song repertory, it is revealing to consult with the recent musicological debate that surrounds the implications of Schubert's sexuality on his music. Although many aspects of such a parallel debate differ; for example Britten's homosexuality is a matter of fact while Schubert's sexuality remains keenly debated;¹⁸ however, many of the issues and insights of this latter debate are applicable to a consideration of the effects of biographic detail as a catalyst, which directly informed the music of these two composers and in

¹⁰ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173. This source makes reference to the publication of 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' in 1937 and contradicts the more recently published Bank's catalogue which dates the composition as 15–16 January 1938 and 1947 as the year of first publication. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 41.

¹³ This compositional sketch was the MS for Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes*, Song with Piano (W. H. Auden) (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1947).

¹⁴ This fair copy was the MS for Britten, 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', in *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, for High Voice and Piano, ed. by Colin Matthews (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997).

¹⁵ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁷ Britten, 'When You're Feeling like Expressing Your Affection (W. H. Auden?)', in *The Red Cockatoo and Other Songs* (London: Faber Music, 1994).

¹⁸ See, for example, Lorraine Byrne Bodley, 'Late Style and the Paradoxical Poetics of Schubert–Berio "Renderings"', in *The Unknown Schubert*, ed. by Barbara M. Reul and Lorraine Byrne Bodley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 233.

particular their song repertory.¹⁹ The decision to engage with this particular musicological debate is, in part, motivated by the effective use by Johnson, in his Britten song monograph, of frequent illuminating comparisons between common themes and ideas contained in both Schubert and Britten's songs.²⁰ The intention here is to justify and 'reassociate [the] music with [Britten's] lived experience and the broader patterns of discourse and culture that music both mirrors and actively produces'.²¹ This is not to say that music, as an artistic work, cannot be considered independently from 'comprehending its creator'²² but rather that a socially contextualised understanding of Britten's songs can reveal 'hidden meanings allowing new interpretation' of these particularly personal songs,²³ albeit fully cognisant of the dangers of reading art purely as confessional expression. A consideration of the relevance of Britten's sexual orientation to this music reveals the presence of issues such as prejudice and non-conformity, which are responded to with increased levels of self-justification. This sexuality-informed analysis provides an additional lens through which to approach these

¹⁹ Solomon's initial claims about Schubert's sexuality within the context of a close circle of male friends is contained in: Maynard Solomon, 'Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 12/3 (1989), 193–206, hereafter referred to as Solomon, 'Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini' was rebutted in Rita Steblin, 'The Peacock's Tale: Schubert's Sexuality Reconsidered', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 17/1 (1993), 5–33, hereafter referred to as Steblin, 'The Peacock's Tale: Schubert's Sexuality Reconsidered', and defended in Solomon, 'Schubert: Some Consequences of Nostalgia', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 17/1 (1993), 34–46. Further comment is to be found in Susan McClary, 'Music and Sexuality: On the Steblin/Solomon Debate', 83–88 and Kofi Agawu, 'Schubert's Sexuality: A Prescription for Analysis', 79–82; both articles are from the aforementioned *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 17/1 (1993). Further analysis is contained in McClary's 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music', in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 205–233, hereafter referred to as McClary, 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music'. Evidence that this debate remains active can be seen in the more recent Steblin, 'Schubert's "Nina" and the True Peacocks', *The Musical Times*, 138/1849 (1997), 13–19 and in Marie-Elisabeth Tellenbach, 'Franz Schubert and Benvenuto Cellini: One Man's Meat', *The Musical Times*, 141/1870 (2000), 50–52.

²⁰ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*.

²¹ Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary Thomas, eds, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994), viii.

²² Jenny Doctor, 'Afterword', in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. by George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 233.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

songs and therefore enhances our knowledge of the codified role of song as an element of confessional expression.

Maynard Solomon's ground-breaking article from 1989 confronted the lack of clarity in the biographical detail surrounding Schubert's sexuality, and it sought to present a view that was 'reasonably probable',²⁴ by means of a close interpretation and extrapolation of primary and secondary research materials. Solomon chose not to go beyond the confines of this core subject, the revelation of Schubert's sexuality from a biographical point of view, and that author does not seek to deal with the musicological significance of these biographical aspects on either the music which Schubert composed, or on its initial or subsequent reception. Solomon's arguments are based on fact; so too Rita Steblin's 1993 rebuttal is exhaustively factually driven.²⁵ Steblin rightly questions many of the interpretations which Solomon places on ambiguous and secondary details and criticises the quality and reliability of the evidence used by her fellow scholar. This evidence, she claims, is at times 'slender', 'out of context', and 'a figment of Solomon's imagination'; she also identifies his use of amended translations, questions his selective quotation and disputes many of his interpretations.²⁶ Unfortunately, within the initial heat of this debate, as to whether Schubert *was* or *was not* homosexual,²⁷ sight was lost of the wider more generally applicable question: why should we ask this question? Or rather, what are the direct and subtle consequences of this supposition for our analysis and reception of this or any other composer's music? It should however be recognised, that perhaps both authors had intentionally confined their attention to a narrow scope due in part to the magnitude of what Solomon was

²⁴ Solomon, 'Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini', 202.

²⁵ Steblin, 'The Peacock's Tale: Schubert's Sexuality Reconsidered', 5–33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21–22, 27.

²⁷ Usefully, McClary locates historically the social and political associations of evolving terms used to describe 'Homosexual', 'Gay', 'Sodomite', 'same-sex erotic activities', and 'Queer'. McClary, 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music', p. 228 n. 2.

proposing to a hostile and partly conservative audience; Steblin responds from this latter viewpoint. Others such as Christopher Gibbs welcome the expanded possibilities which accompany this knowledge of a ‘new Schubert image’ whilst also cautioning against the dangers of speculation based on evidence which ‘is lost – or remains to be unearthed’.²⁸ So too, both Solomon and Steblin’s decision not to extrapolate from their singular monographs may also have been adversely impacted by the necessary limiting confines of a journal article in spite of Steblin’s response, albeit in an extended article in a later issue of the same journal. It was for McClary, Agawu, Brett and others to explore and interpret further these critical historical examinations, albeit initially in a partly hostile musicological environment.²⁹

McClary posits succinctly that ‘music *need not* reveal anything personal about the composer’ and yet ‘some artists *choose* to make a difference based on sexuality, gender, or ethnicity’ in the music which he/she composes.³⁰ Britten makes just such a choice in his corpus of Auden-texted songs. McClary considers that the representational element of genre has ‘something to do with the social world’ of its creation. Within the genre of song, and in particular in these sundry songs, Britten chooses to engage directly with and respond to his social environment. McClary contends that instrumental music, which has formerly been regarded as non-representational and therefore the preserve of ‘formal analysis’, is likewise socially situated and she states:

²⁸ Christopher Gibbs, *The Life of Schubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 3, 135.

²⁹ McClary describes the initial hostilities which she experienced in the musicological and critical circles in the early 1990s in response to her discussion of the relevance of a composer’s sexuality to his/her music. Susan McClary, ‘Music and Sexuality: On the Steblin/Solomon Debate’, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 17/1 (1993), 83–4 and also in McClary, ‘Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert’s Music’, pp. 205–7.

³⁰ McClary, ‘Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert’s Music’, p. 211.

I insist on treating it [music] as a medium that participates in social formation by influencing the ways we perceive our feelings, our bodies, our desires, our very subjectivities—even if it does so surreptitiously, without most of us knowing how.³¹

McClary also cautions against the application of simplistic limiting binarisms, insofar as any music will appear relatively ‘feminine’ when compared with say the ‘hypermasculine figure [and music of] Beethoven’. So too, these Britten songs may therefore now be more usefully considered as constructing a particular model of ‘male subjectivity’, within McClary’s terms, rather than explicitly as either a homosexual or non-heterosexual alternative music, and by definition a marginalised music;³² this approach frees our interpretations of these songs from a tendency to look exclusively for a feminine musical equivalence. Britten may express his unique male sexual orientation in his music without a necessity for this music to be other than male. He may also, therefore, contribute to a general cultural identity of masculinity

Agawu’s contribution—though apparently motivated to provide a balanced response to the heated Solomon/Steblin musicological debate over Schubert’s sexuality—seeks to broaden the scope of this discussion while also defining terminology more closely in his consideration of the relevance of sexuality to three separate aspects or approaches to the analysis of music. Firstly, he questions, and ultimately doubts, the existence of a ‘distinctly homosexual creative process’ and contends that this would require the identification of how sexuality differs from ‘other forms of repression [be they] religious, social, political, and economic’.³³ Agawu has confused, apparently inadvertently, the agents of societal control with the subject of that

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³³ Kofi Agawu, ‘Schubert’s Sexuality: A Prescription for Analysis’, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 17/1 (1993), 80.

censure. Secondly, he is not convinced that a 'neutral level of analysis' of a score can of itself verify a specifically 'homosexual reading' of that music.³⁴ Finally, Agawu proposes that it is at the level of reception that a composer's sexuality, Schubert in this case, is most relevant to the music. Musical research based on sexuality in turn contributes to an evolving reception of that music and affects both how we hear this music and what we listen for. Musicological innovators such as Brett (particularly in Britten studies) have taken a lead in identifying possibilities in a composer's music which has resulted in new ways of hearing that music and has provided additional subject areas for scrutiny. Ultimately, Agawu questions whether Schubert is an appropriate subject, given the fragility of agreed factual detail, 'for investigating the significance for musical analysis of a composer's sexuality'.³⁵ Not so with Britten; as he provides an excellent well-researched musical personality for such an exploration of a sexuality focused approach to his art songs.

More recently Kramer has posited two further related questions, each of which promotes a broader more general application of the relevance of sexuality to music: namely, 'how assumptions about sexuality colour the reception of his music', and 'how the music may or may not project sexual perspectives or sexual subject positions'.³⁶ Consideration of the application of this former aspect is complicated and delayed by Britten's decision to publish only one of these seven songs (in solo form), while the latter question will serve to guide and inform my analysis of the text-setting practices contained in these songs. Platt contextualises these research developments, into the effects of sexuality on music as coming, in part, as a consequence of an expansion of interest in feminist studies in musicology, and in turn he points out that both initiatives

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶ Lawrence Kramer, *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 94.

represent a delayed response to gender and sexuality studies in other humanities and social sciences. Platt also identifies the 1980s as the period in which musical scholarship began to take a specific interest in ‘social identities based on sexual preferences, structures of desire or erotic pleasure, histories of the body and subcultures organised around same-sex erotic inclinations’.³⁷ In short the influences of Auden, his intellectual circle and the content and subject matter of his poetry are now generally accepted as being of significant musicological research interest in a consideration of Britten’s songs. These new ways of interpreting music require fresh consideration of these songs and their textual sources.

5.2.2 THE 1930s: A LEGAL, ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL FRAMEWORK

Brett outlines the grim legal status of homosexuals in Britain during Britten’s life time: homosexual acts, between consenting adults in private, were outlawed and only ‘finally legalised’ in The Sexual Offences Act 1967, by which time Britten was fifty-four years of age. Additionally, the mere mention of homosexuality on stage was prohibited until 1958 and stage productions continued to require state licence until 1968.³⁸ Britten’s decision not to declare publicly his homosexuality in verbal or written form must be considered in the context of his time. Tony Palmer, the director of the documentary film on Britten’s life and works ‘A Time There Was’, in the introduction to his presentation of this film at the recent ‘Britten in Context’ Conference, spoke of the need for an appreciation of this social and cultural backdrop in any consideration or assessment of

³⁷ Peter Platt, ‘Musicology, 11: Disciplines of Musicology: Gender and Sexual Studies’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), xvii, p. 507.

³⁸ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 208.

Britten's decision not to 'come-out' publicly.³⁹ These extant legal and artistic frameworks restricted any overtly explicit expression by this young composer in the 1930s of his emerging sexuality. Conversely these and other societal controls had the effect of encouraging Britten to express his newly-confronted sexuality exclusively in his music, albeit with some mediating levels of sexual ambiguity. These implicit declarations are revealed to us on an interrogation of the textual and musical hermeneutics of these songs.

Brett and Wood's *New Grove Dictionary* article 'Gay and Lesbian Music' places the social position of the homosexual in the early part of the twentieth century: as an emotionally unstable 'sexual inversion'. They credit the efforts of Havelock Ellis,⁴⁰ a medical doctor and psychiatrist, to move away from the consideration of homosexuality as a pathological or condition requiring medical intervention.⁴¹ Sensitivity to the presence of emotional instability is central to an understanding of these seven individual Britten songs, many of which depict male youthful energy, which in turn reflects upon the contemporary psychological reality of their composer. Homosexuality was, at that time, regarded diminutively as a physical act rather than as an encompassing identity. These attitudes came to the fore in the trials and subsequent imprisonment of Oscar

³⁹ 'Britten in Context' Conference was held at Liverpool Hope University 10–12 June 2010; this film was screened on 11 June 2010. Tony Palmer, dir., *Benjamin Britten: A Time There Was* (DVD, Kultur Films TPDVD125, 1979).

This title arises twice in Britten's repertory: firstly, it is the opening line of Thomas Hardy's poem *Before Life and After* 'A time there was — as one may guess' (Hardy, *Time's Laughingstocks* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1909); appropriately Britten set this poem as the final song of his Hardy song cycle *Winter Words* op.52 in 1953, as it serves as an existentialist commentary on the preceding seven songs; secondly, it is also the title for Britten's *Suite on English Folk Tunes: 'A time there was...'* op.90 (1974).

⁴⁰ Ellis and Symonds' studies, from the 1890s, differ to those of other British sexologists as their case studies did not focus exclusively on persons in prisons or in asylums. 'These new cases, mostly of British subjects, were mobilized to argue that homosexual behaviour was normal and natural, and therefore that it should not be illegal. This argument was in stark contrast to other (especially British) psychiatric treatments of homosexuals'. Ivan Crozier, ed., *Sexual Inversion: A Critical Edition of Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds* (1st edn. 1897; modern edn., New York: Palgrave, 2008), p. 2.

⁴¹ Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, 'Gay and Lesbian Music', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), ix, p. 597. Hereafter referred to as Brett and Wood, 'Gay and Lesbian Music', ix.

Wilde in 1895.⁴² The emergence of a homosexual identity, its recognition and varying degrees of its social acceptance, had to wait until the latter part of the twentieth century. Therefore, Britten's verbal and written silence in relation to his sexuality should be considered in the context of his hostile society. Indeed McClary recounts the comparatively recent difficulties (2001) which Brett and Wood had experienced 'when the editor of the *New Grove Dictionary* shamelessly mutilated his [Brett] and Liz's entry on gay and lesbian music',⁴³ thereby exposing evidence of a lasting resistance on the part of a musical establishment to acknowledge the relevance of sexual orientation to a composer's music;⁴⁴ it is this very necessary argument which is absent in the dictionary article and represents a missed opportunity to set out clearly the articulated conflicting views.

Intellectual 'clannishness' and the predominance of private in-jokes within social circles are identified by Mitchell as a key distinguishing feature of the 1930s⁴⁵ cultural environment in which Britten moved.⁴⁶ Mitchell attributes these cultural expressions, in part, to a public schoolboy ethos that prevailed within a certain social class which included Britten and Auden. In addition to recognising the beneficial formative 'jolly' social, sporting and academic camaraderie that existed within boarding schools, Mitchell accommodates the opposing view presented by Cyril Connolly, whose

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 597.

⁴³ Susan McClary, 'Introduction: Remembering Philip Brett', in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. by George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California, 2006), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as McClary, 'Introduction', in *Music and Sexuality in Britten*.

⁴⁴ The full original text of this article was subsequently published electronically. Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, 'Lesbian and Gay Music', in *Electronic Musicology Review*, ed. by Carlos Palombini, 7 (December 2002) <www.rem.ufpr.br/_REM/REMr7/Brett_Wood/Btett_and_Wood.html> [accessed 21 June 2010].

⁴⁵ The presence of symbols and images of the public schoolboy is evident in the earlier Hardy poems 'Midnight on the Great Western' from *Moment of Vision* (1917) and 'At the Railway Station, Upway' from *Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922), both of which were set by Britten in his *Winter Words: Lyrics and Ballads by Thomas Hardy* op.52 (London: Boosey and Co., 1954).

⁴⁶ Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 105.

personal experience of Eton led him to propose an informal ‘theory of permanent adolescence’ in which:

The experiences undergone by boys at the great public school...are so intense as to dominate their lives, and to arrest their development. From these it results that the greater part of the ruling class remains adolescent, school-minded, self-conscious, cowardly, sentimental, and in the last analysis, homosexual.⁴⁷

Many of these characteristics are to be found in Britten’s adult personality and psychology and are revealed in his diaries and letters as portrayed by Carpenter, Cooke, Evans, Mitchell, Reed and others.

This aspect of an in-joke or private humour was not reserved exclusively for public schoolboy references but was also appropriated to express same-sex realities. We see an outstanding example of Auden’s literary appropriation of this aspect in his tongue-in-cheek publication of the epigrammatic poetic dedication ‘To Christopher Isherwood’ in his collection *Poems 1930*:

Let us honour if we can
The vertical man
Though we value none
But the horizontal one.⁴⁸

The humorous homoerotic nature of this text seems evident. Nonetheless Fuller, in his introduction to his commentary of this Auden collection, discounts the perception of sexual innuendo; rather he considers the ‘memorial tone’ of the poem and implies that the contrast applies to a consideration of the dead and the living.⁴⁹ I consider that in this dedicatory quatrain Auden consciously intends this ambiguity based on very real confluence of opposing interpretative views, serious and sexually implicit. Likewise,

⁴⁷ Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 271. As cited in Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties*, p. 113.

⁴⁸ W. H Auden, *Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930), front pages.

⁴⁹ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 52.

this seemingly flippant ditty also reveals serious questions as to the social standing of the homosexual in society and also the prejudices that deny the existence of a fully formed identity and its public expression. The close links between laughter and sexual expression are wryly put by Auden: ““laughter”, he explained to Isherwood, “is the first sign of sexual attraction””.⁵⁰ The juxtaposition of humour and startling social reality is frequently evident in many of the Auden texts which Britten selected for his songs and this insider or closeted outlook is accessible to an audience which is sensitive to its possible presence.

5.2.3 LIVING AN ‘OPEN SECRET’

Britten was not ‘out’ publicly as a homosexual but likewise he was not a closeted artist. In line with what Brett considers as a ‘peculiar characteristic of British society that allows any kind of social deviance and ambiguity [to persist] so long as it is not named, is not published, and does not make claims against’ behavioural norms. Britten conformed to the dominant culture by remaining silent in public speech and in his public writing about his private life. Brett also outlines the ‘social and business advantages’ that accrued to Britten in his tacit observation of this social contract and in living his sexuality as an open secret.⁵¹ Conversely his social compliance also allowed him the freedom to ‘live openly with Peter Pears, but also to set for Pears and perform with him songs whose texts were unambiguous in their celebration of homoeroticism’.⁵² In these individual songs Britten frequently selects texts, whether consciously or

⁵⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), p. 189. As cited in Nicholas Jenkins, ‘Uncollected Songs and Lighter Poems, 1936–40’, in *W. H. Auden: The Language of Learning and the Language of Love - Uncollected Writing, New Interpretations*, ed. by Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 50.

⁵¹ These social advantages included royal commissions and patronage. Philip Brett, ‘Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet’, in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. by Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 19. Hereafter referred to as Brett, ‘Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet’.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

otherwise, which exhibit contrasting imagery such as of light and darkness and public and private spheres which, to some extent, reflect metaphorically upon the contemporary social environment of a homosexual.

Brett in his chapter 'Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet' identifies the attractiveness of music to a socially isolated homosexual composer such as Britten:

Music is the perfect field for the display of emotion. It is particularly accommodating to those who have difficulty in expressing feelings in day-to-day life, because the emotion is unspecified and unattached.⁵³

This difficulty in respect of Britten relates to both the inability of his contemporary society to hear and publicly accept his homosexuality, as much as it refers to the related reluctance on his part to generally articulate this private reality.⁵⁴ More recently in his co-written *New Grove Dictionary* entry, 'Gay and Lesbian Music' Brett develops further this idea of the 'non-specificity of musical language'⁵⁵ and quotes Koestenbaum who considers that:

Historically, music has been defined...as implicitness rather than explicitness, and so we have hid inside music: in music we can come out without coming out, we can reveal without saying a word.⁵⁶

These two complementary ideas have been developed primarily from an analysis of instrumental or absolute music but they are also applicable to Britten's representational text-based music. Song though less so—due to its referential source—also inhabits music's unique non-exclusively-verbal realm of communication. Therefore, singing about sexuality is different to speaking or writing about it.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ See Sedwick for a listing and discussion of binarisms which are used to indirectly describe homosexuality and sustain the etiquette of the 'closet' in which an anti-homosexual bias predominates. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Penguin, 1994).

⁵⁵ Brett and Wood, 'Gay and Lesbian Music', ix, p. 597.

⁵⁶ Wayne Koestenbaum: *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 189–190. As cited in Brett and Wood, 'Gay and Lesbian Music', ix, p. 597.

5.3.1 THE AUDEN FACTOR

Brett rightly remarks that both Britten's 'emotional and intellectual development' can be significantly attributable to 'Britten's being a member of the Auden generation and in particular to his being very close to Auden himself'.⁵⁷ Aspects of the beneficial academic and literary influences which Auden exerted over Britten have been noted in the preceding two chapters of this dissertation but the body of songs now under consideration shows evidence of a growing emotional and sexual freedom of thought and expression which Britten experienced specifically through his interaction with Auden, Auden's poetry, and Auden's extended artistic social circle. The members of this loose intellectual politically-leftist grouping were either homosexual or homosocial⁵⁸ in outlook, or both, and included a broad range of artistic males such as the writer Christopher Isherwood, the poet Louis MacNeice, and the GPO film producer Basil Wright. Auden and his artistic circle collectively took the younger Britten under their wing.

The diversity of Auden's influences on Britten is considered by Johnson to be as a 'confident, mentor and librettist'⁵⁹ and Mitchell describes Auden's role, in relation to the composer's sexuality, more explicitly to be that of 'Britten's sexual mentor and therapist';⁶⁰ within the songs considered here, these otherwise distinct contributions appear almost inseparable, whereby Britten permits Auden to assume the role of sounding-board, catalyst and poet. Britten's confiding his sexual orientation to Auden may have been the first articulation of his awareness of his homosexuality. This new-found freedom and openness must have strengthened Britten's resolve and

⁵⁷ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 187.

⁵⁸ In this context Brett uses the term to describe gay and gay-friendly male social company. Brett, 'Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet', p. 15.

⁵⁹ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 141.

⁶⁰ Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 383.

encouragement to work on literary/music collaborations with Auden. In turn, Auden and his close social circle, in addition to working professionally with this young bright composer, took on Britten's sexual awakening as a project to be achieved by various means. Davenport-Hines confirms that Auden's practice of meddling in the love affairs of other undergraduate poet friends commenced while he was at Oxford.⁶¹ In addition to his close personal interactions with Britten, Auden set about affecting change in his new friend through his poetry, as Mitchell puts it 'to argue him into accepting his own sexual constitution'.⁶² In his 1936 poetic collection *Look Stranger!* the poet dedicates two poetic texts, which he describes as 'songs' 'for Benjamin Britten'.⁶³ This possibly unimportant dedication 'for' Britten should be considered in relation to Auden's usual practice of dedicating his poetry 'to' a named person. As seen in this same poetic publication Auden also dedicates 'Out on the Lawn I Lie in Bed'⁶⁴ 'to Geoffrey Hoyland' and the untitled poem 'xxx' 'to Christopher Isherwood'.⁶⁵ Given Auden's didactic nature, particularly in matters personal, it may therefore be likely that he is drawing a distinction between his Britten dedications 'for' and other more general dedications 'to', in that he wishes these poems to cause the composer to reflect upon his sexual status. This term may also be interpreted as Auden's tacit invitation to the composer that these poems were 'for' him to set. In either case Britten confesses to his diary 2 November 1936 that he purchased a copy of Auden's *Look Stranger!* which has 'some splendid things in it. He has written two *for* me.'⁶⁶ The composer's immediate

⁶¹ Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', p. 16.

⁶² Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 382.

⁶³ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, pp. 53–54. (Italics inserted by this author).

⁶⁴ Britten later set this Auden poem as a final dramatic conclusion to Part II of his four part *Spring Symphony* op.44, from 1948–49.

⁶⁵ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, pp. 13, 63.

⁶⁶ John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 384. Hereafter referred to as John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*.

response, on the day that he bought this book of verse, shows both Britten's eager poetic discernment and his awareness that Auden had written two poems with the composer as their object if not their subject.

Britten acknowledges Auden's poetic intent in the best way he knows how, by setting these 'two songs' to music.⁶⁷ In addition to these two texts which Britten set he selects three other poems from this 1936 Auden poetic collection. The importance of *Look Stranger!* as a poetic source for Britten can be seen in that he selects the texts for four of the five songs of his *On This Island* and the prologue to *Our Hunting Fathers* from this source. Therefore, we may now appreciate that Auden's *Look Stranger!* provided the single source of the greatest number of Britten's songs. Johnson considers that Britten may have initially missed the point of Auden's personal intent in these two dedicated poems, in that he sets the first of these seven individual songs 'Underneath the Abject Willow' in November 1936 (see Table 5.1) as a vocal duet with piano,⁶⁸ whereby the direct impact of Auden's pointed call to the immediacy of the need for sexual awakening is lessened and defused by Britten's decision to use canonic-vocal counterpoint in the second and final verses of his song;⁶⁹ the first high voice commences the verse that begins 'Bells that toll...' (bars 25–29) and the second high voice starts the following verse 'Geese in flocks...' (bars 46–52), each of which present effective direct musical settings firstly of resounding sound, peeling bells, and secondly of action, birds in flight. However, on this occasion the direct and personal nature of Auden's poetic message remains unclarified in Britten's choice of musical forces. This part-acknowledgement of the issue at hand, his sexual awakening, and yet a reluctance to

⁶⁷ The text for Britten's 'Underneath the Abject Willow' (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997) and his 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997) are both taken from Auden's *Look Stranger!*, pp. 53, 54 respectively.

⁶⁸ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 166.

⁶⁹ Britten, 'Underneath the Abject Willow', in *Two Ballads for Two Voices and Pianoforte* (London: Boosey & Co., 1937).

engage musically with the text, marks a point in the evolution of Britten's sexuality as heard in his music. His decision to revise this song in 1941 for a solo voice possibly represents Britten's awareness of his earlier missed opportunity. These two dedicated poems deal with themes of youthful sexual awakening and maturity; independently, Britten went on to select five other poetic texts which broadly continue these themes (see Table 5.2). Through this musical expression Britten reveals that he was fully aware of and wished to respond to Auden's intentions to affect the composer's realisation of his sexual orientation, but more particularly, that the young composer chose the intimacy of art song as the genre in which to first approach the issue of maturation.

The wider Auden artistic circle was also involved in expanding Britten's emotional maturity and sexual possibilities. In his diary entry of 3 July 1937 Britten describes a cathartic evening of conversation, socialising and drinking with Christopher Isherwood:

then at mid-night [we] go to Jermyn St. & have a Turkish Bath. Very pleasant sensations – completely sensuous, but very healthy. It is extraordinary to find one's resistance to anything gradually weakening. The trouble was that we spent the night there – couldn't sleep a wink on the hard beds, in the perpetual restlessness of the surroundings.⁷⁰

Evans, in his annotation of this diary entry, wryly interjects that 'Britten was missing the point: those who frequented the Jermyn Street baths in those days were not there to sleep', as this was a venue frequented by men in search of same-sex erotic experiences.⁷¹ Mitchell also recognises the significance of this sexually-formative expedition, by way of its prominent inclusion in his introduction to the first volume of *Letters from a Life*.⁷² Furthermore, the intentions of Britten's friends are recognised in

⁷⁰ John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*, p. 440.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 490, n. 77.

⁷² Mitchell and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 18.

Parker's quotation from Isherwood's follow-up enquiries to this event; Isherwood is reported as having asked Basil Wright, 'well have we convinced Ben he's queer, or haven't we?',⁷³ thereby confirming the recognition among his close friends that Britten was at a critical stage in his personal development and also that their encouragements were indeed part of a concerted group effort. Britten's resistance to confront and accept the pleasure of sensual homoerotic experience and expression was finally weakened.

As Solomon all but rejects the idea of Franz von Schober's (1796–1882) luring of Schubert into immorality, so too any notion of Auden and his contemporaries excessively influencing rather than encouraging Britten's awareness of his own latent sexuality should likewise be rejected.⁷⁴ It is likely that Schubert, and definite that Britten, chose to enter into these close personal and artistic associations knowingly, willingly and indeed joyously (although there is insufficient evidence to make irrefutable statements in connection with Schubert). So too Solomon's ultimate presentation of aspects of Schubert's personality as 'heroic',⁷⁵ given the censure of his contemporary social circumstances, may also be applied to Britten in his exercise of social and sexual discernment in the context of the 1930s restrictive sexual reality. In any case, that Britten saw fit to dedicate his next song cycle *On this Island*, also from 1937, to Christopher Isherwood shows the affection and gratitude which Britten wished to express to his colleague and friend.

⁷³ Peter Parker, *Isherwood: A Life* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 380.

⁷⁴ Solomon, 'Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini', 197.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

5.3.2 AUDEN'S TEXT AS AGENT OF PERSONAL REALISATION AND SEXUAL FREEDOM

Although two of Auden's texts are dedicated for Britten and one other was also written after composer and poet first met in July 1935⁷⁶ (see Table 5.1), no biographical equivalence is inferred in these poems.⁷⁷ So too, the date of composition of the four other Auden texts, which are considered here, pre-date his friendship with the young composer. Rather, my intention is to show evidence of how Britten strongly identified with Auden's poetry insofar as its themes and subject matter engaged with issues that interested the composer artistically and personally. The process of composition of these individual songs allowed Britten to give voice to the personal sexual turmoil he felt as an emerging homosexual and his choice of Auden's poetry acted as the literary agent of this personal transformation. The emotional intensity and questioning of the nature of love and human sexuality, which Britten experienced at a critical point in time in his own personal development, profoundly affected his selection of Auden texts. The themes of these poems concern male youthful innocence and transition to adulthood as expressed in the metaphors of sexual awakening and the process of unrelenting questioning (see Table 5.2).

For Britten this poetic subject matter presented a general means of self-expression rather than as an exact biographical representation. McClary also recognises that music uniquely provides the possibility of a 'means of self-expression otherwise unavailable'.⁷⁸ The presence of either explicit questioning or implicit choice, often in the context of social ambiguity, runs throughout these seven individual songs (see Table

⁷⁶ Britten and Auden first met on 5 July 1935 in connection with the mutual GPO film unit commissions. Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 380.

⁷⁷ Likewise, Mitchell also states in relation to 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' that the 'personal experience it might seem to describe does not match up with what we know of the personal histories of Britten and Auden at the time the poem was written'. *Ibid.*, i, p. 383.

⁷⁸ McClary, 'Introduction', in *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 5.

5.2). The extent of the profusion of these poetic devices is not found elsewhere in Britten's Auden art-song repertory. However these songs are not the only Britten songs on texts by Auden which consider sexuality. The *Cabaret Songs* provided an alternative genre in which the nature of the performance context permitted an enhanced but also lighter emotional or love interest in their texts.⁷⁹ Male sexuality is also presented in the concluding statements in *On This Island* in both the first song 'Let the Florid Music Praise', ostensibly a love song, and in the fourth song 'Now through Night's Caressing Grip', with texts 'let *him* lie then gently wake' and 'and my vows great before *his* look', respectively. However sexuality is a secondary theme in *On This Island*, unlike in the sundry songs, in which sexuality is either the primary theme or a central theme in these works. Likewise, my approach to this body of songs is not based on an intentional retrospective imposition of themes identified in Britten's later operas to the genre of song, but rather from an organic exploration of a heretofore unacknowledged central theme of these songs and poems.

Specific homosexual representation in the songs is seen in texts which engage often in a binary depiction of light, darkness and gradients thereof (shadows) as a metaphoric depiction of the existence of a homosexual closet. Even in the otherwise joyous openly homoerotic song 'To Lie Flat on the Back' the glory of the sunshine is infected by the isolation from the 'life outside' and the social control of the 'bully'. The worlds of sleep and dream are seen as providing a form of momentary escapism in 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'.

⁷⁹ Britten, *Cabaret Songs* (London: Faber, 1980).

Table 5.2 Poetic themes of the Auden texts which Britten set in song

Britten Song	Themes of youth and young love (expressions of ambiguity and choice)
‘Underneath the Abject Willow’	Call to action and sexual awakening (direct questioning of the value of inactivity and a call to undertake one’s personal journey)
‘To Lie Flat on the Back’	Adolescent physical experience (intense fundamental direct questioning)
‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’	Realm of night and dream (night and shadows as metaphors of a secret life)
‘The Sun Shines Down’	Transition to manhood (explicit and implicit questioning)
‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’	Attributes and conscious exercise of love (a personification of the worlds of animals and nature as expressions of the essence of human love)
‘What’s in Your Mind?’	Call to act in response to love (initial continuous questioning encourages increased awareness and ultimately action)
‘When You’re Feeling like Expressing Your Affection’	Call to express feelings through actions (ambiguous sexual fluidity is expressed in choice)

5.3.3 AN EXPANSION OF BRITTEN’S SEXUAL AWARENESS

These individual songs form part of the beginnings of Britten’s exploration of his sexuality in his settings of English-language song. Brett identifies that Britten went on in his French Rimbaud cycle⁸⁰ *Les Illuminations*⁸¹ and in his Italian cycle in the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*⁸² to explore homosexual themes further. These other early works are from 1939 and 1940, respectively; originate from Britten’s time in America;

⁸⁰ Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, p. 196.

⁸¹ Britten, *Les Illuminations* op.18, for High Voice and String Orchestra (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1940).

⁸² Britten, *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* op.22, for Tenor and Piano (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1943).

and represent, in part, the composer's temporary desire to diversify and move away from English-language settings, but these conspicuous foreign-language choices may also have afforded him an enhanced freedom to consider sexuality-based themes in this music which were not explicitly accessible to an English-language audience. Significantly these works provided the initial song cycles for his joint performance repertory with Pears, his newly-established partner and principal interpreter. In particular, the performance of the *Michelangelo* cycle provided a direct juxtaposition of the very public expression in performance of the very private emotions of the singer and his accompanist. Britten's choice of these two poets is again likely to have been influenced by Auden's literary didactic mentoring of the composer: Auden's promotion of Rimbaud's poetry expanded Britten's contemporary literary discernment;⁸³ Michelangelo's love poetry provided Britten with his first opportunity to write both, a love song cycle for Pears and to perform jointly this expression of love. This artistic figure also provided Auden and subsequently the composer with a personally significant historically validating homosexual-artistic roll model. Britten revealed, in a 1960 BBC interview, his awareness of the widespread nature and significance of the effects of Auden on the composer, albeit a retrospective consciousness, when he stated that 'he [Auden] had an enormous influence on me for quite a considerable period. He showed me many things'.⁸⁴ In the following analysis of the text setting in these seven individual songs we see the extent and breadth of the 'things' which Britten appreciated in Auden's transforming poetry and which the composer expressed musically.

⁸³ BBC interview by Lord Harewood with Benjamin Britten, *People Today*, BBC Radio (May/June 1960). As cited in Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 384.

⁸⁴ BBC interview by Lord Harewood with Benjamin Britten, *People Today*, BBC Radio, May/June 1960. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

5.4 AN ISSUE OF PUBLICATION: WORKS THAT REMAINED WAITING IN THE CLOSET

Three of these Britten songs based on Auden texts have been identified by Reed as possible contenders for inclusion in a never-completed Auden second volume song publication;⁸⁵ volume one contains the five-song cycle *On This Island*.⁸⁶ Other than the publication of the duet version in 1937 of ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’⁸⁷, only one of the seven individual solo songs was published during the composer’s life: ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’⁸⁸ was published in 1947 although it was composed in 1938 (see Table 5.1). The circumstances that surround this isolated publication, some nine years after its composition, have not come to light; however, it is the least sexually explicit of the songs. Therefore, taking into account this delay in publication, none of these songs for solo voice and piano was published contemporaneously. It is unlikely that Britten thought them musically weak or inconsequential for publication as he retained his musical sketches and manuscripts. Perhaps Britten thought them too sexually explicit or alternatively too expressive of his personal sexual orientation for publication. If these songs or a significant selection of them had been published as an Auden ‘Volume Two’ the literary connective would most likely have been considered to have been youthful development without reference to any same-sex possibilities. They constitute a personal foil to the largely political basis to their preceding volume *On This Island*.

⁸⁵ The three settings, all from or completed October 1937, are identified as ‘To Lie Flat on the Back with the Knees Flexed’, ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’, and ‘The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea’. Banks, Paul, *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, pp. 39–40. Reed corroborates this information and in addition considers that the final of these three songs may also have been worked on by Britten in May 1937. Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i.

⁸⁶ Britten, *On This Island* op.11.

⁸⁷ Britten, ‘2. Underneath the Abject Willow (W. H. Auden)’, in *Two Ballads for Two Voices and Pianoforte* (London: Boosey and Co., 1937).

⁸⁸ Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes* (London: Boosey and Co., 1947).

Colin Matthews, in his position as a founder Trustee and current Music Director of The Britten-Pears Foundation, addresses the issues involved in the posthumous publication of Britten's works in general and asks:

Would Britten have approved of works that he had put to one side being revealed for all to see? Probably not. But...so long as this 'unauthorised' music is given its proper perspective, it can only add to our overall understanding of the composer.⁸⁹

The intolerant social and sexual environment in which Britten wrote these songs has changed and musicology now values a more comprehensive understanding of such 'unauthorised' music, insofar as it directly reflects a composer's personality and psychology and his discernment of the themes that underscore this musico-poetic art form.

5.5.1 SONG PRELIMINARIES

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with the analysis of the text setting of the first six of the seven Britten songs listed in Table 5.1 and on a close reading of the poetic texts which inform these songs. This exploration occurs in the context of the preceding exposition of Britten's contemporary socio-political, sexual, and personal backgrounds and is informed by the theories of text setting set out in Chapter 2. Songs are considered largely in the chronological order in which Britten composed them, with the exception that the solo version of 'Under the Abject Willow' from 1941 is treated as the first of these substantial songs as this solo version is principally a reworking of the November 1936 song for female duet and piano; whereas Colin Matthews places this song last in his ordering of six posthumously published songs in the Britten collection *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes*.⁹⁰ In each case the poetic source of Britten's song is

⁸⁹ Colin Matthews, 'Going behind Britten's Back', in *Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on His Life and Work*, ed. by Lucy Walker (Woodbridge: Boydell Press/The Britten-Pears Foundation, 2009), p. 15.

⁹⁰ Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*.

considered as a formative introduction to that song. Britten's song 'When You're Feeling like Expressing Your Affections' is not given detailed treatment as its text attribution to Auden has not been proven. This reduced level of authorial certainty together with the advertising commercial content and the resultant lighter mood and more popular musical idiom of this song distinguish it from Britten's six other art songs, thereby justifying this approach. Suffice it to say, that the sexual ambiguity of lines five and seven at the centre of this poem's text, 'Eve or Adam, anyone you ask for' and 'Sir or Madam, if you get a taste for', now appears overtly expressive of a protagonist at a point in formative sexual alignment and seems to typify Auden's juxtaposition of satirical humour and commercial intent.⁹¹ This type of 'in-joke' would have been observed by astute colleagues such as Britten.

5.5.2.1 'Underneath the Abject Willow': poetic source

Britten sourced the text of 'Underneath the Abject Willow',⁹² which Auden dedicated 'for' him, from Auden's *Look Stranger!*⁹³ Britten set this poem twice, as a vocal duet with piano in November 1937 and later as a song for solo voice with piano in 1941 (see Table 5.1). This dedication together with Auden's title for this poem as 'song', specifically highlighted to Britten both the musical intent of his mentor, but also the potential musical qualities of its text, in part reflected in the regularity of the rhyming scheme and the metric foot count (see Table 5.3). This poem represents the poet's call to the protagonist to put away the unproductive past, to act spontaneously in response to the natural environment in matters of love, and ultimately to enter the realm of 'your satisfaction'. The sexual identity of the subject of this poem is uncertain; however, a

⁹¹ Britten, 'When You're Feeling like Expressing Your Affection', in *The Red Cockatoo and Other Songs* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 10–11.

⁹² Fuller dates this poem to March 1936, a period of intense Britten/Auden artistic collaboration. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 171.

⁹³ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 54.

male lover may be implied by references in the first verse to a sulking lover treading below a willow and the second verse refers to 'arms across' and a call to 'strike'; these are likely images of male physicality.

Auden's trochaic duple metre dominates this three-verse poem; this metric regularity contributes to the didactic intentions of its subject matter. The only exceptions to this pattern are the shifts to the iambic duple metre of the final couplets of the first and final verses and the penultimate line of the middle verse. Within Malin's approach to the rhythmic analysis of song, this variation creates interest and allows varied word-stress possibilities (see 2.5 and Table 2.5). This central verse is further distinguished by its variation in the otherwise perfect metrical foot count of these three verses (see Table 5.3): the last line of the second verse is not only trochaic but also has a six metric foot count whereas the other two verses are iambic and have a metric foot count of seven. Again, Malin notes that this rhythmic contraction allows a natural punctuation at the end of the setting of a couplet (see 2.5 and Table 2.5). Each eight-line verse is subdivided into two four-line punctuated sections, in which an opening predicament is identified and a resolution prescribed.

The second verse of this poem is also differentiated from its surrounding stanzas by the nature of its content. Whereas the first verse is personal in nature and the final verse likewise focuses on the individual, by contrast the central verse is more public in outlook, as expressed in the resounding 'bells that toll across the meadows'. The private nature of the text of the opening verse is achieved through the poet's direct personal address to the 'unique and moping' lover as 'you' and 'your'. The protagonist's sense of isolation is heightened by Auden's inclusion of this typically obscure word 'abject' in the first line of his poem; this also serves to attract the listener/reader's attention. The poet's characteristic lexical interests have been noted in Chapter Three. Similarly,

isolation is to the fore in the content of the final verse. Here, the individual is contextualised in his surrounding natural environment in terms of the 'geese in flocks *above* you flying' and the 'brooks *beneath* the thin ice', in which the singularity of the lover's intent is contrasted with the collective aspects of these plural nouns. In each case the geese and the streams are described as having a destination which is certain, as 'their direction [is] known'. These two framing verses are also linked by texts which contain images of coldness which characterise the emotionally and sexually unfulfilled reality of the hesitant protagonist. The references to 'cold' in the first verse and to 'ice' and 'coldest' in the last verse are transformed in this final verse as a response to the lover's conscious action 'coldest love will warm to action'. The opening idea of sulking 'underneath' the willow is also linked by lexical variation with the third verse's streams 'beneath' the ice. Even in this latter apparently barren image, as life continues below the winter surface, so too Auden invokes the love interests of the subject to spring into action.

The contrasting public expression of such a personal predicament is expressed in the central verse of this poem. The image of a church's peeling bells pervades: 'bells that toll', 'toll', and 'strike'. The idea of rigidity and social isolation is expressed by the poet in crossed arms, which also may refer to an inability to engage in the action of ringing the steeple bells, or stubbornness and inactivity. The conspicuous dramatic and social nature of this means of communication is juxtaposed with the inability of the young inexperienced lover to voice his sexual desires and orientation. Auden's call to this expression and action in his epigrammatic central line 'all that lives may love', serves to encourage the protagonist to achieve that end through sexual awakening.

Table 5.3 Auden's poem: 'Underneath the Abject Willow'

		Metric Foot	Rhyming scheme	Word patterns Ideas/Images
V.1				
1	Underneath the abject willow,	8	a	Obscured image
2	Lover, sulk no more;	5	b	Personal advice
3	Act from thought should quickly follow:	8	a	Psychological process
4	What is thinking for?	5	b	Psychological questioning
5	Your unique and moping station	8	c	Internal rhyming
6	Proves you cold	3	d	'you'
7	Stand up and fold	4	d	
8	Your map of desolation.	7	c	'your' repeated
V.2				
1	Bells that toll across the meadows	8	a	Public resounding image
2	From the sombre spire,	5	b	's' alliteration
3	Toll for those unloving shadows	8	a	'toll' repeated
4	Love does not require.	5	b	'l' alliteration
5	All that lives may love; why longer	8	c	'love' repeated
6	Bow to loss	3	d	'l' alliteration
7	With arms across?	4	d	Question inactivity
8	Strike and you shall conquer	6	c	Call to action
V.3				
1	Geese in flocks above you flying	8	a	Above, 'f' alliteration
2	Their direction know;	5	b	Certainty
3	Brooks beneath the thin ice flowing	8	a	Below, 'f' alliteration
4	To their oceans go;	5	b	'their' repeated, destination
5	Coldest love will warm to action,	8	c	Cold/warm, 'w' alliteration
6	Walk then, come,	3	d	'w' alliteration, call to action
7	[No longer numb]	4	d	
8	Into your satisfaction	7	c	'your' repeated

The language of the three verses of this poem is bound together by a continuous process of psychological questioning. In the first verse the poet doubts the value of internalised personal contemplation without resultant action. The protagonist is questioned as to the validity of his continued reticence in the second verse. Finally, the third verse, though devoid of explicit questioning, proffers an awareness of the instinctive aspects of the natural environment as expressed in the action of the birds and

the streams. The lover is encouraged to prevaricate no longer, clogged by internalised thought and to physically ‘walk...into your satisfaction’—to give way to love.

5.5.2.2 ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’: musical setting

Britten composed two settings of Auden’s poem ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, the first a duet completed by 18 November 1936,⁹⁴ within days of his purchase of Auden’s recently published poetic collection *Look Stranger!*⁹⁵ The song considered here, a version for solo voice and piano, was not completed until early 1941; it is considered first in this chapter as it is a reworking for solo voice of the 1936 duet version (see also 5.5.1).⁹⁶ The time which elapsed between these two versions of this song represents a period of intense professional development and personal growth for Britten. While in America, Britten also composed the French orchestral song cycle *Les Illuminations* op.18 (1939) and the Italian song cycle for voice and piano *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* op.22 (1940); by this time, as stated previously, he had also met and entered into an intense personal relationship with Pears, who was to become his primary vocal interpreter. In this latter aspect Auden’s poetry had been prophetic of Britten’s emotional maturation and sexual awakening. However, these developments are not specifically reflected in the later solo version of this song as it is largely a re-composition of the duet version for new vocal forces rather than a new composition, and therefore both reflect more upon Britten’s emotional and sexual reality in late 1936, than on his 1941 status. Johnson suggests that the solo version of this song was

⁹⁴ Britten, ‘2. Underneath the Abject Willow (W. H. Auden)’, in *Two Ballads for Two Voices and Pianoforte* (London: Boosey and Co., 1937).

⁹⁵ Britten’s diary entry for 2 November 1936 records this acquisition. John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*, p. 384.

⁹⁶ Britten, ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, in *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997).

probably composed by Britten to provide material for a recital performance with Pears during their time in America.⁹⁷

The solo song (see Table 5.1) differs from the duet version primarily in the writing for the piano part. In the duet version of this song, due to the counterpoint between vocal forces, the piano largely plays a purely accompanimental role while in the solo version it performs an enhanced independent role and engages in dialogue with the voice. Johnson is critical of both versions of Britten's setting of these Auden lyrics. He considers Britten's settings to be flippant deflections of Auden's elevated and persuasive words, a glossing over of the poet's 'serious, and loving, intention'.⁹⁸ Britten's application of an already established musical formula of setting conspicuously the central idea or image of a text which encapsulates the intentions of the poet is not achieved here. Rather the composer's decision to set the crucially liberating lyrics 'All that lives may love' in vocal counterpoint in which the declamation of the full line of text has not been complete before the second voice enters, pays testament to Johnson's opinion. The audience effectively hears 'All that lives...All why' (bars 34–35) and the full impact of the text is musically obscured.⁹⁹ However, the later solo song must be considered in the social context of Britten's emerging sexuality in the latter part of 1936. His mother, who had a strong relationship with and controlling hold over her son, was still alive;¹⁰⁰ she died two months after this first setting was composed.¹⁰¹ In spite of

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 168.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 168–69.

⁹⁹ Britten, '2. Underneath the Abject Willow (W. H. Auden)', in *Two Ballads for Two Voices and Pianoforte* (London: Boosey and Co., 1937).

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, the relationship between a mother and her child is the subject matter of the companion piece to 'Underneath the Abject Willow' which is a contemporary setting for vocal duet of Montague Slater's 'Mother Comfort'. Five of the first eight lines of this poem potentially reveal a confessional or reflective aspect of his awareness of the possible difficulties that disclosing his sexual orientation might have on his relationship with his mother. 'Dear, shall we talk or will that cloud the sky? ...If I should love him where would our lives be? ...My longing, like my heart, beats to and fro. Oh that a single life could be both yes and no'. Britten, '1. Mother Comfort (Montague Slater)', in *Two Ballads for Two Voices and Pianoforte* (London: Boosey and Co., 1937).

the intense grief Britten felt at her loss, her passing also allowed him significantly greater personal freedom to explore his sexual orientation: Auden's poetry was there to support that difficult transition. Therefore, this solo song and its original duet version should not be considered as Britten's final word, though expressed musically, on of his awareness of emerging sexuality, but rather it represents an early stage in that process. Johnson does not comment upon the remarkable difference in the clarity and effectiveness of the words which Britten achieves in his solo song. The textual deflection of this duet setting, caused initially in the first verse by the parallel-third motion of the two voices which gives way to a largely polyphonic setting of verses two and three, is not, by definition, present in the solo-voice version. In this way the emotional content and didactic intent of the words are to some extent allowed to surface, while in the duet version the message was lost in the vocal medium. Whether Britten was actually the subject of or the catalyst for Auden's composing this poem is less important than is the composer's musical response to its contained ideas and images.

The poetic structure of Auden's poem provides the basis of the musical structure of Britten's song 'Underneath the Abject Willow'. The piano transitions which occur between vocal phrases are reflective of poetic stanza breaks (see Table 5.4). Even the transitions which Britten intersperses mid-way in each verse, though not immediately discernible, can be said to emanate from its textual source (see also Table 5.4); Auden has punctuated verses so as to subdivide each verse into two sections in which separate yet related ideas are developed in units, each containing four lines. Britten responds to the near perfect uniformity of syllabic metric feet of his source with a musical setting of equal regularity: the first line of each verse is set in regular two-bar phrases (2 2 2 2),

¹⁰¹ Edith Rhoda Britten, née Hockey, died 31 January 1937.

and the second four-line section of the first and second verses is set regularly (2 1 1 2) (see Table 5.4). This latter pattern is also reflective of Auden's line-ending cross-rhyming scheme in this section (*c d d c*).

The regularity of the poetic line-ending rhyming scheme and the near perfect metric foot count of all verses might have been suggestive of a strophic setting. Rather, based upon a discussion of the changing subject matter we identify a move from the personal realm of the first verse to the public statements of the second verse and a return to the individual in the final verse; this *ABA* structure of the poem is reflected in Britten's *ABA'* modified ternary form song. This structure is supported by modulation from the C major first verse to the Ab major of the central verse and the return to the home C major in the final verse. However, within this simple musical structure Britten distinguishes each verse with his increasing practice of setting each syllable to two notes; initially the tolling bells of the second verse encourages the expansion of this musical feature and then the flocks of geese flying and flowing streams of the final verse herald exclusive use of this text-setting method. Therefore, Britten has achieved both a straightforward ternary form in this song while simultaneously also developing a more complex use of a musical motif.

So too, Auden's exclusive use of duple metre in this poem is accentuated by Britten's conspicuous setting of two notes per syllable in the first of each two-line group. Initially this text-based musical idea decorates the setting of the first four syllables of each four-line poetic unit with upper and lower auxiliary semiquaver notes (see Ex. 5.1, bars 5–8). This idea is then followed by a variant with passing notes, thereby creating a five-note scale as far as 'a¹' (see also Ex. 5.1, bar 6). The text setting of these two lines of text, in this four-bar musical phrase, seems to typify much of Britten's approach to text in this song. The initial decoration of the dominant tone ('g¹'

in this case), in the vocal part (bar 5), builds up a musical pattern so that any break in the series draws attention to the text. In this example the oblique and conspicuous text ‘abject’ is thereby shown in relief. So too, the setting of ‘willow’ is highlighted, as it is built on the initial musical idea of a two-note setting of each syllable but this time decoration takes the form of passing rather than auxiliary notes. The setting of this first line of text or antecedent phrase (see Ex. 5.2, bars 5–6) is responded to with a single syllabic setting of the consequent phrase (see Ex. 5.1, bars 7–8). This also contrasts with the opening phrase (bars 5–6) and draws particular attention to the relatively more important didactic text ‘Lover, sulk no more’ (bars 7–8). Britten recognised this relative textual emphasis as he accentuates its musical effect by use of both phrase-ending *crescendo* and *staccato* performance indications. The rigidity of these text-setting practices might suggest that Britten has restricted his ability to colour individual significant words in this song; however, this is not the case, as much of Auden’s punchy advice and rhetorical questioning is intentionally contained consistently in the consequent second lines of these two-line units of text, such as: ‘Lover, sulk no more’ (bars 7–8), ‘What is thinking for?’ (bars 11–12), ‘Love does not require’ (bars 31–32), and ‘bow to loss/with arms across’ (bars 37–38). Therefore, Britten’s text-setting practices can be considered to align with textual syntax.

Example 5.1: ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, bars 5–8

The musical score for Example 5.1 consists of two staves. The upper staff is the vocal line, and the lower staff is the piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'Un - der - neath the ab - ject wil - low, Lov - er, sulk no more;'. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. Performance markings include 'mf' and 'energico'.

Example 5.2: ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, bars 38–40

The musical score for Example 5.2 consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, the middle staff is the right-hand piano part, and the bottom staff is the left-hand piano part. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major). The time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: 'arms a - cross?_ Strike and you_ shall_ con - quer.' The piano part has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a 'molto accel.' marking. The vocal line has a 'molto accel.' marking. The piano part has a 'Ped.' marking. The piano part has a 'dim.' marking.

Likewise, in this song, Britten is not restricted to a predetermined formulaic pattern and reveals the essence of Auden’s poetic message through variations in these patterns. A notable example of this is his setting of the final line of the second verse ‘Strike and you shall conquer’, in which he musically depicts the action of striking through the quaver chord and momentary cessation of the accompaniment (see Ex. 5.2, bar 39). This local climax is achieved in a number of ways: firstly the word ‘strike’ (bar 39) is anticipated in the $\#4^c$ chord (based on Ab) and secondly the subsequent tonic Ab major chord is sounded harmonically while the preceding six chords are all spread chords. This attainment of a tonic root position chord together with its forte and non-spread performance indications creates a musical equivalent of the certainty and dramatic action of striking. Interestingly, Britten uses an isolated spread chord to set the word ‘strike’ in another song ‘What’s in Your Mind?’ (see 5.5.7.2). Thirdly, this effect is accentuated by Britten’s decision to include a rest after the word ‘strike’ (bar 39). That this is the only insertion of silence within a line of text in the song reveals Britten’s conscious intention to highlight musically the central poetic theme—a call to act/to ‘strike’ now. And finally, the importance of this text is further shown in relief as the piano accompaniment remains silent while the voice declaims resolutely in an Ab tonic

triad ‘...and you shall conquer’, thereby musically highlighting the personal didactic object of Auden’s encouragements as ‘you’.

Britten’s extended use of his two-note setting of each syllable has been identified in the final verse as a credible depiction of geese flying and brooks flowing beneath an icy surface. Auden’s inclusion of these two natural phenomena is not a static depiction *per se*, but rather serves as an introduction to the ideas of certainty of outcome or ultimate goal: the geese whose ‘direction [is] know[n]’ and the streams ‘to their oceans go’. By contrast the lover is unsure and hesitant to act on his natural feeling of sexual orientation. Britten achieves musical certainty in these passages through his extended linear semiquaver setting, initially ascending to depict the flying birds and subsequently descending to depict a possible landing ‘their direction know’, all of which is set to a descending bass figure (bars 48–49). In direct contrast to this the subsequent phrase is set in contrary motion. The streams are initially presented as a meandering primarily descending figure ‘beneath the thin ice flowing’, which morphs into a linear ascent for Britten’s depiction of ‘to their oceans go’ (bars 52–53). Certainty of destination is confirmed by the stability of phrase-ending longer minim notes which contrast rhythmically with the running semiquavers’ depiction of the journey.

The piano also engages directly in Britten’s text-setting practices. Both verse interludes reveal significant, but very different, aspects of the composer’s approach to word painting. Bars 21 to 24 act both as a conclusion to the first verse with a bar in tonic C major (bar 21); this shifts to a C minor chord (bar 22) and is followed by two bars of repeated static Eb quaver notes in treble and bass parts (bars 23–24). This ‘Eb’, the mediant of C minor, then becomes the dominant of Ab major which subsequently becomes the tonic of the key of the second verse. This clever monotonal two-bar ‘Eb’ interlude represents a musical depiction of, and an introduction to, the ‘bells that toll...’

(bar 25); insofar as this resounding ‘Eb’ note, which becomes the dominant of the new key is also the note which Britten decorates when he returns to his pattern of semiquaver writing (bar 25). Likewise, the interlude between verses two and three not only acts as a four-bar Ab major descending triadic response to the text ‘strike and you shall conquer’ (bars 40–43), but it also performs as a two-bar introduction (bars 44–45) to ‘geese in flocks above you flying’. Here again, the birds’ flight is anticipated by Britten’s single use, in this song, of a diatonic semiquaver scale which extends beyond two octaves, thereby smoothly linking the Ab tonic root of the preceding verse with the C tonic of the key of the final verse, C major. These very literal depictions in this song, a descending line as a result of striking and an ascending scale in preparation for flight, present examples of direct mimesis (see 2.3.3.2). In both of these transitions the piano and vocal presentations of text engage in discourse in a blended song space (within Zbikowski’s terminology 2.3.4.1).

Britten approaches the climax of the song which is located towards the end of the final verse by combining musical material which is already familiar. Auden’s text ‘walk then come’ is stated and sequentially repeated four times. Each of these five phrases uses the established two-semiquaver setting of two syllables followed by a contrasting *tenuto* crotchet (bars 57–62); such a combined rhythmic pattern is unique to this text setting. The sense of urgency as expressed in Auden’s words and identified by Britten’s repetitions is heightened by the singular presence of his chromatic sequential writing in this song. The ascending chromatic chords outlined in these phrases *in the piano* are D minor, D# diminished, E minor and C⁷ major forming the dominant of F minor, while the voice also has a parallel chromatic ascending linear trajectory spanning ‘f²’, ‘f#²’, ‘g²’ and finally attaining a high ‘aflat²’ local climax (see Ex. 5.3, bars 57–61). The dramatic effect of this passage is further underscored by the predominance of second

inversion chords. The song's climax is reserved for the subsequent setting of the final line of text 'into your satisfaction'. The *crescendo* to a *fortissimo* E major chord announces this moment of transformation which is achieved, in part, by this root position chord in the context of the preceding second inversion chords, but also by the first occurrence of the single pair of semiquavers' setting of 'in'. The notational beaming of the notes of bar 63 draws the reader's attention to the momentary recurrence of this feature, which previously dominated the song. The voice now achieves its climactic high 'b²' the dominant pitch of the E major chord (bar 63); whereas the voice had previously been restricted to the mediant note in the preceding five chords (bars 57–62). The descending sequential repetition of the consequent final phrase 'into your satisfaction' contrasts with the ascending sequential nature of its antecedent. These phrases which outline a falling seventh interval achieve a consonant C major tonic chord (bar 69) and provide a logical and hopeful musical ending to this song.

Example 5.3: 'Underneath the Abject Willow', bars 57–61

The musical score for Example 5.3 consists of five measures. The vocal line (top staff) is written in treble clef and features a melodic phrase that descends from G4 to B3, with a final note on B3 marked with a fermata. The piano accompaniment (bottom staff) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The lyrics are: "Walk. then, come, walk. then, come, walk then, come, walk then, come, walk then, come,". The key signature changes from one sharp (F#) to one flat (Bb) over the five measures.

Table 5.4 Britten's song: 'Underneath the Abject Willow'

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	4 bars		C major	
Verse 1 /Line 1	2	2 notes per syllable	s/q decoration of dominant	
L2	2	Syllabic phrase, 'more' long note		
L3	2	2 notes per syllable		
L4	2	Syllabic phrase, 'for' long note		
Expansion	2			
L5	2	2 notes per syllable	s/q decoration of dominant	
L6	1	Syllabic phrase		
L7	1	Syllabic phrase		
L8	2	Mainly syllabic	Stepwise ↑ E to G	
Interlude	2+2		Repeated Eb quaver	
V 2/L1	2		Ab major, s/q decoration of dominant	
L2	2	Combines syllabic and 2 notes per syll., 'spire' long note		
L3	2			
L4	2	'..quire' long note		
Expansion	2			
L5	2		s/q decoration of dominant	
L6	1			
L7	1			
L8	2	Text separation	Ab attained in voice	
Interlude	4+2		Pf scale in 6ths	
V 3/L1	2	2 notes per syllable	s/q decoration of dominant	
L2	2	2 notes per syllable, 'known' long note		
L3	2	2 notes per syllable		
L4	2	2 notes per syllable, 'go' long note		
Expansion	1			
L5	2	2 notes per syllable	s/q decoration of dominant	
L6	6		Stepwise ↑ E to Ab	'walk then come' 4 times
L7	4+1+2	decorate 'satisfaction'		repeated twice; text 'no longer numb' is deleted
Coda	4		C major	

Key to Table no. 5.4, 5.6, 5.8, 5.11, 5.13, 5.15, ↑ = ascending figure, ↓ = descending figure

5.5.3.1 ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’: poetic source

Auden first published the poem ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ in his 1936 poetic collection *Look Stranger!* Fuller dates the composition of this poem to 1933 (see Table 5.1), which predates Britten first meeting with Auden in July 1935.¹⁰² Therefore, unlike ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’ and ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’, both dedicated for Britten, and ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’ written in 1936, ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ may not be considered to contain any biographical factual detail pertaining to Britten, his sexuality, or his relationship with its poet; rather, Britten’s selection of this poem for musical setting reveals his independent exercise of poetic discernment unaffected by Auden’s literary influence in its selection.

This text presents a private and personal love poem in which physical sexual simplicity is confronted by complex external social forces resulting in deep personal interrogation; the protagonist—although left with more unresolved questions than answers due to this intense experience—has arrived at the formulation of a fundamental life-changing question: ‘Do you know why?’. Given the allusions to images of male physicality, such as full exposure of the belly and the spine in the sun, we are left to consider the initial social interaction as an exchange between two young males as a carefree youthful experience. Given this poem’s sonnet, the original exclusive love origin of which was extended in scope in the seventeenth century to religion by John Donne,¹⁰³ Auden’s setting of this text in sonnet form is structurally interpretatively loaded and appropriate to this unconventional expression of same-sex attraction.

The conventional formal structure of the sonnet, containing three quatrains followed by a final rhyming couplet, is not immediately obvious from Auden’s

¹⁰² Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 168.

¹⁰³ Chris Baldick, ed., ‘Sonnet’, in *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 312. Hereafter referred to as Baldick, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*.

presentation of two verses of eight and six lines respectively. On closer investigation the first verse subdivides into two four-line sections and the final verse subdivides into one quatrain followed by an epigrammatic concluding couplet. Therefore, these three four-line sections may now be considered to typify the expected sonnet form of three quatrains followed by a final couplet. The contrasting nature of Auden's *ABA'* poetic content also supports this tripartite analysis of the poem's subject matter, whereby an isolated free and open yet vulnerable world (*A*) is exposed and then considered ('[as] good') in relation to the world (*B*) of social conventions 'there', which is then followed by a return to the private world 'here' (*A'*). The initial relaxed situation is however transformed and focus shifts to internalised fear, apprehension which results in increased personal doubt. Auden's conspicuous enjambment in line five 'is good' textually links the two parts of this apparent first eight-line section, though it also classifies and justifies the preceding four lines. The musical treatment of such an enjambment will impact significantly on any song setting.

The metric foot count of this eight-line first poetic section also rhythmically supports the existence of a two-section analysis (10, 11, 10, 11 and 10, 10, 11, 11; see Table 5.5). The consonance and flow created by the regularity of the line-end rhyming scheme of this eight-line section contrasts with its relative absence in the final section. This latter text is reflective of the protagonist's personal anguish. This turmoil is ostensibly related to the challenge of awakening homosexual sexual orientation. Auden's text uses contrasting images and ideas, many of them binary in nature, to affect such a radical personal transformation.

The first section of the opening verse provides an initial momentary respite in which physical and sexual issues are becalmed in the warmth and intimacy of a secluded sunbathing scene. The initial outdoor scene, though anonymous, is intensely

private and introspective in nature. The relaxation of these two young males is repeatedly conveyed in imagery of 'knees flexed', 'soft receptive belly', and the 'insolent spine relaxed'. These images of naked or partially-naked physicality, which juxtapose aspects of beauty and vulnerability within a homo-erotic context, are symbolic of the natural openness and pleasure of youth. The wholesomeness of this encounter is clarified in the fifth line 'is good', but not before the feeling of joy has been tinged by shame and fear. The implied physical aggression of the conflicting positions of the bully and his victim ('to cower or to bully', line 4) contrasts with the initial themes of this poem (lines 1–3) and acts as an introduction to the awareness of expected social roles in the subsequent section (lines 5–8). The social grouping of the dog, the woman, and the boy is significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, the absence of an adult male from the ambling group signifies an incomplete conventional family. The boy is given textual prominence in this listing as being the only human not described in terms of the material world as the woman is depicted as 'the lady with parcels'. The interest of the protagonist in this boy is accentuated by the sonant line-ending 'b' alliterations of 'belly', 'bully', 'by', and 'boy'. Finally, Auden's repeated use of the definite article in relation to family life recalls its similar use in 'As It Is, Plenty', the final song from Britten's song cycle *On This Island*, in which its use serves to satirically demean and devalue the morals of the social relations described 'The children happy/And the car, the car/That goes so far/And the wife devoted'; here it has a similar effect.¹⁰⁴

The description of the location of this social family scene, as 'below', implies that the sunbathing scene occurred at a relative physical height, which symbolises the social remove of this latter occurrence from everyday life. For the poem's protagonist, this

¹⁰⁴ Britten, 'As It Is, Plenty', *On This Island* op.11.

presumed heterosexual social grouping represents 'the casual life outside the heart' and therefore it is not a fulfilling reality for him. This aspect of aerial height as a literary image of homosexuality for Auden has been remarked upon by Davenport-Hines.¹⁰⁵ The importance of this hidden or private and secret allusion was accessible only to a knowing or homosocially aware audience and represents an open secret in the context of contemporary literary and artistic homosexual public prescription.

Auden's second stanza returns to the secluded pair; however, due to the effects of intervening awareness of social realities, the calm of the former scene has been transformed into psychological turmoil, as evident in an almost continuous process of indirect rhetorical questioning. The textual connectivity and positivity of this verse's affirming opening word 'Yes' is short-lived, so too the anonymity of the first section of text has given way to conspicuous identifying references to 'we' and 'our' and multiple references to 'you'. These repeated identifying signifiers, together with the effects of 'w' alliterations in the second line of this stanza ('aware what weapon'), the tongue-twisting onomatopoeic 't' alliterations ('to...that teasing talk') and double disruptive consonants ('what that teasing) of the following line, and the use of the words 'pulses count', all contribute to an ominous heightened rhythmic drive. Auden does not clarify the response of the other male youth to his predicament; indeed, we are unaware of even his understanding of its sexual nature. Likewise, the protagonist is also unsure of the thoughts and feeling of the other and is paralysed by fear of judgement.

Subtle differences in imagery occur in this poetic section. The poem's opening sensual physical analogies are replaced by sensory description. Simplistic external images of the body give way to more complex images of sight, hearing and thinking. There is a shift from a consideration of the body to an awareness of the psychological

¹⁰⁵ Davenport-Hines, 'Auden's Life and Character', pp. 17–18.

processes of the mind. The judgemental effects of destructive widespread idle talk and gossip are described as societal weapons of control. Auden knew well the social implications of coming out as a homosexual and the repercussions which this revelation would have for him. Also, the locating text reference ‘here’ affirms that the world ‘outside’ has permeated the inside private world of these two males.

Table 5.5 Auden’s poem: ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’

V.1		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns Ideas/Images
1	To lie flat on the back with the knees flexed	10	a	Anonymous, body images
2	And sunshine on the soft receptive belly,	11	b	‘s’ sibilance, body
3	Or face down, the insolent spine relaxed,	10	a	‘s’ sibilance, body
4	No more compelled to cower or to bully,	11	b	Social roles
5	Is good; and good to see them passing by	10	c	‘good’ repeated, enjambment
6	Below on the white sidewalk in the heat,	10	d	‘below’, ‘heat’, definite article
7	The dog, the lady with parcels, and the boy:	11	c	Repeated definite article, final word ‘b’ alliteration (belly/bully/by/boy)
8	There is the casual life outside the heart	11	d	‘outside’
V.2				
1	Yes, we are out of sight and earshot here.	10		‘we’, sight and sound
2	Are you aware what weapon you are loading,	11	e	‘you’ repeated, ‘w’ alliteration
3	To what that teasing talk is quietly leading?	12	e	‘t’ alliteration, series of questions, internal rhyme
4	Our pulses count but do not judge the hour.	10		‘our’
5	Who are you with, from whom you turn away,	10		‘w’ alliteration
6	At whom you dare not look? Do you know why?	10		‘you’, series of questions, ‘you’, psychological questions, eye rhyme

The introspective existential nature of the final couplet is expressed in a continuous flow of intensely personal mental interrogation; this self-questioning is more direct than that of the preceding four lines. A process of awareness, recognition and implied rejection is expressed in an inability even to look upon each other, upon the person whom, a few moments earlier, was a voluntary participant in the preceding

pleasurable physical discourse. A poetic mantra is achieved through the repetition of ‘you’ in each clause of these two lines and ‘w’ alliterative questions again dominate the rhetoric (‘who’, ‘from whom’, ‘at whom, and ‘why’). The anguish and darkness of this final couplet contrast dramatically with the relaxed and carefree brightness of the poem’s opening.

5.5.3.2 ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’: musical setting

The posthumous publication of this song, composed by Britten in October 1937, is based on the composer’s fair copy (see Table 5.1).¹⁰⁶ Its contemporaneous composition together with three of the songs of *On This Island* (see Table 4.1), and given Britten’s designation of that song cycle as an Auden ‘volume one’, has led Johnson to speculate that this song was a likely contender for the never-completed second Auden volume.¹⁰⁷ Unlike ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, the previous song considered here, which was criticised as not directly confronting the intention of the subject matter of Auden’s poem, such criticism cannot be levelled at the song ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’. The bare physicality of its title informs the listener of the initial mood and nature of its subject matter. It must be remembered that this song and all of the other songs in the remainder of the current chapter were composed after the death of Britten’s mother and also after his extended exposure to Auden, Auden’s artistic social circle, and further personal maturation. These life experiences resulted in Britten’s ability to express musically an enhanced level of personal independence as revealed in his direct engagement with issues of sexuality in these songs — he said more in his music because he had more to say and also because he could say more.

¹⁰⁶ This song is dated as completed on 26 October 1937. Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, pp. 155–56.

Britten's identification of the obscured structure of the love sonnet form, of three quatrains and a rhyming couplet, is evident in this setting of Auden's two sections of text of eight lines followed by six lines. The regularity of phrase length of Britten's setting of the first four lines reflects the momentary calm of the opening scene (lines 1–4); this contrasts with the relative absence of regularity in the second section of text (lines 5–8). This latter aspect is a response to the interference of a wider public social forum. Britten's chromatically-coloured C major piano interlude in bars 25 to 29 between Auden's sections of text is conspicuous (lines 8 and 9), as is the composer's *fermata, molto crescendo* and animated performance distinction of the final couplet and the preceding four lines of text (bar 41 onwards). Of greater significance is Britten's musical treatment of Auden's poetic enjambment in the fifth line and the composer's transition from the first four lines of text to the next four lines, which are joined in Auden's first eight-line stanza. Britten's punctuation of his setting of the words 'Is good;' (bars 9–11) with rests for the singer, provides focus to the significance of the text. This segment of text provides a validating commentary on the preceding section and is linked to that text by the composer's continuation of an Eb major section of music (bars 8–10). The voice is, for the first time, unaccompanied at this point and its dominant to tonic declamation ('Is good') underscores the natural conviction of the protagonist. This poetic enjambment also provides a textual link with the following four-line section of text 'Is *good*; and *good* to see', in which the 'and' (bar 11) heralds a new chromatically-coloured C major passage. The initial 'good' is associated musically with the preceding music (Eb major) while the repeated 'good' is linked to the music that follows (C major). We may now identify the presence of Auden's *ABA'* poetic structure informing Britten's musical delineation of these three four-line segments of text: Britten's musical A section commences with a short unstable C major passage after

which dialogue occurs between the more stable E major and Eb major, while the *B* section is nominally in C major, and the *A'* section represents a return of a dissonant E major, Eb major and Eb minor variant section before the final E major conclusion. Britten's ternary musical structure therefore reflects Auden's poetic form.

The piano's opening dissonance, which also introduces the voice, effectively and immediately sets the mood of the first section of text (see Ex. 5.4, bars 1–6). This dominant 11th chord (based on 'G'), which clashes against its resolution ('b') and is presented *molto rubato* with a *piano* dynamic, has the effect of expressing the freedom and the striving independence of the male-youthful pair of sunbathers (performance of this same cluster marked *fortissimo* would create a very different sound world). This textual relaxation is further expressed in the freedom of the *molto rubato* triplet quavers and the natural rising and subsequent fall of the initial two-bar vocal phrase (see Ex. 5.4, bars 1–3). The edgy quality of the opening diminished chord is also heightened in the context of the surrounding consonance of C major and D major chords (see Ex. 5.4, bars 1–3). The voice's chromatic descent from 'e²' to 'eflat²' (bar 2) is part of the act of relaxing but also it predicts Britten's setting of the subsequent two lines of text. Sunshine is depicted in an affirming tonic/dominant 7th alternating series in an E major section of music (bars 4–6). Mention of the 'soft receptive belly' is responded to by an excited *presto* in the piano's solo commentary outlining a tonic E major with added 7th (see Ex. 5.4, bars 3–5). This piano's parallel-octave interlude is the first instance of parallel writing in the piano and represents the physical closeness and congeniality of the two male youths (see Table 5.6 for a summary of Britten's further use of this musical feature throughout the song); thereafter, references to E major are linked by association to these poetic ideas. Likewise, the presence of the bully and his victim, in line four, is responded to by a sequential repetition of the previous music, played a

semitone lower (bars 8–9), in Eb major and consequently this tonal centre assumes negative associations; however, the effect of this social controlling influence is not yet reflected fully in Britten’s music as he repeats the earlier calm tonic and dominant 7th series (bar 8).

Example 5.4: ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’, bars 1–6

Allegretto - comodo e molto rubato

To lie flat on the back with the knees flexed And
sun-shine on the soft receptive belly,

accel. *rall.*

presto!

Britten introduces the second four-line section of text with stepwise ascent in the bass, which introduces music nominally in C major (see Ex. 5.5, bars /12–15). The unease with which the presence of this perambulating social group is acknowledged is heard in the quality of the piano’s chordal accompaniment (bars 12–15), in which D minor progresses via Bdim.7th to C major (ii–vii.dim7–I). We are left in no doubt that

Britten understood fully Auden's satirical text which states that it is 'good to see' the interfering strangers 'passing by', when nothing could be further from the truth. After a 'c¹/'c#¹' clash (see Ex. 5.5, bar 13) this progression is repeated in Britten's setting of line six of this text (bars /14–15), but this time he incorporates the triplet quaver figure in the piano part; this latter feature thereby musically connects the section's reference to sweltering 'heat' (bar 15) with the previous variant reference to pleasurable 'sunshine' (bar 3). The final two chords of this progression are also alternated to set the listing of the ambling social grouping 'The dog, the lady with parcels, and the boy:' in a series of seven iterations of vii.dim7–I in C major (bars /16–18). Britten decorates the final words of each subset of this group 'dog', 'parcels' and 'boy' with an arpeggiated triplet figure and ensures the clear articulation of the syntactical punctuation of linguistic commas through his musical separation of gestures with intervening rests. However, he particularly distinguishes his setting of the final member of this group 'the boy' in a number of musically significant ways: firstly, in a marked developing *crescendo*; secondly, the rhythmic duration of this four-note decoration of the text 'boy' has been extended, in which the C major tonality is coloured by auxiliary diminished 7th chords (bars 16–18); and finally, textual reference to 'the boy' reintroduces the *presto* parallel triplet quaver figure in the piano which previously is associated with pleasure and safety. With this multi-layered accentuation of 'the boy' I propose that Britten is conclusively revealing the gender of the loved one as male, and by consequence the sexual orientation of the protagonist. The subsequent dissonant close cluster ('g¹/'f#¹/'f¹/'e'), and 'bflat'/'c¹' (bar 20) shatters this temporary consonant reprieve.

The final line of Auden's first stanza 'There is the casual life outside the heart' elicits a unique musical setting. Britten treats the word 'casual' melismatically in a disjunct melody which is initially unaccompanied; then, for the first time in this song,

the piano doubles the vocal line over a chromatic moving bass line F–Gb–G–G#–A (bars 21–22) and then D–Eb–E–F–F#–E#–E–Eb (bars 23–25). Both musical features simultaneously convey the casual walking motion of the passing group: the melisma characterises the unpredictability of casualness, while the stepwise bass movement reflects the walking motion of the ‘casual’ group. The dissonance of this four-bar phrase concludes surprisingly in C major consonance on the emotionally important word ‘heart’ (bar 25), whereas dissonance musically depicts the ‘life outside’, consonance characterises the internal feelings of the ‘heart’. This root C major tonic chord (bar 25) is repeated (bar 26), each statement of which is coloured chromatically, reflecting this emotionally-filled text.

Example 5.5: ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’, bars /12–15

The musical score for Example 5.5 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a melisma on the word 'Be-low' and includes triplets. The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and features a chromatic moving bass line. The lyrics are: "and good to see them pas-sing by Be-low on the white side - walk in the heat,".

The two-and-a-half-bar piano interlude which introduces the final verse (bars 27–29) engages in making the transition from C major chord outline (exclusively triadic triplets) to a monotone repeated octave ‘E’ note (bars 29–30), in advance of attaining an E major statement (bar 31). Interestingly, the piano takes up the established parallel-motion pattern, which heretofore has provided a commentary in response to text concerning male physicality (‘receptive belly’ (bar 4), absence of the ‘bully’ (bar 9),

and ‘the boy’ (bar 19)) and previously always at the interval of an octave; here, we see the anticipatory use of this musical motif to announce our return to the previous secluded spot. The expansion of the piano’s parallel movement to a two-octave interval, from the established one-octave pattern, symbolically represents both an increased psychological distance between the protagonist and his male companion, and between them and the disturbing social group. From bar 29 the voice sings a monotone ‘e¹’ for the next twelve bars (bars 29–41), which spans four vocal phrases; this note recalls the physical image of the youth from bars 3 to 5. The meaning of the text ‘*we are out of sight and sound here*’ is assured by its *pianissimo* animated delivery. In the recording of this song by Philip Langridge and Stuart Bedford, this section of the song is performed as an exaggerated whisper and the text ‘out of’ ‘sound’ is given a soft performance dynamic.¹⁰⁸ The words ‘are you aware...’ (bar 32) commences a series of psychologically loaded questions. The mental anguish of the protagonist is not conveyed in the repeated ‘e¹’ pitched vocal delivery, which is reminiscent of relaxation and carefree pleasure, but rather it is presented in a series of chromatically shifting unrelated inverted chords, which pass through F# major (bar 32) and Eb major, F# major, Db major, C major before momentarily settling on Eb minor (bars 33–35). The diversity of the chordal colour heard in this section is, however, suggestive of the diversity of ‘teasing talk’ of this tongue-twisting text which is highly alliterative (‘t’) and contains repeated double consonances (‘To what that teasing talk’), thereby revealing Britten’s sensitive ‘cantaparolatory’ setting (see 2.4.3).

The arrival of the final poetic couplet (bar 42) with the unambiguous nature of its direct self-questioning eventually dislodges the voice from its previous static repeated

¹⁰⁸ Britten, ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’, *Britten/Berkeley: Auden Songs*, Philip Langridge (T), Stuart Bedford (pf) (CD Naxos 8.557204, 1998 [1997]).

'e¹' pitch into gradual ascent. It is the mention of 'you' in the text which has psychological emotional associations and results in a raised pitch which is then repeated: 'who are you with' 'e¹' to 'f¹', 'from whom you turn away' 'f¹' to 'a¹', 'At whom you dare not look' 'a¹' to 'c²' extended to 'd²' and 'd#²' (bars 42–47). This latter semitonal ascent in the voice dramatically declaims the idea of rejection, contained in this penultimate question, which expresses the inability to look upon the loved one (bars 45–47) and is supported by D moving to D# in the piano bass; however, the related chords outline an augmented fifth followed by a secondary seventh chord (vii⁷ in E major) which is held on until the end of the section; this is based on the 'a#¹' going and remaining on 'a¹'. The song's *a tempo* final section incorporates a return to the previously dominating 'e¹' in the voice in the context of C major in the piano 'Do you know why?' (bars 48–53) The two-bar sustained piano chord gives great performance clarity to this final and ultimate question, and the voice's 'E' octave leap from *piano* to *pianissimo* dynamic suggests that this is a rhetorical question and that the protagonist is fully aware of the answer. The piano is left to provide the musical response to the question posed by the voice. The return of the music in E major, with its clear association with physical male attraction, clarifies that the cause and source of the extended mental anguish is the realisation of the life-changing impact of this youthful same-sex physical experience, the intimacy of which is assured by the return to the initial one-octave distance of the parallel piano hands. The final two bars of this song provide the root and major third which imply E major, but the absence of clarifying fifth in the chord leaves the final question musically open.

Table 5.6 Britten's song: 'To Lie Flat on the Back'

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Verse 1 /Line 1	2 bars		Triple quavers, C major to dim 7 th chord, punctuating note clusters	
L2	3	'belly' long note	E major, pf in parallel octaves (1)	
L3	2			
L4	2	'bully' long note	Eb major	
L5	1+2	Text separation	Eb major/C major	
L6	2		ii–vii.dim7–I	
L7	1+1+2	Text separation, decorate 'boy'	vii.dim7–I series, pf in parallel octaves (1)	
L8	5	Melisma 'casual'	Piano doubles voice	
Interlude	4		Pf in parallel octaves (2)	
V 2/L1	2.5	Text separation	Repeated note E, pf in parallel octaves (2)	
L2	2	'loading' long note	As above	
L3	3	'leading' long note	Repeated note E, pf in parallel octaves (2), aug. 5 th chords	
L4	4	'hour' long note	Repeated note E	
L5	2		Voice ↑ from E through F, A, C, D and finally D#	Reordering of 'are you' ¹⁰⁹
L6	9	'look?' long note	Aug 5 th & dim 5 th chords, return of E major	

5.5.4.1 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land': poetic source

Auden published this poem in his 1936 poetic collection *Look Stranger!* 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'¹¹⁰ was dedicated together with one other poem also from this volume 'for Benjamin Britten'.¹¹¹ Fuller dates Auden's composition of the former work to March 1936.¹¹² These two poetic works are also entitled collectively as *Two Songs*, which suggests, at minimum, the poet's intentional encouragement for Britten to set

¹⁰⁹ The text in Britten's composition sketch is 'Are you aware', while Auden's text is 'You are aware'. Britten, 'To Lie Flat on the Back', MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Fair copy, microfiche A29, p. 225.

¹¹⁰ Auden, 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land', in *Look Stranger!*, p. 53.

¹¹¹ Auden also dedicated a second poem 'For Benjamin Britten' which Britten set as 'Underneath the Abject Willow'. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹¹² Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 170.

these lyrics to music, but more importantly that Auden considered these poems contained musical possibilities in the hand of their dedicatee.¹¹³ The first lines of both poems also reveal a fingerprint of Auden's lexical interests in his use of an obscure attention-grabbing adjective 'rigid land', in the case of the first poem, and 'abject willow', in the second poem; conspicuously, both of these brief descriptions contain semantic associations with the idea of isolation and marginality, themes which are central in both songs.

The regularity of the line-end rhyming scheme of this five-quatrain poem is shown in Table 5.7. The near perfect symmetrical metric foot count (8–6–8–6) of each verse presents a repeating long/short/long/short syllabic pattern which mirrors the recurrent A/B/A/B cross-rhyming scheme. The strength of these poetic structural features contributes to the textual-musical flow and drive of Auden's words. Review of the regularity of the poem's punctuation reveals a single enjambment in the second line of the second verse 'You cannot staunch, *nor I* /Control the moments of your sleep'. I suggest that this conspicuous feature may reflect the poetic content of these two lines of text in which the poet, who otherwise has rigidly controlled his poetic form, allows himself a momentary emotional tearful loosening of that formal rigour.

The poem laments in a very personal way the all-pervasive emotional, sexual and artistic rejection of unreciprocated love, while it also engages with the complex feelings resulting from the awareness that the loved one loves another. Scholarly speculation exists as to the identity of the 'you' and 'I' of 'and I love you' (see Table 5.7, verse 4 line 3), also whether this Auden poem is autobiographical, and questions whether Britten is the rejecting lover. Mitchell wisely cautions against too 'literal an interpretation' of the text, as he recognises that the artistic process that Auden went

¹¹³ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, pp. 53–54.

through in making such a poem is ‘something entirely different from autobiography masquerading as poetry’ and that the aesthetic value of his art work should not be diminished to mere biographic sexual revelation.¹¹⁴ Also, Johnson acknowledges this particular advice, from such ‘experts’, but affirms that the poem’s personal ‘message is clear’; he also appends an interesting observation, that in March 1936, at the time Auden was writing this poem, Britten was the recipient of the emotional interests of his close friend the composer Lennox Berkeley, and that Berkeley went on, in 1938, to set this text also for solo voice and piano.¹¹⁵ Johnson does not imply that Berkeley is the loved one’s lover of this poem. Fuller contends, for textual reason, that ‘it is not certain therefore that it [this poem] is addressed to Britten himself’; he traces lines 13–15 and 19–20 of this poem to translations of Auden’s earlier German-language poetry, texts which predate the poet’s emotional interest in the young composer.¹¹⁶

However, it is clear from the present discussion, that more has been written about this autobiographic speculative aspect of this song, than has been written about the music which the poem inspired, a musicological lacuna I seek to redress. In any event there is no significant evidence to show that Auden was Britten’s lover or suitor, in any conventional sense; in the following example Auden shows himself capable of having a simultaneous personal emotional interest in Britten while also wishing his friend emotional and sexual fulfilment. This is seen in his inscription in this joint publication with MacNeice of *Letters from Iceland* ‘For my friend Benjamin Britten, composer, I

¹¹⁴ Mitchell, and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 384.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 160.

¹¹⁶ Fuller considers these line of ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’ to derive from ‘lines 5, 6, 8 and 12 of Auden’s “Lacrimate Rerum” (‘Denn jede Liebe hat ihr eigene Large/Und jeder Art von Liebe denkt an sich...Du liebst dein Leben und ich liebe Dich...Mein Traum von Dir mit Dir hat nicht zu tun’’. Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 171.

beg/That fortune send him soon a passionate affair'.¹¹⁷ The inclusion of such a dedication in a joint publication also provides a very public statement of an affectionate engagement, by Auden and his circle, in Britten's emotional mentoring; two male artists wish another male artist well in his love life.

As a lament, this poem uses the opening images of night and darkness ('shadows') as a metaphor for emotional loss which is suffered as a result of rejection, whereby the protagonist is left impoverished ('ugly' and 'poor') in an isolated space, in the context of the unaccommodating and unbending physicality of land ('rigid land') and the contrasting quivering instability of water ('ocean's quaking moor'). References in the second verse to pride and the inability of the protagonist to choose the identity of whom he loves, and expresses how falling in love is not a decision but a natural outcome of predetermined sexual orientation. The quaking ocean of the first verse has transformed into an inability to stem the flow ('staunch') of tears in the second. So too the 'weep'[ing] from loss of the first line is mirrored in the sleeping loved one's disclosure of the identity of the third party ('hear the name you cry'). This verse introduces sleep and, more specifically, the related realm of dream which continues the analogous expression of the protagonist's sense of loss and fatalism previously expressed as 'night' and 'shadows'. The dream world is considered as a place of emotional truth and disclosure in spite of the pain that may accompany such revelation.

The middle verse is central to our understanding of the poem as a whole and is distinguished from those surrounding it due to the direct erotic intimacy it expresses. Startlingly, the participants do not include the protagonist. The joy of sexual and emotional union is expressed in the eyes of the loved one in the act of love making. The

¹¹⁷ W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937) as quoted in Mitchell and Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, i, p. 383.

sexual identity of the protagonist's loved one is revealed as male ('his') in the central line of the poem. This sexual identity of the third party is not clarified. 'The dark caressive head' may imply that this person is a man which would therefore confirm the same-sex nature of both relationships, reasonably assuming that the protagonist is male if not the poet himself. Auden provides some guidance on this sexual ambiguity in the succeeding verse.

Auden engages with a process of emotional logic in the penultimate verse of this poem in an attempt by the protagonist to understand his predicament and to self-justify his own position. The expression of love is seen as a pure and natural pursuit in which one must be true to one's orientation. Auden supports this opinion with the words 'And all kinds seek their own', which possibly means, in the context of the previous clause, that each love seeks his/her unique partner. Alternatively, he may also be saying to Britten that homosexual same-sex orientation ('aim') is as natural as heterosexual opposite-sex attraction. The surface-level logical flow of the final couplet of this verse belies the harsh personal realities it describes; because the protagonist must be true to his love and because his lover is consumed by his 'own' independent personal journey, therefore as a consequence of such rejection the protagonist must remain 'alone'.

The flow and drive of this fourth verse is continued into the opening couplet of the final verse. The loved one is implored to 'hurry to the fêted spot/Of your deliberate fall'. The previously referred to beloved 'bed' is likely to be that honoured place with the implied intention of falling in love, as symbolised in sleep. This allusion to sleep brings the poet full circle to a complex ultimate realisation, that, as with the reality of the physical aspects of emotional loss, even in the world of dreams it is also impossible to retain an image of the loved one ('my dream of you cannot/Refer to you at all'). Physical external loss therefore results in total psychological isolation.

Table 5.7 Auden's poem: 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'

		Metric	Rhyming	Word patterns
V.1		Foot	Scheme	Ideas/Images
1	Night covers up the rigid land	8	a	Night, unbending
2	And ocean's quaking moor,	6	b	Instability
3	And shadows with a tolerant hand	9	a	Darkness
4	The ugly and the poor.	6	b	Impoverished
V.2				
1	The wounded pride for which I weep	8	c	'Weep', 'w' alliteration
2	You cannot staunch, nor I	6	d	'You' and 'I', flowing
3	Control the moments of your sleep,	8	c	Truth in dreams
4	Nor hear the name you cry,	6	d	'you', ref. to weep
V.3				
1	Whose life is lucky in your eyes,	8	e	Eyes agents of weeping
2	And precious is the bed	6	f	Place of consummation
3	As to his utter fancy lies	8	e	Other male lover
4	The dark caressive head.	6	f	Intimacy
V.4				
1	For each love to its aim is true,	8	g	True love is supreme
2	And all kinds seek their own;	6	h	Attraction of the familiar
3	You love your life and I love you,	8	g	'You' do not love me ('I')
4	So I must lie alone.	6	h	Rejection
V.5				
1	O hurry to that fêted spot	8	j	Go to that other lover
2	Of your deliberate fall,	7	k	Fall in-love/asleep?
3	For now my dream of you cannot	8	j	Reality of rejection
4	Refer to you at all.	6	k	Truth reflected even in dreams

5.5.4.2 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land': musical setting

The posthumous publication of this song is based on Britten's pencilled draft manuscript copy, which is dated 27 October 1937 (see Table 5.1); therefore the composition of 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' was completed on the day after the completion of the song 'To Lie Flat on the Back.'¹¹⁸ Interestingly, both poems engage with differing aspects of love and affection which do not come to fruition. The contemporaneous composition of 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' with Britten's *On This Island*, also completed in October 1937, and the designation of that publication as

¹¹⁸ 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' is dated as completed on 27 October 1937. Reed, 'Introductory Note', in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i.

an Auden 'Volume One', suggests this song was a possible contender for inclusion in a never-completed second volume of Auden songs.¹¹⁹ The first performance and first broadcast of this song predate its eventual publication in 1997.¹²⁰ The lack of any musicological research engagement with this song may be due to the comparatively recent publication of the score. Johnson's cursory treatment of the song is purely as an addendum to his more comprehensive discussions of 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', another Britten setting of an Auden text.¹²¹ 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' will be shown to reflect upon text-setting models developed in Britten's composition of the song cycle *On This Island*.

The brevity and structural regularity of this five-quatrain poem made it unlikely that Britten would provide a through-composed musical setting of Auden's text. Conversely, given this poetic structure, and together with the regularity of the line-ending rhyming schemes and the metric syllabic count (see Table 5.8), it might also have suggested the suitability of a strophic setting to the composer. Britten chooses to set this poem in musical phrases which incorporate two-line textual couplets; he does however repeat musical material in the opening, central and closing verses based on his binary division of each verse as follows: verse one A/A; verse three A/A'; and verse five -/A' (see Ex. 5.6a, bars 1–5 for melody A and see Ex. 5.6b, bars 24–29 for melody A'). This binary musical structure is Britten's response to the textual punctuation of the poem. The melodic variant differs from the original melodic line in that the vocal phrase reaches a tonic note 'g²' by leap from the dominant (see Ex. 5.6b). The original melodic

¹¹⁹ This speculation is also commented upon by: Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 40; and in, Reed, 'Introductory Note', in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i.

¹²⁰ 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' was first performed 22 November 1985, Wigmore Hall, London. Patricia Rozario (S), Graham Johnson (pf); and first broadcast 4 December 1986, BBC Radio 3 (pre-recorded 18 November 1986). Neil Mackie (T), John Blakely (pf). Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 40.

¹²¹ Johnson, Britten, *Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, pp. 159–60.

line attains, again by leap, a structurally important 'f²' pitch (see Ex. 5.6a), thereby clarifying that this song is modal and in G aeolian mode, given the consistent presence of 'F' rather than 'F#' (which could suggest G minor tonality) and confirmed by the 'f¹/'g¹' clusters in bar 3 (see Ex. 5.6a).

Britten's composition in October 1937 of this at times G aeolian modal song, while he was completing the cycle *On This Island*, is significant for two reasons. Firstly, as has been identified in the previous chapter that, both the second song 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast' and the penultimate song 'Nocturne' from that song cycle, are also modal and aeolian, F aeolian and C# aeolian respectively. These songs were composed in May of the same year, but would undoubtedly have also occupied their composer in October 1937, when he was finalising *On This Island*. This factual connection takes on enhanced expressive musical meaning, when common literary themes and connections are explored. Each of these three songs engages metaphorically with ideas of night, darkness, and shadows as expressions of isolation: political and social in both of the settings from *On This Island* settings, and social and sexual here in 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'.

The relative independence of the recurring two-phrase structures of the opening, central, and closing stanzas is ensured by Britten's varied and increasingly-enriched colouration of the piano harmonies of successive phrases and also by his insertion of a one-bar interlude in each of these framing verses, again each of which is conspicuous in its presentation of increasing dissonance. Example 5.6a also shows the dissonances which mediate Britten's two-phrase first verse (bars 5–6) in which bar 6 presents the first incidence of a three-part harmonic texture in the piano treble which represents a semitone descent to C# from the preceding D and the introduction of an F#, the first suggestion of a G minor tonality. Characteristically the C# has the effect of destabilising

a tonic suggestion. This repeated cluster reflects on both the preceding darkness of the night scene and the subsequent ‘shadows’ of the subsequent text. While example 5.6b shows the dissonance which links the two phrases of the third verse (bars 24–25), again the C# is the root cause of the disturbance, which on this occasion comments initially upon the mention of the image of the ‘bed’ (bar 24), before continuing its descent, whereby the subject of affection is identified as the third party, the lover of the protagonist’s loved one (bars 26–27).

Example 5.6a: ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’, bars 1–5

Andante con moto
pp

Night cov-ers up the ri - gid land And o - cean's quak - ing moor,

pp sostenuto

Example 5.6b: ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’, bars 24–29

bed As to his ut - ter fan - cy lies The dark ca - ress - ive head.

p
marcato

By contrast the second and fourth verses do not contain melodic material identified above as either A or A' music. The music of these verses is also distinguished

from the surrounding music, in that they do not contain a one-bar interlude which is a feature of these binary framing verses (see Table 5.8). Britten's musical treatment of the second verse as three almost continuous phrases, containing all four lines of text, has the effect of avoiding the difficulty which the single enjambment at the ending of the second line would otherwise have created had this verse followed the pattern of the preceding verse. The text 'nor I' would neither provide a satisfactory ending to 'you cannot staunch', also the subsequent 'control the moments...' would not be understood syntactically without its connection to 'nor I'; these words provide a textual linkage which connects the full verse. Britten resolves the musical issue of textual intelligibility by setting all four lines of text as one extended phrase. So too, the two couplets of the fourth verse are not separated by a discordant interlude. This seems appropriate given the continuity of explicit textual references to love in both segments of this verse ('each love' in the first line and 'you love your life and I love you' in the third line). Significantly these verses also present the most personal textual material as signified by the singular references to 'I' in each verse; the persistent particular emotional subject matter of these two verses may also explain the musical reasoning for this continuous text-setting practice. In the following consideration of Britten's text-setting practices we see that it is in these two verses that local climax occurs and the song's ultimate climax is prepared.

Britten shows his appropriation of Auden's text and his musical destination in the seeming artless simplicity of the first three bars of this song (see Ex. 5.6a). The sustained piano treble monotone contributes to the creation of the mood of the song and it simultaneously depicts the image of night's ability to shroud the surrounding land, while the voice's repeated solitary 'G' pitch expresses a human dimension, in which the protagonist's isolation is experienced as a result of unreciprocated love. The initial

vocal progression from ‘g¹’ to ‘d²’ outlines the scope of both the musical material of the A and A’ phrases but, more importantly, also reflects at a local level on the journey of the song as a whole, which essentially moves from an opening solitary ‘g¹’, as a modal tonic in the context of G aeolian, through emotional turmoil and loss to the total isolation of an undefined open ‘DD’ note, low in the piano bass (bar 54). A dialogue between these two pitches dominates this song and the repeated movement in the piano bass from ‘G’ to ‘D’ characterises the loss felt by falling out of love. For example, in the first A section music of the opening verse, we hear the piano descend by stepwise motion from ‘g¹’ via ‘f¹’, and ‘eb¹’, to ‘d¹’ (see Ex. 5.6a, bars 1–5) while also maintaining a repeated ‘g¹’; the vocal line also melodically outlines this progression. In the second presentation of the A music of this verse (bars 7–10) we hear the introduction of an additional stepwise parallel piano left-hand descent from ‘c#¹’ via ‘c¹’, ‘b’, ‘bflat’ to ‘a’ together with an inner-voice semitonal variant of the first mentioned descent from ‘f#¹’ via ‘f¹’, ‘e¹’, ‘eb¹’ to ‘d¹’ which effectively creates a hollow perfect-fourth semitonal descent in parallel motion. This second phrase’s semitonal descent (bars 6–10) when compared with the former descent initially of a tone (G, F, Eb but not to D) provides the musical equivalents of the increasing isolation and nightfall as expressed in the textual accentuation of the night scene with reference to ‘and shadows’. The piano’s parallel descent, while maintaining a static soprano note ‘G’, also becomes a primary structural determinant of much of the harmony of this song and expresses an increasing realisation of loss in the context of a fixation on the image of the loved one.

Most significantly, the vocal rhythm of this song is derived entirely from the rhythm of Auden’s accentual syllabic verse; the duple iambic syllabic accentuation of Auden’s poetry dominates. The verbal alternation of an unstressed syllable followed by

a stressed syllable (u S)¹²² is reflected perfectly in Britten's musical alternation of his pattern of a quaver followed by a crotchet. In the context of the song's 6-8 time signature this pattern becomes a recurring upbeat quaver, crotchet, quaver, crotchet rhythmic unit. From the second beat of the song's second bar this pattern starts to unfold. However, not content to rigidly restrict his text to this short/long–short–long pattern the composer inventively interpolates two quavers in the place of certain crotchet (long) notes. These inserted pairs of quavers in the place of a crotchet occur only on the initial two quavers of each dotted-crotchet beat, therefore taking up invariably either, or both of, quavers 1 and 2 and/or quavers 4 and 5 in the bar. This produces a compositional framework which allows for a single stressed syllable to be set either as a crotchet or as two quavers on a downbeat. The significance of the discovery of this feature in this song is, not alone that we glimpse Britten's acute sensitive response to the verbal rhythm and form of the poetic language of the text, but also, that we can now identify his specific enrichment of this given frame. This example also clearly shows the interpretative benefit to be gained in an application of Malin's rhythmic approach to song analysis (derived from his analysis of nineteenth-century *Lieder*) to Britten's twentieth-century English song repertory (see 2.5 and Table 2.5).

These rhythmic features are evident in the first verse of 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' and remain prominent throughout the remainder of the song. In Examples 5.6a and 5.6b we see Britten's use of his prime rhythmic derivation from Auden's poetry in bar 3 (including upbeat) (marked X) as a quaver/crotchet–quaver–crotchet rhythmic unit. In bars 4 and 9 we see Britten split syllabically-stressed words into quavers (marked Y) as follows: quaver/(quaver–quaver)–quaver–(quaver–quaver).

¹²² The abbreviations (u) to mean an unstressed syllable and (S) to mean a stressed syllable serve to provide clarity in this complex discussion and are used likewise by: Chris Baldick, ed., 'Metre', in *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, p. 208.

Britten then uses a combination of these two features in bar 7 as quaver/crotchet–quaver–(quaver–quaver).

Britten’s use of this musical equivalence of a rhythmic poetic device is not unique to ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’. Earlier in October 1937 he applied a similar approach to the composition of ‘As It Is, Plenty’ (the closing song from *On This Island*). In this earlier song Britten set the duple iambic metre (u S) of his text in a semiquaver/dotted crotchet pattern in the context of music in common time; whereas, in ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’ the poem’s iambic metre (u S) is composed by Britten as a quaver/crotchet pattern in the context of 6-8 time.

Otherwise, the triple dactylic metre of the song’s opening words from ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’ of ‘night cov–ers’ (S u u) (bar 2) occurs only on two other occasions in this song, ‘tol–er–ant’ (S u u) (bar 8) and the final three syllables of ‘de–lib–er–ate’ (S u u) (bar 43); Britten treats each of these stressed/unstressed/unstressed patterned exceptions differently depending on its musical context. Firstly, his unique use of three quavers in a row to set three separate syllables of the opening concealing image of ‘Night covers up the rigid land’ (bar 2) has the musical effect of concealing the rigidity of the primary rhythmic pattern which makes the song. Likewise, the triple dactylic metre of ‘to-le-rant’ (bar 8) is as previously mentioned accommodated by use of a grace note decoration of the central syllable quaver beat. And lastly, he intentionally sets the final three syllables of ‘deliberate’ as a direct musical response to text in the only example in this song of a three-note consecutive descending quaver setting of three separate syllables.

In addition to this mood painting Britten reveals his interpretation of Auden’s poetry through his use of word painting, which highlights the texts that he considers significant and open to musical depiction. Auden collaborates with the composer in the

suggestion of word painting in his specific placement of related images and ideas at certain points in the second line of each verse. For example, Britten's use of a repeated note 'G' to set 'night covers up'¹²³ is equally descriptive of 'and shadows with' but he shows subtly his sensitivity to his text in two ways: firstly, he does not employ an anacrusis in the first phrase which effectively transfers the first strong beat of the song to 'rigid' (bar 3), while the anacrusis he inserts in his setting of the second phrase gives 'shadows' that same prominence. This is further enhanced by a rhythmic change from four equal quavers to a quaver/crotchet/quaver pattern. With this rhythmic manipulation Britten shows in relief his poet's word fascination and the inclusion of obscure words in the opening lines of poems. The prominent word of this first line, 'rigid', is thereby highlighted. Malin's observations concerning the substitution of iamb with trochee at the opening of a vocal phrase proves rewarding here (see 2.5 and Table 2.5); Britten, however, selectively uses this expression of rhythmic stress only in the opening line of his song. Secondly, Britten then further emphasises this word 'night' by depicting its meaning in the immobility of four repeated consecutive notes. This static depiction contrasts with the following image of trembling water 'ocean's quaking moor', as set in a continuous flow of descending quavers. In the second phrase of this first verse we also witness Britten's acuity to the metric syllabic count of his source. Table 5.7 shows the syllabic count of the third line of this verse as nine syllables, in comparison with eight in all successive verses; Britten restores metric symmetry with his allocation of the central syllable of 'tol-er-ant' (bar 8) to a grace note, the only occurrence of such a feature in this song.

¹²³ That Britten's melody starts to rise from this static position on the second of a two-note setting of the word 'up' may be coincidental or instinctive (see Ex. 5.6a, bar 2).

The dark intensity of the personal emotions expressed in the second verse of this poem is announced by the introduction of the piano left hand, which sounds a low 'Eb' that clashes with the treble's held cluster which includes a 'd¹' pitch (bar 11). The alliterative 'wounded pride for which I weep' (bars 12–13), the original source of the preceding dissonance, is set to a repeated 'eflat²' in the voice with the 'w' assonances occurring only on strong accentual beats, again in the context of a move from D; this repeated-note vocal line conveys the action of weeping. The increased intensity of emotion ('wounded pride' and 'weep') is affected in the first contrary motion writing for soprano and bass piano parts (bars 13–15). This initial mention of the loved one 'you', the subject of the protagonist's weeping, results in the first move away from the structurally important note 'G' to 'Gb', which is anticipated in the piano (bar 13), and commences the vocal descent which depicts, a direct mimesis, an inability to stem the flow of tears referred to in the text. The idea of the emotional despair felt on hearing the name of the loved one's lover is seen in the hollow bare three-octave 'D', the darkness of which is expressed in the new depths explored in the piano bass (bar 19). In this verse the setting of text in three continuous phrases presents a vocal melodic outline which descends an octave from 'd²' to a low 'd¹' (as dominant) and therefore represents a variance from the established A music pattern which outlines a descent of a perfect fourth (from tonic to dominant).

The opening music of the third verse (bars /21–25) repeats the A melodic material referred to above (see Ex. 5.6a) and commences with the piano's first statement of a G minor chord (bar 21) which uses hollow octaves and commences a descent characteristic of this song. The inclusion of 'f¹' (bar 22) heralds its Aeolian modality; this relative musical consonance reflects upon the meaning and lightness of the alliterative text '*...life is lucky in your eyes*'. In line with this changed lighter mood,

and based on a memory of the past (expressed in the return of the *A* music), the chordal density of the previous verse is replaced by open octave chords in the piano (bars 19–28). Full bar pedalling is required here to achieve two octave descents in the bass. On the weak second beat of each bar the piano's outer voices repeat simultaneously high 'D' (dominant) octaves in the treble and low 'G' (tonic) octaves in the bass, while in the inner voice octaves descend by step on stronger first beats in line with the *A* music progression (G–F–Eb–D). These dramatic-expansive movements reflect upon the idea of looking in to the eyes of the loved one. The second phrase of this third verse continues the inner voice's linear semitonal descent from D via C#, C, B, Bb to A while retaining the simultaneous second-beat high 'D' and low 'G' piano octaves. The music reflects upon the protagonist's distressing realisation that the identity of the person's reflection in his loved one's eyes and also the occupant of that person's bed is not himself but another. This sexual and emotional reality is reflected in an utterly changed piano accompanying punctuation of a near perfect repetition of the established *A* melody in the voice. The vocal line of this *A* variant music (referred to as *A'*) differs from the original in one note only: in the third bar the melody outlines a complete G minor chord (bar 28) for the first time as the voice climaxes on a high 'g²'. This climax is, however, not euphoric given the chromatically descending line. The outline of the quaver vocal descent (bar 28) is taken up in the piano's bass *marcato* quavers (see Ex. 5.7, bars 29–37) which marks not alone the rush of response to the image presented of the image of the new lovers' sexual intimacy '...his utter fancy lies/The dark caressive head' but may also be considered to be an anticipation of (or indeed the cause of) the agitation of the fourth verse. Britten's setting of the word 'dark' is musically and textually highlighted: as stated the voice reaches a dynamically climactic high 'G' (minor) tonic, which is undermined by the relative brightness of the preceding bar's

isolated G major chord (bar 27) at the reference to ‘fancy lies’. It also textually connects with the poem’s initial mood-setting images of ‘Night’ falling and ‘shadows’ from the first verse, also expressed in ‘G’ as a tonic. This musical association contributes to the realisation that the person described erotically is the cause of the loss of the loved one.

Example 5.7: ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’, bars 29–36

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system covers bars 29-32, and the second system covers bars 33-36. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. The tempo and mood are marked 'agitato' and 'p' (piano). The piano accompaniment includes a 'marcato' marking in the first system and a 'mf' (mezzo-forte) marking in the second system. The lyrics are: 'head. For each love to its aim is true, And all kinds seek_ their own; You love your life and I_ love you, So'.

Britten’s *agitato* performance indication for the penultimate verse sets the scene for a declaration of unselfish true love, in spite of the devastating realisation, in the second verse, that this love is hopeless. The poet’s philosophical postulation that in matters of love ‘all kinds seek their own’ is commented upon by the composer and receives his musical approval. This agreement comes in the form of Britten’s transformation, of a G minor chord (bar 30) which previously represented lost love ‘each love’, to the key of G major (see Ex. 5.7, bars 34–35) which now becomes the custodian of the absolute positivity of the human desire to share one’s life sexually and emotionally. The pointing out of this passage of music is indicative of Britten’s probable interpretation of ‘and all kinds seek their own’ as being Auden’s ambiguous

statement of the open secret that love, albeit heterosexual or homosexual, is valid. Here, Britten's symbolic allusion to G major represents the musical equivalence of the poet's expression of the purity of 'true' love. This conventional modulation however becomes noteworthy in the context of the surrounding shifting harmonies, with F major chord (bar 31) and Gb major chord (bar 32) a musical symbol of this search, which is unique to this section of the song and is resolutely confirmed by the dominant D major to tonic G major perfect cadence (Ex 5.7, bars 33–35).

The final phrase of this verse is shown to be musically significant in a number of ways (bars 35–38). The melodic line essentially outlines a diminished octave linear ascent from 'f^{#1}' to 'f²', while a 'D' octave span prevails in verse two and in the opening phrase of the fourth verse. Along this current journey the repeated 'eflat²' (bars 36–37) depicts the protagonist's outlook that he 'must lie alone' and makes allusion to the repeated vocal Eb in the second verse (bars 12–13), which in that earlier instance was associated with the related emotional weeping. The ultimate cause of this sorrow is now clarified through Britten's repeated use of the same musical material. Also, Britten's setting of the text 'So I must lie alone' is particularly poignant, as from the word 'must' the piano supports, for the first time, both the melodic and the rhythmic content of the vocal declamation. This feature of musical doubling accentuates the expression of being 'alone' by apparently contradicting that idea, while being accompanied. The pattern of the piano bass which outlines a pentachordal octave descent commencing on 'd' (bar 29), 'c' (bar 31), 'B' (bar 34), and 'Bb' (bar 36) (see Ex. 5.7, bars 29–36) ends on the word 'alone'; thereafter the piano's three-octave *crescendo* ascent expressively supports the voice's prolongation of the climactic high 'f²' final syllable of 'alone'. The piano bass falls away after the first beat of the bar (bar 38) and the reduced texture of the single line of ascending quavers musically depicts the

text ‘alone’; again, the first use on this feature by the composer confirms Britten’s musical intention to show this particular text in relief.

As with his expansion of the closing vocal descending quavers at the end of the middle verse, which served as the basis of the piano’s bass line in the subsequent verse (bars 28–29), in this final verse Britten utilises mimetic practices which directly link instrument, piano in this case, with poetic text. In the upbeat to and in bars 39 and 40, we see Britten’s first replication of the vocal rhythm of the song, already identified as a (quaver/crotchet, quaver, crotchet) rhythmic pattern and also used to set ‘So I must lie a lone’, as the basis of the piano’s accompaniment at the commencement of the final verse. That this rhythmic pattern is derived from the accentual syllabic metre of Auden’s words has already been expanded upon in the current chapter. Therefore, in this example we see the rhythmic composition of Britten’s piano instrumental line deriving directly from text (with the following metre: u/S u S u) and the exposition of this significant Britten text-setting technique.

When the voice begins to sing the tragic text ‘O hurry to the fêted spot/ Of your deliberate fall’, the conversion of this textual rhythm into the rhythm of piano accompaniment effectively creates a counterpoint with the voice (bars 39–40). The voice remains high in its range sustaining a *forte* ‘gflat²’, while remaining at a higher pitch than heard in the piano’s treble. This variation in Britten’s regular phrase length in setting all textual units can be seen in Table 5.8. The pitch and dynamic of the voice create the climactic motion which depicts the text ‘O hurry’. The piano’s rhythmic-octave accompaniment, based on the song’s core pattern of vocal rhythm, also contributes to this textual depiction. This forward propulsion ends with the piano’s sustained harmonic perfect fifths and perfect fourths (C and G) in bar 43. Meanwhile, the voice’s sustained singing of ‘gflat²’/‘f#²’ (enharmonics) commences its linear

descent as an intentional musical expression of ‘your deliberate fall’, producing the voice’s lowest note ‘c#¹’ at the word ‘fall’. A semitonal shift in one of the notes of the three harmonic perfect fifths in the piano from ‘C’ (bar 43) to ‘C#’ (bar 44) creates a diminished-fifth interval doubled twice. These three superimposed diminished fifth intervals in the piano, achieved by a descending movement, aptly reflect upon the desolation of the text ‘fall’. The preceding poetic analysis of this text suggests that the fall referred to here represents either, the loved one falling in love with another, or if the present reference to the ‘fêted spot’ refers to the previous ‘precious’ ‘bed’ then this text would imply falling asleep; in either case a desolate result is conveyed in this tritonal presentation of the song’s final climax.

The return of the *tempo primo* announces and introduces the textual conclusion of this song as a coda. So too, the return of the A’ vocal melody musically suggests the poetic idea of memory as explicitly referred to in the text’s world of dreams. Interestingly, the piano treble includes the harmonic descent associated with the A music (G, F, E [new], Eb, D) (see Ex. 5.6a) rather than that supporting the A’ music (C#, C, B, Bb, A) (see Ex. 5.6b, bars 25–29) and thereby combining elements of two closely related musical motifs. Whereas the previous presentation of this exact melodic line in the third verse (bars /26–29) was accompanied with a three-octave piano expansion from the first to the second beat of each bar (depicting ‘lucky [wide open] eyes’), on this occasion the piano is characterised by inward contraction to a ‘D’ octave on the second beat of each bar. The internal refocusing of this music also brings attention to the dream content of the text. The vocal part outlines the established phrase ascending from ‘g¹’ to high ‘g²’ and its subsequent descent to ‘d¹’, however, the final linear arrival at ‘d¹’ is disturbed by the octave displacement of the penultimate note ‘Eb’ which creates a final interval of a falling minor ninth rather than the original stepwise minor-

second descent. The voice's final arrival on a 'D' in bar 50 coincides with the piano's supporting stepwise descent (detailed above) also onto 'D'. Therefore this bar presents a summation of the song as a whole: a dialogue between 'G' and 'D', in the context of the tonic and dominant of G aeolian. The final four bars of this song reveal a dynamic reduction to triple piano in which 'D' now dominates this 'G' and 'D' discourse. Finally 'D' is left alone in a low unqualified octave. This note has assumed the qualities of the protagonist who likewise is also abandoned and alone. This isolation is due to his existential outlook 'I love you so I must lie alone'. The final obliteration of the note G from the discourse directly reflects upon the protagonist's dream world in which any image of the lost loved one is denied.

Table 5.8 Britten's song: 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land'

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	1 bar		Treble only	
V.1 Lines 1–2	2+2	'moor' 2 dotted crotchet beats	A music, upbeat quaver/ quaver-crotchet-quaver vocal rhythm setup	
Expansion V.1	1			
L3–4	2+2	'poor' 2 beats	A music	
Interlude			Intro. of pf bass	
V.2 L1–4	2+1+2+2	'cry' 2 beats		
Interlude	1		Treble only	
V.3 L1–2	2+2	'bed' 2 beats	A music, pf expansion from 1-octave interval to 3 octaves	
Expansion V.3	1			
L3–4	2+2	'head' 1 beat	A' music	
V.4 L1–2	2+3	'own' 3 beats	Semiquavers in bass	
L3–4	2+2	'alone' 2 beats	Ending treble only accompaniment	
V.5 L1–2	3+2	'hurry' 4 beats, 'fall' 2 beats		

Expansion V.5	2		4-octave treble & bass intervals, contraction	
L3-4	2+2	'all' 2 beats	A' music	
Coda	4		Contraction of G and D to 1-octave single D	

5.5.5.1 'The Sun Shines Down': poetic source

This poem was composed by Auden in July 1932, apparently to celebrate the twenty-first birthday of a young man, at a time when the poet was himself twenty-five years of age, and therefore predates his meeting with Britten in July 1935 and their subsequent artistic collaborations; this poem was first published as 'To a Young Man on His 21st Birthday', in *New Oxford Outlook* (1933).¹²⁴ Fuller notes that Auden's first publication of this poem included fifteen verses;¹²⁵ however, the source for Britten's composition is the seven-verse version of 'The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea' from Auden's *Look Stranger!*¹²⁶ Therefore, the composer may have been unaware of the existence of an earlier expanded version; indeed an eighth final verse was included in the copy of this poem which was given to Auden's lover and collaborator, Chester Kallman, in 1939 (see Table 5.9). Auden did not include this poem in subsequent revisions of his poetic collections.¹²⁷ Perhaps this was the poet's response to the specificity and the topical nature of its poetic content. Unlike the preceding song 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land', which was dedicated by Auden for the composer and which may have affected Britten's decision to set it in song, this current song 'The Sun Shines Down' represents Britten's independent selection of a poetic text.

The apparent lightness and inconsequential nature of the opening two three-line verses is only confirmed in the final verse when the young man's attainment of his

¹²⁴ W. H. Auden, 'To a Young Man on His 21st Birthday', *New Oxford Outlook*, May 1933. As cited in, Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 167.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹²⁶ W. H. Auden, 'The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea', in *Look Stranger!*, p. 47.

¹²⁷ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 167.

majority is confirmed. However, this clarification does not occur before Auden affords himself the liberty of delivering an extended dismal commentary on contemporary social and political life. Johnson makes reference to this central section of text as ‘Auden’s sardonic observations of contemporary British life’¹²⁸, and for this reason alone this song might have fitted in well into the song cycle *On This Island*,¹²⁹ also completed by Britten in October 1937. This theme is presented prominently in the penultimate song ‘Nocturne’ and in the final song ‘As It Is, plenty’, both from that contemporary cycle, but these latter works treat such recurrent subject matter more seriously and with greater conviction than does this current song. That Auden surrounds the core political message of his poem within the context of a birthday wish is problematic in a serious appreciation of this poetry. It is not the juxtaposition of wry humour with serious intent which jars the ear in ‘The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea’, as the poet achieves this challenging combination successfully in ‘As It Is, Plenty’, but rather, it is the matter of poetic imbalance and incongruity which questions the artistic merit of this text, between the barren social depiction and the final good wish ‘To-morrow morning’s another day’. This juxtaposition is unmediated and ultimately unconvincing. However, such literary concern need not of itself adversely affect Britten’s song composition of this text.

Auden’s indentation of the central verses of text (verses 3–6) distinguishes this block of text, from the two introductory and single final closing verses, and functions almost as an indication of a theatrical aside;¹³⁰ that this aside contains texts of greater importance than the framing words has been alluded to above. Auden’s exclusion of a final eighth verse (see Table 5.9), whether in omission or otherwise, has the effect of

¹²⁸ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 156.

¹²⁹ Britten, *On This Island* op.11.

¹³⁰ Auden, *Look Stranger!*, p. 47.

unbalancing the perfect sectional symmetry which a two–four–two verse-structure would have given the poem. As they are, the themes of ‘The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea’ are presented in a ternary two–four–one poetic form. The trite nature of the line-ending rhyming of the unset additional verse ‘apart–heart–cart’ (see Table 5.9) adds nothing to the already over-the-top ‘campness’ of the actual final line-ending rhyming of ‘gay-away-day’.¹³¹ The composer’s exclusion of the penultimate line from the final verse in his setting of ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’ and his substitution of additional text repetitions lead me to postulate that Britten may also have deleted this eighth verse of ‘The Sun Shines Down...’, by reason of flippancy, had he been aware of its existence.

A division of the poem into three sections is also supported by a review of Auden’s line-ending rhyming schemes in which ‘aaa’ is used in the first, second and last verses and ‘ccdd’ is used in all intervening verses (see Table 5.9). The opening poetic material of the first and second verses and its return in the final verse are characterised by the use of alliteration and textual connections. The poem’s opening line displays strong alliterative sibilance, and ‘the sun *shines* down on the *ships* at sea’ also conveys detachment within the contexts of nature’s power. This assonance continues into the following line, with two further repetitions of ‘shines’, in which mankind is united (‘you’ and ‘me’) by this energy. Auden, rather than restrict the application of this poem to the young man referred to in the final verse, expresses a wider appeal with the word ‘we’ in the following line of this first verse. The poet rhetorically questions life’s fundamental issues related to both a consideration of the present ‘Whatever we are’ and the future ‘or are going to be’, thereby effectively presenting a poetic ontological textual

¹³¹ This retrospective observation is not based on an historically informed understanding of the words camp or gay.

discourse, within terms defined by Zbikowski (see 2.3.4.1), which is available for conceptual blending in a further musical context.

Aspects of changing perceptions in response to the passing of time connect texts in the second and final verses of this poem. A focus on a future outlook is ensured by repetitions of the word 'To-morrow'.¹³² Childhood innocence has 'passed away' and sexual maturation and experience are implied in 'to-morrow morning you'll be a man'. These considerations of the past and the future are mediated by an awareness of the present in 'to-night you are flushed and gay'. The strength and impetuous nature of this young man's specifically male energy is aptly conveyed in Auden's lyrics 'let wishes be horses as fast as they can'. This element of pace infuses the remainder of the text.

The propriety and natural maturation of the aforementioned images and ideas which are contained in the framing verses of text are in stark comparison to the disastrous inevitability of Auden's present-tense political exposé. The commentary in this middle section is framed in terms of an intentional avoidance by organised society of natural agricultural methods which nourish its citizens (verse three's 'the crops are growing' and verse six's ambiguous 'it's my bread and butter'). The inability of society to hear the warnings of the artist 'the poet reciting', is evident in the 'dogs are barking...but nobody knows how the wind is blowing'. Auden's British public-schoolboy experience is evident in his inclusion of a punctuated exclamation 'Gosh' as he thereby identifies, by his uses of its particular vernacular, the social class which he blames for the ills of the subsequent mantra. That 'history seems to have struck a bad patch' is reiterated in Auden's listing of many of the pillars of society and the destructive effects of their collective ignorance of the laws of natural justice; even the

¹³² The hyphenation of 'to-morrow' and 'to-night' was a contemporary literary practice and is not suggestive of extended meaning. John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938*, p. xx.

initial neutral presentation of the ‘teacher setting examinations’ is found to be guilty by association in Auden’s increasingly negative depictions of other professionals. The journalist is complicit in ‘his falsifications’ and ineffectual reporting of political reality; likewise, the poet’s verse goes on deaf ears. Similarly, ‘the judge’, ‘the banker’, the scientist, and the engineer are also revealed as complicit in their dedication to the business of war; the ultimate conclusion of such diligence is ‘to exterminate everyone under the sun’. Auden’s reuse of the image of the sun contrasts with its initial unifying effects. The practical personal dilemma faced by an informed and educated individual is ironically stated in “‘What can I do? It’s my bread and butter””.

In this four-verse central section of text Auden prominently uses the definite article on eleven occasions (see Table 5.9). His localised use of this grammatical identifier has been noted in ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ (see Table 5.5; verse 1, line 7) to highlight social roles within family groupings, and similarly in ‘As It Is, Plenty’, the final song from Britten’s song cycle *On This Island*, the definite article is used in a satirical value judgement of social relations ‘The children happy/And the car, the car/That goes so far/And the wife devoted’.¹³³ However, in ‘The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea’, Auden makes extensive use of this feature as he develops the single use of the definite article in a sentence to double and triple use: ‘*The* teacher’, ‘*The* judge enforcing *the* obsolete law’, and finally ‘*The* banker making *the* loan for *the* war’. In this section of text ‘the’ takes on a satirical meaning by association; the poet thereby loads these neutral words with negative connotations.

The image of the bard ‘reciting to Lady Diana/While the footmen whisper “Have a banana”’ expresses, at a surface level, society’s more widespread distracted attention but it also contains a less obvious specific sexual inference. ‘Lady Diana had a banana’

¹³³ Britten, ‘As it is, plenty’, *On This Island* op.11.

is a line from a popular song which uses the image of this fruit as slang for sexual intercourse.¹³⁴ This hidden reference is unlikely to have been lost on Britten or indeed on the young man, the protagonist of the poem, and is expressive of a social culture which relegates consideration of sexuality to innuendo. Auden's peculiar placement of this sexual image at the centre of his poem, embedded within a listing of the good and the great, draws further attention to this cultural malaise.

Table 5.9 Auden's poem: 'The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea'

		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns Ideas/Images
V.1				
1	The sun shines down on the ships at sea,	9	a	'sun', 's' alliteration, definite article
2	It shines on you and it shines on me	9	a	'shines' repeated 's' sibilance
3	Whatever we are or are going to be.	11	a	Uncertainty present and future
V.2				
1	To-morrow if everything goes to plan,	10	b	'to-morrow' repeated
2	To-morrow morning you'll be a man:	9	b	Implied sexual experience
3	Let wishes be horses as fast as they can.	11	b	Passing of time
V.3 [as an aside]				
1	The dogs are barking, the crops are growing,	10	c	Internal rhyming
2	But nobody knows how the wind is blowing:	11	c	Uncertainty
3	Gosh, to look at we're no great catch;	8	d	Public school Englishism
4	History seems to have struck a bad patch.	10	d	Political state of affairs
V.4				
1	We haven't the time—it's been such a rush—	10	e	Urgency, passing of time
2	Except to attend to our little push:	10	e	
3	The teacher setting examinations,	10	f	'ex' alliteration
4	The journalist writing his falsifications,	12	f	Definite article, internal rhyming

¹³⁴ A line from a popular song c.1909 written by Francis Collins quotes 'I had a banana with Lady Diana', the sexual innuendo of which is confirmed in: Paul Beale, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 46.

V.5					
1	The poet reciting to Lady Diana	12	g		
2	While the footmen whisper ‘Have a banana’,	11	g		
3	The judge enforcing the obsolete law,	10	h	Failed legal system, definite article	
4	The banker making the loan for the war,	10	h	Failed economic syst., internal rhyming	
V.6					
1	The expert designing the long-range gun	10	i	War	
2	To exterminate everyone under the sun,	12	i	‘ex’ alliterations, ‘sun’	
3	Would like to get out but can only mutter:—	11	j		
4	‘What can I do? It’s my bread and butter.’	10	j	Psychological questioning, commercial realisation	
V.7	[return to opening theme]				
1	In your house to-night you are flushed and gay;	10	k	Now	
2	Twenty-one years have passed away;	8	k	Passing of innocence	
3	To-morrow morning’s another day.	9	k	‘to-morrow morning’ repeated, hopeful	
V.8	[verse not set by Britten]				
1	[If we can’t love, though miles apart,	8	l		
2	If we can’t trust with all our heart,	8	l		
3	If we can’t do that, then we’re in the cart.]	10	l	‘If we can’t’ repeated	

5.5.5.2 ‘The Sun Shines Down’: musical setting

The posthumous publication of ‘The Sun Shines Down’ is based on Britten’s pencilled draft manuscript copy which is undated but likely to have been composed during either May or October 1937.¹³⁵ The contemporaneous composition of this song together with ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ and ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’ (see Table 5.1) with Britten’s *On This Island*, also completed in October 1937, and the designation of that latter publication as an Auden ‘Volume One’, suggest these songs were likely

¹³⁵ The composition of ‘The Sun Shines Down’ is dated to either May or October 1937. Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i. Banks also considers it to have been completed in October 1937. Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 40

contenders for a possible second volume of Auden songs.¹³⁶ The lack of any significant musicological research on this song may be due to its comparatively recent publication. Johnson's cursory treatment of the song, characteristically, provides some illuminating detail;¹³⁷ likewise, Fuller's comments on Auden's poem are brief.¹³⁸

As with Britten's setting of his five verses of 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land', and again here, in his seven-verse setting of 'The Sun Shines Down', he chooses not to set this poem strophically, in spite of its regularity of form and rhyme (see Table 5.9); rather, Britten chooses, in this current song, to set blocks of text using musical motifs which distinguish three sections of music. For similar reasons, a through-composed setting of these seven verses would likewise not respond to the structural composition of his text. Britten identifies the linguistic and poetic features which support his composition of this *ABA'* modified ternary-form song; the related subject matter of section A (first and second verses) and A' (final verse), and its significant contrast with the content of the central section of text (verses three to six), have been noted. The composer seeks to characterise musically both the mood and the meaning of these opposing textual ideas in addition to his specific controlled use of interpretive word painting.

'The Sun Shines Down' - Section A

This first section of music is characterised by the carefree rhythmic freedom of the piano's introductory motif. The bass's alternating 'C' and 'A' pitch accompaniment is sustained throughout the first verse until it transfers into the piano treble (see Ex. 5.8, bars 4–8) and sets the mood of hope and vitality in the text, with this leaping rhythmic

¹³⁶ This speculation is also commented upon in: Reed, 'Introductory Note', in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, i, and in, Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 40.

¹³⁷ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 156.

¹³⁸ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 167.

motif. The radiance of the sun is conveyed in the two triadic descending semiquaver runs in C major (bar 4) ending on 'f#¹' and A minor (bar 5) ending on 'd¹' (see Ex. 5.8, bars 4–5); on each of these two occasions the action of the text 'it shines' is anticipated in the piano's melodic figure. This musical motif is also used in Britten's second verse but its direction has changed; the ascending figure is now associated with the sexual awakening of the young man 'you'll be a man' (bar 14). The third line of text is illustrated graphically in another semiquaver stepwise ascending line in the treble, which contrasts with a slower stepwise descent in the piano bass (see Ex. 5.8, bars 6–8); this musical expansion reflects upon the poetic idea that the horizons of this young male protagonist are broadening as he reaches maturity. However, Britten's curtailment of this expanding vista with his setting of a static *piano* staccato repetition of a 'd²' pitch at 'are going to be', together with the first interruption in the bass's rhythmic figure and the rest in the piano accompaniment (see Ex. 5.8, bars 7–8), are prophetic of the forthcoming disastrous social environment. Similarly, the motif is reused in the second verse, but again on this occasion the element of musical expansion reflects upon the increasing potency and impetuosity of the young man 'Let wishes be horses as fast as they can' (bars 14–16); the static repetition of 'c²' for the final four syllables of this phrase in a *forte* dynamic, however not indicated here as staccato, continues the momentum referred to in the text.

setting practice is related to the composer's equally consistent use of the definite article throughout this song as a musical upbeat to the more important subsequent noun, for example 'the/sun' and 'the/ships'. In Britten's setting of the second verse this upbeat iambic effect is applied to the repeated line opening 'to-morrow' (bars /11 and /12). In each case the composer's musical treatment of his text is as a direct response to the consistent initial unstressed quality of first words in each line.

'The Sun Shines Down' - Section B

The piano's introductory parallel octave movement (bar 19) which opens Britten's setting of the central block of text (verses 3–6) also characterises much of the music in this section of the song. The parallel quaver movement in the piano part contributes significantly to a musical pacing which reflects the verbal propulsion inherent in Auden's jaunty words, for example: 'the journalist writing his falsifications'. This musical feature adds credibility to the text by suggesting the inevitability of the inexorable momentum towards political, economic, and social disintegration; however, within this flowing pattern, Britten remains in firm control of his ability to highlight specific aspects of the text by varying established rhythmic features and patterns of accentuation.

This song's central four-verse section is generally devoid of the melodic variety of the opening music. The vocal line is characterised by monotone rhythmic repetitions. These pitches are initially supported rhythmically and melodically by the piano, which simultaneously sounds a major second (see Ex. 5.9, bars /22–29). The vocal line ascends almost imperceptibly by step over an extended duration of line (see Table 5.10).

Table 5.10 Pace of melodic change in ‘The Sun Shines Down’

Poetic source	Melodic repeated note	Dynamic	Bar no.	Text	
Verse 3	Line 1	Bb	<i>pp</i>	/21–25	‘The dogs are barking...’
	Line 4	B	<i>pp</i>	30–31	‘History seems to have struck’
Verse 4	Line 1	C	<i>P</i>	34–35	‘We haven’t the time...’
	Line 2	C#–D	<i>P</i>	/36–37	‘Except to attend...’
	Line 3	Eb	<i>mf</i>	39–43	‘The teacher setting...’
Verse 5	Line 1	F#	<i>mf</i>	45–48	‘The poet reciting...’
	Line 2	G	<i>mf</i>	49–50	‘Have a banana’
	Line 3	A	<i>f</i>	/52–53	‘The judge enforcing...’
	Line 4	Bb		/55–56	‘The banker making...’
Verse 6	Line 1	B	<i>cres.</i>	/58–59	‘The expert designing’
	Line 2	C C#		60 61–62	‘To exterminate everyone under the sun’
	Line 3	D	<i>f</i>	/64–66	‘Would like to get out’
	Line 4	D–Eb–E–F	<i>ff</i>	67	‘What can I do?’

Example 5.9: ‘The Sun Shines Down’, bars /22–29

The image displays two systems of musical notation for 'The Sun Shines Down', bars 22-29. The first system covers bars 22-25 and includes the lyrics: 'The dogs are bark-ing, the crops are grow-ing, But no-bod-y knows how the wind is blow-ing:'. The music is marked *pp* (pianissimo). The second system covers bars 26-29 and includes the lyrics: 'Gosh, to look at we're no great catch;'. The music is marked *P* (piano) and *sf* (sforzando). The notation includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment with various dynamics and articulation marks.

This combined tabulation of musical and textual data shows the pace of the voice's stepwise melodic ascent and also that these changes occur with increasing, almost linear, frequency, given that all verses contain four lines of text and that the composer sets each of these textual units with reasonable phrase regularity (see Table 5.11). The characteristic linear primary focus of Britten's style is thereby revealed. His use of repeated pitches affords a new audibility to the monotonal declamation of this text; so too, his controlled gradual rising of the vocal pitch has the effect of increasing the dramatic tension in the song and also it creates a musical atmosphere in which the meaning of the text is intensified. Whereas Auden lists the destructive roles played by society's power brokers in an apparent increasing order of negative impact, the composer depicts this gradual escalation through raising the pitch of the repeated notes; this is underscored by the use of increasing dynamic levels, from *pianissimo* through *piano*, *mezzo-forte*, and *forte* to *fortissimo*. Britten refers directly to his intentional compositional practice of aligning relative pitch and dynamics: at bar 21 he references a handwritten note at the base of his score 'the expression marks also determine the pitch of voice—soft for low, loud for high'.¹³⁹

However, even within the structural predictability of the voice part Britten draws attention to isolated segments of text. For example his setting of 'Gosh, to look at *we're* no great catch' introduces new text-setting practices to this song: firstly, the quintessentially English schoolboy quaint expletive is highlighted in its textual separation by rests (bar 26); secondly triplet dotted-quavers are also introduced to affect a conversational style (see Ex. 5.9, bars 26–29); and finally the leaping melodic motif used in the *A* section music, commencing with a major-sixth ascent and minor-seventh

¹³⁹ Britten, 'The Sun Shines Down', MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, pp. 109–13 (110).

descent (bar 4), returns in a variant form, of an ascending minor sixth followed by a falling major seventh, musically highlighting that the textual reference ‘Gosh’ also serves to connect the framing social world of the young man with this central section of text. Such isolated musical linkage seems appropriate to the intimacy implicit in ‘we’re no great catch’ from the collegiality of the first verse’s ‘it shines on *you* and it shines on *me*’.

Britten’s use of triplet dotted-quavers, to convey a colloquial style, returns when the ‘footmen *whisper*’ (see Ex. 5.10, bars /48–51). The opportunity presented by Auden’s ironic juxtaposition of humorous triviality in the midst of a serious dilemma, with its implicit sexual innuendo, is seized upon by the composer. Britten’s dramatic melodic setting of the absurd five-syllable text ‘Have a banana’ (see bars 49–50) compares satirically with his monotone setting of the preceding bombastic five-syllable teacher’s ‘examinations’ (bar /40) and the journalist’s ‘falsifications’, which textually on face value is of greater significance. Further ironic comparison is created by Britten’s linkage, of the nonchalant ‘footmen’ and their sexual encouragement to the equally ineffectual ‘judge enforcing the obsolete law’, by way of a parallel major-ninth chromatic quaver run (bars 49–51) in the piano.

Example 5.10: ‘The Sun Shines Down’, bars /48–51

The musical score for Example 5.10 consists of two systems. The top system is the vocal line, written in treble clef. It begins with a triplet of dotted quavers (eighth notes) for the words 'foot-man whisper'. The melody then rises to a major ninth interval (e.g., G4 to A5) for the words 'Have a ba-na-na', before falling. The bottom system is the piano accompaniment, written in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The right hand features a prominent chromatic quaver run (eighth notes) that ascends through a major ninth interval, marked with 'molto cresc.' and 'f'. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Example 5.11: ‘The Sun Shines Down’, bars 59, 60, 63, 66

The image shows a musical score for the song 'The Sun Shines Down'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is marked with four sections: A, B, C, and D. Section A (bar 59) features the lyrics 'long-range gun' with a bracket over the notes. Section B (bar 60) features 'To ex-termin-ate eve-ry-one'. Section C (bar 63) features 'Would' and 'mut-ter:'. Section D (bar 66) features 'mut-ter:'. The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as 'cresc.' and 'mf'. The score is in a key with one flat and a 4/4 time signature.

The isolated use of quavers to set the text ‘long-range gun’ (see Ex. 5.11 (A), bar 59) places this text in relief and together with his staccato treatment of the action of annihilation, heard in the final three vowels of ‘exterminate’ (see Ex. 5.11 (B), bar 60), are localised examples of word painting which show Britten’s musical expression of his identification and agreement with Auden’s anti-war stance. However, understandably, Britten’s brilliant depiction of the positive image of the ‘sun’ from the first line of this song does not return, given the despondent nature of his text ‘exterminate everyone under the sun’. The first evidence of the presence of an aching social conscience is heard in ‘Would like to get out’ which is expressed within the context of the impact of the piano’s first and only presentation of a contrary motion passage, which may be considered to reflect on the claustrophobic essence of the text (see Ex. 5.11 (C), bar /63). Interestingly this isolated contrary motion section contrasts with the subsequent antiphonal dialogue between unaccompanied voice in bar 67 and the piano’s major-ninth parallel motion in bar 68. The feeble response of this increasing awareness of political and social strife is, ineffectually, to ‘only *mutter*’ (bars 65–66); Britten uses a musical equivalent of this line’s final two-syllable word ‘mutter’, set to ‘e²’ and ‘d²’ in the voice with a piano accompaniment of a series of four-octave major-second

descending two-tone clusters (C and D) which creates a conversational echo effect (see Ex. 5.11 (D), bar 66). Here again, triplets are associated with aimless verbal expression.

The dramatic isolation of the rhetorical text 'What can I do?' is underscored by silence in the accompaniment and almost contradictory, stepwise ascending *crescendo* from *forte* to *fortissimo*, which suggests that this protestation is reflective of an internalised monologue rather than a publicly articulated statement; the ironic justification for these 'falsifications' is expressed as a jocular response which has serious ramifications for society, 'It's my bread and butter'. Britten adds to this musical irony with an isolated one-bar move to triple compound time (bar 69) and an immediate return to duple compound time in the subsequent bar; together with his use of two groups of chattering triplets; and with the exaggerated local *diminuendo* from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo*, the same range which encompassed Britten's setting of the entire central section of text.

'The Sun Shines Down' - Section A'

After Britten's climactic treatment of the final line of the sixth verse of text, 'What can I do?' (bars 67–68) in a semitonal rise to a high 'f²' and the subsequent musical relaxation on 'It's my bread and butter' (bar 69), the return of the Tempo I music from the song's opening has an ironic impact, which was not previously present. We are now aware of the dismal effects of the ineffectual political and economic outlook for this generation's young men and as a consequence the repeated music may now contain modified associations and meaning. However, Britten subtly alters some musical elements of these returning motifs, thereby reflecting the effect of the transformation which has so dramatically occurred in the central section of text. For example the rhythmic grace note (bar 1) returns (bar 70), now voiced high in the treble and extended in additional repetitions before the voice re-enters. This passage descends sequentially;

these modifications reflect on the lack of reality of the preceding text (height of pitch), and the closing descent contrasts with the opening radiance of the sun—the ‘sun’ has musically been exterminated.

So too, the disjunct melodic series of the first verse returns (major-sixth ascent followed by descents of a major third and a diminished fifth); however, they are no longer responded to with energetic triadic semiquavers in the piano (see Ex. 5.8, bars 4–5) but rather with static repeated quavers (bar 75). Britten’s final setting of Auden’s text ‘To-morrow morning’s another day’ with a G major diatonic scale passage does provide a vestige of hope. However, the composer’s interpolation of an additional section of nonsense text of ‘la, la, la’s’ reveals his appreciation of the light-hearted content of the framing verses and his intention to musically and textually enhance the poem’s ironic trivialisation of a serious global situation. Review of the ‘text alteration’ content of the poetic table included in the analysis of each song throughout this chapter (Tables 5.4/.6/.8/.11/.13/.15) reveals the infrequency with which Britten changes Auden’s texts, with the exception of the composer’s musical repetition of text; therefore, the mocking nature of his commentary of this current nonsense-text insertion emphasises the flippancy of Auden’s texts. Interestingly, but probably not Britten’s intention, the structural effect of adding this text rebalances the symmetry of a 2–4–2 verse formal structure as referred to above. With this textual insertion Britten has provided a final highly ironic comment on Auden’s satirical text.

Table 5.11 Britten's song: 'The Sun Shines Down'

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	2 bars		Repeated rhythmic fig.	
Verse 1 Lines 1–3	2+2+2		Leaping melodic fig. Pf: expanding s/q's series, ↓ melodic s/q's	
Interlude	2		Transfer of rhythmic fig. to treble	
V.2 L1–3	2+2+2		Leaping melodic fig. Pf: ↑ melodic s/q's, expanding s/q's series	
Interlude	5		Parallel octaves	
V.3 L1–2	2+2		Bb repeat	
L3	3	'Gosh' long note, text separation		
L4	2		B repeat	
Interlude	2			
V.4 L1–2	2+2		B↑C, C#↑D repeat	
L3	2		D↑Eb repeat	
L4	2		D↑Eb repeat	
Interlude	1			
V.5 L1	2		F# repeat	
L2	1+2	Text separation	F# repeat, F#↑G↑G#↑A	
Expansion V.5	1		Parallel major 9ths	
L3	2		A repeat	
L4	2		A↑Bb repeat	
Interlude	1			
V.6 L1–2	2+3	'sun' long note	Bb↑B↑C↑C# repeat	'designing' became 'determining', ¹⁴⁰
Expansion V.6			Pf bass inversion of treble	
L3	1+2	Text separation	D↑Eb, D↑E	
L4	2+1	'do' long note, unaccompanied, text separation	Semitone ↑ D to F, pf ↑ parallel major 9ths chromatic scale	
Interlude	4		Return of Tempo I	

¹⁴⁰ Both the score of Britten's 'The Sun Shines Down' and his poetic source 'The Sun Shines Down on the Ships at Sea' in *Look Stranger!* quote 'designing the long-range gun', while Ford quotes this as 'determining...'. This may suggest a change in the subsequent publication of revisions of his text by Auden. Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets: The Poetry He Set to Music*, p. 55.

V.7 L1-3	3+1+2			
Interlude	3		Leaping melodic fig. Pf: expanding s/q's, ↑ and then ↓ s/q's	
Postlude	6		A major ↑ scale	'la, la...' added text

5.5.6.1 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes': poetic source

This three-verse love poem was written by Auden in March 1936 and was published, firstly, in *The Listener* April 1936,¹⁴¹ then included in his poetic collection *Look Stranger!*, also from 1936.¹⁴² This latter publication provides Britten's source for his song 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes'. The topic of love occupied the poet in early 1936 as the composition of 'Underneath the Abject Willow' (see Table 5.3) and 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (see Table 5.7), which also engage with aspects of love, are also dated to March 1936 (see Table 5.1). The poetic source for Britten's 'Let the Florid Music Praise' from *On This Island*¹⁴³ was composed a month earlier by Auden in February 1936 and is also a love poem.¹⁴⁴ As with all of these first-line titled poems, Auden consistently provides his audience with an attention-catching imaginatively suggestive, but equally obscure, conspicuous word: 'florid', 'abject', 'rigid' and now 'unruffled'. But whereas the object of emotional and sexual attraction is either explicitly stated as male as in 'Let the Florid Music Praise' ('and my vows break before his look') and in 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (as to his utter fancy lies') or ambiguous in 'Underneath the Abject Willow', there are no such clarifying pronouns contained in 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes'. Conversely, there are also no exclusively female images

¹⁴¹ This poem is presented without contextualization in the weekly British Broadcast Corporation publication 15 April 1936. W. H. Auden, 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', *The Listener*, xv/379 (1936), 701-750, (732).

¹⁴² Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 173.

¹⁴³ Britten, *On This Island* op.11.

¹⁴⁴ Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 151.

contained in this poem. The universal appeal of this poem, due to its engagement with the nature of love, allows it broad interpretative appeal.

The formal structure of this three-verse poem, each verse containing nine lines, is also contributed to by the regularity of its line-ending rhyming scheme and its syllabic metric count (see Table 5.12). Within this poetic tightness and symmetry the rhyming scheme distinguishes the second and third verses, as a unit, from the first verse, as the first line of the final two verses end 'are done' and 'and done' and their fifth line-endings contain cross rhyming 'worn' and 'swan' (see Table 5.12). This formal distinction is also reflected in the subject matter of these textual units. The opening verse deals exclusively with the animal world while the central and final verses engage with aspects of human love, within the context of this first verse. Auden's tripartite approach to animals 'Lion, fish and swan' in this poem is reminiscent of his collaboration with Britten on *Our Hunting Fathers* in which the primary themes of the three central poems deal with diverse attributes of animals in terms of their interactions with humans as pests, as pets and as prey respectively.¹⁴⁵ In 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' these themes are reversed as the poetry now considers aspects of the animal world as a model for human assimilation.

Haffenden also remarks upon this presence, in 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', of Auden's contrasting exposition 'of human and non-human lives'.¹⁴⁶ The first verse of this poem engages with three separate animals which can be said to have universal presence: the fish occupies the 'lakes', the swan flies in the 'air', and the lion 'walks' the land. With regard to the fish and the swans Auden refers to the plural as the generic species; the lion is however portrayed individually as he 'walks /Through his innocent

¹⁴⁵ Britten, 'Rates Away!', 'Messalina', and 'Dance of Death' from *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8.

¹⁴⁶ John Haffenden, ed., *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 217.

grove'; this latter personification 'walks' sets the scene for the entrance of mankind; so too, the lion's solitary depiction creates a theme which will have further human repercussions. The poem's opening impressionistic poetic presentation of the image of the fish moving energetically beneath the calm and 'unruffled' surface is added to by the impression of the swans in flight, as 'a white perfection'. All three animals are described in terms of their typical physical bodily motion, whereas in the first two images of the fish and the swan, their physical activity is suggestive of their actions, as 'fish *in* the unruffled lakes' and 'swans *in* the winter air', rather than as explicitly stated as is the case with 'the great lion [who] *walks*'. The beauty, perfection, and strength of the animal kingdom is celebrated in the creatures' ability to live fully in the present moment, without reference to the past or the future ('Act, and are gone /Upon Time's toppling wave'). Auden's frequent satirical use of the definite article in his punctuation of lists of human social groupings has been highlighted in the poetic source of Britten's 'To Lie Flat' ('the dog, the lady with parcels, and the boy') and 'The Sun Shines Down' ('the teacher', 'the journalist, and 'the expert'); such associations are absent in this current poem as 'lion, fish, and swan' are portrayed heroically. This verse's concluding final image of the movement of the sea contrasts with its opening calm lake depiction.

The second verse describes mankind in terms of the restrictions which we place upon ourselves: these conventions are based not alone on social and industrial practices but also on religious-based moral codes and on superstitions. Whereas the animal world is seen as a model of 'perfection', 'innocent', and vibrant, the human world is described, by contrast, as a darkened-weeping realm (religious 'shadowed days', and accompanying images of 'we must weep'); the 'swarming colours' of fish contrast favourably with the 'shadowed' days of mankind. Duty is portrayed as the lowly mediator of social conscience. The poet castigates extreme attentiveness to passing

time. Ultimately human mortality imposes awareness that ‘we must lose our loves’; this perpetual human anxiety can only be alleviated by an appreciation of certain animal attributes. It is only in the final couplet of this verse that explicit binary references are made generically to animals, as ‘beast and bird’, rather than as the three specific species presented earlier. The poet commends the value of ‘an envious look’ at the movement of these creatures.

Table 5.12 Auden’s poem: ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’

		Metric	Rhym.	Word patterns
V.1		Foot	Scheme	Ideas/Images
1	Fish in the unruffled lakes	7	a	Fish, still surface
2	The swarming colours wear,	6	b	Movement beneath surface
3	Swans in the winter air	6	b	Bird, ‘s’ ‘w’ alliterations
4	A white perfection have,	6	c	Nature’s perfection
5	And the great lion walks	6	a	Beast, ‘w’ alliterations
6	Through his innocent grove;	6	c	Nature’s innocence
7	Lion, fish, and swan	5	d	List (no def. articles)
8	Act, and are gone	4	d	Place in life cycle
9	Upon Time’s toppling wave.	6	c	Role of time in this cycle
V.2				
1	We till shadowed days are done,	7	v.3	‘we’, mankind, darkness
2	We must weep and sing	5	b	‘we’ repeated
3	Duty’s conscious wrong,	5	b	Human conscience, morals
4	The Devil in the clock,	6	c	Over emphasis on time
5	The Goodness carefully worn	7	v.3	Bad/good contrast
6	For atonement or for luck;	7	c	
7	We must lose our loves,	5	d	‘we’ repeated
8	On each beast and bird that moves	7	d	Beast and bird
9	Turn an envious look.	6	c	Envy the animal world
V.3				
1	Sighs for folly said and done	7	v.2	
2	Twist our narrow days;	5	b	
3	But I must bless, I must praise	7	b	‘I’
4	That you, my swan, who have	6	c	‘you’, personification
5	All the gifts that to a swan	7	v.2	Bird, implied simile
6	Impulsive Nature gave,	6	c	‘N’ capital
7	The majesty and pride,	6	d	‘p’ alliteration
8	Last night should add	4	d	Night’s power to transform
9	Your voluntary love.	6	c	Unique human possibility to ‘love’

The final verse remains in the human domain, but whereas the faceless ‘we’ of the preceding verse served to denote an anonymous social grouping, the ‘we’ of this verse is personalised as ‘you’ and ‘I’ to describe a refocusing upon the protagonist and the lover. The poet commences with an allusion to the earlier idea of man’s regret for past actions and words. The aspect of personification involved in affording one’s lover ‘my swan’ the attributes of the bird ‘the swan’ is striking; Auden engages with the memory of the listener here as he refers to a motif from the first verse ‘All gifts that to the swan /Impulsive nature gave’. The poem is transformed at this point and a realisation of man’s unique nature to choose and exercise conscious will is achieved. Uniquely, only mankind can unite and engage willingly in an act of physical and emotional love ‘last night should add /Your voluntary love’. This explicitly sexual reference to the transformative image of night as a mediator of innocence as expressed here was also central to an interpretation of the song ‘The Sun Shines Down’ (‘To-morrow morning you’ll be a man’; see Table 5.9). The enduring nature of this higher-level appreciation of human sexuality is contrasted with the unconscious ‘impulsive’ nature of the animal world.

5.5.6.2 ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’: musical setting

Of the individual songs considered in this chapter ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’ is the only one which Britten published, as a solo song with piano, during his lifetime (see Table 5.1). This song was composed 15–16 January 1938¹⁴⁷ but it was not published until 1947 and has a somewhat complicated publication history. At the time of publication the fair copy manuscript (microfiche A29 pp. 306–13)¹⁴⁸ was not available, as Britten had given it to Sophie Wyss, the Swiss soprano who premiered *Our Hunting*

¹⁴⁷ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁸ Britten, ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’, MS (Jan 16 1938). Britten-Pears Foundation: Fair copy, microfiche A29, pp. 306–13.

Fathers; therefore Britten's compositional sketch (microfiche A29 299–304)¹⁴⁹ was used to prepare a copyist's score for the publisher's engraving.¹⁵⁰ This 1947 published version of the song is referred to as version II.¹⁵¹ When this song was considered for inclusion in the Associated Board's singing syllabus in 1973 certain errors in the score were discovered (dynamics, hairpins and slurs) and an errata slip was produced in 1972 in advance of the revised edition published in 1973 (version II, revised).¹⁵² Subsequent to these events, the original manuscript was obtained by the Britten-Pears Library in the early 1980s; at this time these errors and other inconsistencies were discovered and a version I of this song was edited by Colin Matthews and posthumously published in 1997.¹⁵³ It is this later publication (version I) which is considered more authoritative and therefore provides the score used in the following discussion.¹⁵⁴

Although this song was performed and published during the composer's lifetime, unlike the other songs considered here, it has received scant musicological comment. Evans does not deal with this song in his discussion of Britten's early songs, he merely refers to its composition in 1937 in his listing of the composer's published music.¹⁵⁵ A brief contemporary review in *Music and Letters* of the publication of this song considers Britten's musical 'competence' and his technical proficiency and criticises the song for having 'that instantaneous effect that leaves nothing deeper to be found after first

¹⁴⁹ Britten, 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', MS (Jan 16 1938). Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, pp. 299–304.

¹⁵⁰ Britten, 'Editorial note', 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', ed. by Colin Matthews (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1997), iii.

¹⁵¹ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 41.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵³ Colin Matthews states that 'over 100 changes have been made in this edition, most of them minor, and concerned with enharmonic notation and placing of dynamics and hairpins'; eight 'important differences' are specifically noted in: Britten, 'Editorial note', 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', ed. by Colin Matthews, iii.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–21.

¹⁵⁵ This reference to the composition of the song in November 1937 is incorrect but stems from the dating of the 1947 published score. Subsequently it has been proven that it was composed on 15–16 January 1938. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 563.

hearing'.¹⁵⁶ Pears',¹⁵⁷ and Banfield's¹⁵⁸ accounts of this song are likewise brief. Banfield rightly considers this song to be a prime example of Britten's view of song as 'sung melody, melody that is frequently self-sufficient in thematic material, harmony and rhythm' in which the 'accompaniment in its outer sections is just a foreground continuum, the rhythmic character and harmonic background of the song being implicit in the vocal melody itself'.¹⁵⁹ The intentional lightness of the piano's expressive accompaniment role, as highlighted by Banfield, was lost upon the 1948 *Music and Letters* reviewer referred to above. Johnson's particularly performance-informed musicological comments are insightful; he considers that this song reveals Britten's assimilation of Auden's text in this 'subtle musical equivalence [and] is an indication of his [Britten's] future Schubertian mastery'. Johnson also states in relation to the piano accompaniment that 'sounds tinkle in such a high tessitura that we feel harmonically unanchored in a calm, watery expanse of sound'.¹⁶⁰ None of these accounts of this song claims or attempts to provide a comprehensive investigation of the music-text relationships in this Britten song.

The music of Britten's song 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' is focused more on achieving a musical setting of starkly contrasting moods and flows of energy, which reflect upon animal momentum and human rigidity, rather than on a specific word-painting depiction of a poetic text, as is largely the case in 'The Sun Shines Down'. This dissertation has identified the regularity of the formal aspects of Britten's poetic source in relation to form, metric syllabic count, rhyme-ending scheme and poetic rhetorical devices (see also Table 5.12). Britten's musical response is a setting which is indeed in

¹⁵⁶ Ivor Keys, Review of: Britten, 'Fish and the Unruffled Lakes', *Music and Letters*, 29/3 (1948), 313.

¹⁵⁷ Pears, 'The Vocal Music', p. 64.

¹⁵⁸ Banfield, *Sensibility and English Song*, ii, p. 384.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano - Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 158.

ternary form *ABA'*, but this form does not follow the simple formal structure of its three-verse source; rather, Britten uses returning musical motifs whose recapitulation responds to the repetition of textual thematic ideas. The piano's initial introduction presents the animal kingdom as a vibrant two-bar figuration of semiquavers with both piano hands high in register, close together, and primarily in the black keys which outline an independent two-bar motif in the right hand and in the left hand which is then repeated (see Ex. 5.12, bars 1–2). This musical depiction is focused on the inherent energy of the movement of these animals rather than on the initial textual image of the lake's calm surface and it recurs throughout the song. The fish appear to glisten in the opaque reflective water. It is this initial image that inspires much of the 'water music' quality of Britten's piano accompaniment of the motion of his song.

Example 5.12: 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', bars 1–2

Allegretto, poco mosso

*sempre pp e delicato
con Ped.*

This fast-flowing rhythmic figure is immediately associated with the subsequent vocal introductions of the fish, swans and lion. Each species is in turn presented, in both the text and in the music, in terms of the physical dexterity of its bodily motion. The fish are set musically with a combination of two motifs in the voice, firstly by a contrasting long sustained note followed by a semiquaver four-note ascending scale reaching an 'f#²' (see Ex. 5.13, bars 4–6, marked X), and secondly by a subsequent

melodic disjunct sequence which alternates descending intervals of either a major or a minor sixth with ascending perfect fourths (see Ex. 5.13, bars 4–6, marked Y). These motifs initially reflect upon the darting motion of the fish in the water. Britten adds to this musical vibrancy with four isolated single grace-note octave decorations in the piano bass which enhance the implied action of the creature (see Ex. 5.13, bar 6). All of these musical features are equally appropriately applied to Britten’s presentation of the ‘perfection’ of the swans in flight, which again, is shown in relief in the context of the clear ‘winter’ sky. The composer, however, alters his established pattern of the use of these two motifs as he conveys the graceful majestic movement of the solitary lion as two modulated sets of four-note semiquaver scales reaching a local ‘g#³’ climax; these follow on from a rhythmically altered four-note vocal stepwise ascent (see Ex. 5.14, bars 14–15). Simultaneously Britten depicts the graceful action of this animal, while also conveying an increasing awareness of inherent danger, as reflected in the rising pitch. The absence of the melodic leaping motif (Y), from Britten’s setting of the lion, provides contrast with the setting of the two previous animals and may be considered to reflect upon their varied contextual presentation (‘Fish in’, ‘Swans in’, and ‘And the great lion walks’), but it also appears to respond appropriately to the unique physical poise of this prowling king. As the composer has used the four-note ascending semiquaver scale to represent life and momentum, in the preceding three two-line couplets, he also uses the inversion of this motif to introduce the idea of the cyclic nature of the animal’s life-pattern, bar 19 shows the stepwise crotchet-movement descent from ‘f#²’ via ‘e#²’ and ‘d#²’ to ‘c#²’ (‘Lion, fish and swan’), in the voice, as a musical anticipation of the subsequent text ‘act, and are gone’; here, the descent from ‘f#²’ represents the animal’s death, although not before the final couplet of this verse celebrates the carefree nature of the animal world with a full restatement of the

combined motifs X and Y in bar 21 (as also seen in Ex. 5.13, bars 5–6). Again, the four-octave grace-note decorations return to reinforce the action of the leaping melodic passage (Y) motif (bar 21).

Example 5.13: ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’, bars 4–6

pp cantabile Fish in the unruffled lakes The swarming *ten.*

marc. Ped. Ped. Ped.

Example 5.14: ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’, bars 14–15

più f And the great lion

(loco) *8va*

più f

By contrast, there is a complete absence of the energetic motif, derived from the animal realm, in the second verse of this song. As Britten’s initial piano introduction prepared the energetic landscape of the animal world of the opening verse of this song, so too, his first piano interlude anticipates the essence of the contrasting human world in a number of ways: two sets of rests create a separation between these two realms (bars 25, 27); a musical equivalent of landing on earth (from a higher world) is effected by a

two-octave parallel descent in register in the piano, as the bass clef is introduced for the first time; this musical descent is accentuated by the *molto crescendo* dynamic introduction of *poco agitato*, perhaps suggesting musically that the animal kingdom, as at this point in the song, metaphorically represents a higher world. The collective ‘we’ of mankind is also expressed in the fluctuations between F# minor and G-natural tonal centres in which F# minor is implied in the right hand with G-natural cutting across the tonality in the vocal line and in the bass. The texture of the initial chordal accompaniment (bars 28–31) contrasts with the preceding predominantly flowing triadic semiquaver movement. The Y melodic motif is introduced into the transformed piano bass part and enters into antiphonal dialogue with the voice (bars 28–30): this discourse may reflect upon the complexity of a morally-conscious mankind, and the lower ‘f#¹’ starting pitch of this motif, when compared with a higher and brighter ‘c#²’ of the fish (bar 4) and the swans (bar 9) and ‘d#²’ (bar 14) for the lion, thereby is also reflective of their momentary superiority. Specific word-painting is achieved by the composer’s depiction of human weeping in a vocal semitonal melodic descent (‘d²’, ‘c#²’, ‘b#¹’), a traditional musical trope which is accented, with the only occurrence in this song of a spread chord in the piano treble (see Ex. 5.15, bar 31). Again word painting is used to set the subsequent whispered ‘The Devil in the clock’ with a repeated ‘d¹’ semiquaver rhythmic depiction of the ticking clock (bar /33), in an agitated declamation of a despondent text. Semiquaver movement returns to both piano hands, but this time the energy and vitality of the animal kingdom are absent from the sequences of hollow octave descending patterns (see Ex. 5.15, bars 31–33). The vocal dissonant semitonal descent returns to depict repeated dissonance in the text such as ‘worn’ (bar 34) and ‘we must *lose our loves*’ (bars 36–37). The solitary explicit reference to animals ‘On each beast and bird that moves’ (bars /38–39), in this central verse, is set using the

semiquaver ascending X motif. This momentary musical recall and backward glance at animal beauty are subsequently responded to by a return to a repeated monotone declamation of ‘Turn an envious look’ (bar 40); this repeated ‘e¹’ pitch represents a stepwise escalation of tension from the previous vocal repetitions of a ‘d¹’ pitch (bars 32–34).

Example 5.15: ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’, bars 31–33

The musical score for Example 5.15 consists of two staves. The upper staff is the vocal line, and the lower staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'weep and sing' and continues with 'Du-ty's con-sci-ous wrong, The De-vil in the clock, The'. The piano accompaniment features a descending semitone figure in the bass line, marked with 'pp' and 'marcato'. The vocal line is marked with 'pp' and 'distinto'.

Britten’s artful variant and combined use of these X and Y motifs provides a musical equivalence of the changed psychological scene of the final verse of this song. His use of the intellectually focused contrary-motion inversion of the ascending X motif of the treble against this descending figure in the piano bass responds to the textual expression of the complexity of human anxiety (bars 42–49). Within the potential rigidity of this musical device the composer introduces melodic compression, in the contraction of the four-note scale (X) into two notes and rhythmic variant (see Ex. 5.16, bars 42–45). So too, he adds an inner voice, representing human conscience, which over an extended duration mirrors the established three-note semitone dissonant melodic figure. The ‘weep[ing]’ of the middle verse (bar 31) is referred to now as ‘Sighs for folly said and done’ (bars 42–44), whereby the central three syllables of the text are set to a semitonal melodic descent (‘f#², ‘f², ‘e²). The subsequent similarly despondent text ‘Twist our narrow days’ is again expressed in the voice through the same melodic

figure ('e²' 'eflat²' 'd²'), but this time new extreme dissonance is applied to the word 'twist', which is set initially in the piano bass with harmonic and melodic tritones before this dissonant interval enters the treble (see Ex. 5.16, bar 45).

Example 5.16: 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', bars 42–45

The musical score for Example 5.16 consists of two staves. The upper staff is the vocal line, and the lower staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is F# major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins with a fermata over the first two notes, then continues with the lyrics 'Sighs for fol - ly said and done Twist our'. The piano accompaniment is marked 'f molto marc.' and 'dim.'.

The prayer-like 'But I must bless, I must praise /That', which includes repetitions of the solitary first person 'I', is effectively set as an unaccompanied first occurrence of a nine-note chromatically ascending vocal line ('e¹' 'e#¹' 'f#¹' 'g¹' 'g#¹' 'a¹' 'a#¹' 'b¹' 'b#¹') (bars 50–52). The tranquillity of the animal world is regained, half way through this final verse, with the full return of the *tempo primo* F# major music, again recalled in the higher registers of the piano. The directly anthropinistic statement 'you, my swan' is set to the X motif at the original bright 'c#²' pitch of the song's opening, before a full recapitulation of a complete statement of the X and Y motifs of the A music returns. The leaping melodic sequence of the Y motif now seems appropriate, as a reminder of the setting of 'all gifts that *to the swan /Impulsive Nature gave*' and also to the subsequent phrase 'The majesty and pride'.

Britten's setting of the final couplet of text 'last night should add your voluntary love' achieves a correlation of sexual (text-based) and musical climax. The recognition of the unique capacity of the human being, to fall in love willingly with another, is

appreciated here as a higher-level possibility than physical beauty and attraction. The closing text 'your voluntary love' is initially set as the ascending four-note scale of the X motif and with the commencement of the leaping melodic series (motif Y). However, the transformative effects of this ultimate realisation and new-found awareness are reflected in the momentary interruption of this sequential Y motif and in the extension of the melodic line to attain a high climactic 'a#²' before a return to complete the sequence. The consensual subject matter of the text is aptly set in this extended melismatic treatment of the expressive word 'voluntary', which is underscored by the piano bass' first doubling of the extended melodic line, while the *pianissimo* dynamic accentuates the intimacy of this emotional and sexually climactic moment.

Britten's publication of 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' represents a decision to publish a musical work which explores an awareness of the unique consensual emotional and sexual possibilities available to mankind in physical union with another. This song and its poetic source engage with the nature of love and are of universal appeal and therefore neither exclusively heterosexual nor homosexual in outlook. The concept of looking beyond the human realm to the non-human world of animals encourages a broadening of social outlook in a consideration of the nature of human relationships. The poet was aware of the reality of his homosexuality and the composer's increasing awareness of his own emerging same-sex orientation must have been supported and nurtured in the process of composing this song.

Table 5.13 Britten's song: 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes'

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	3 bars		Animal world glistening s/q's, F# major	
Verse 1 /Lines 1–2	2+3	'Fish' long note	Vocal s/q scale and sequence	
L3–4	2+2.5	'Swan' long note	As above	
L5–6	2+2.5	'lion' decorated	s/q scales	
L7–9	2+1+3		s/q scale and sequence	
Interlude	4		Pf register ↓, key change to F# minor	
V.2/L1–2	2+1.5		s/q scale in voice and pf, chordal pf	¹⁶¹
L3–4	1+1		Vocal repeated 'D' note	'Devil' is 'devil' in source
L5–6	1+1			
L7	1		Pf chordal	
L8	2.5			
L9	1		Vocal repeated 'E' note	
Interlude	2			
V.3/L1–2	2.5+5	'days' long note	Pf contrary motion	
L3	2		Unaccompanied	
L4	2		Return of F# major and glistening pf s/q's, vocal s/q scale	
L5–6	1.5+2		Vocal s/q scale and sequence	
L7	3.5		Vocal sequence	
L8	2			
L9	5	'voluntary' melisma	Vocal s/q scale and extended sequence, 1 st pf doubling of melody	
Code	4			

5.5.7.1 'What's in Your Mind?': poetic source

This love poem written by Auden in November 1930, and published in his poetic collection *Poems*,¹⁶² represents the earliest text written by Auden which was selected by Britten to be set in art song and is also his only setting from that collection. The poet's inclusion of this poem as the first of a collection entitled *Five Songs* within his

¹⁶¹ The text in Britten's composition sketch is 'Devil', while Auden's text is 'devil'. Britten, 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Fair copy, microfiche A29, p. 310.

¹⁶² The 1933 second edition of Auden's 1930 poetic collection contains the poem 'What's in Your Mind'; it was not in the 1930 first edition publication. W. H. Auden, *Poems*, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1933). Britten-Pears Foundation: GB - ALb 1-9300426.

publication highlights the lyrical style and musical quality of his poetic text.¹⁶³ Davenport-Hines remarks upon the thematic literary significance which love held in Auden's work and identifies the poet's specific ideas on love in the 1930s as 'ecumenical. Love was healing: the works of healers were works of love'; Davenport-Hines's chapter heading 'To Love; To Be Loved; To Be a Teacher; To Be a Pupil' aptly epitomises much of the inseparability and complexity of Auden's intentional poetic impact and personal influence on Britten.¹⁶⁴

The direct and intimate address of this poem is clearly stated in the poem's opening line 'What's in your mind, my dove, my coney' (see Table 5.14); Auden exhibits his customary practice of including an intriguing but also obscure word 'coney', as the final-rhyming word of his first line. This brief three-quatrain pedantic love poem seeks to encapsulate the physical and sexual aspects of the nature of love at a critical point in time in an emotional relationship. The personal intimacy of the poem is achieved in a conversational and relaxed style which is expressed in the opening abbreviation 'What's', and the colloquial word order of 'Is it making of love', and also in the structural irregularity of the syllabic-metric foot count (see Table 5.14). By contrast to this latter rhetorical device, the strength of the near perfect regularity of the line-ending rhyming scheme contributes to the textual flow of often complex ideas. For example, in the final line of the opening verse 'Or raid on the jewels, the plans of a thief?', immediate interpretation is obscured; the first clause 'raid on the jewels' arises in response to the previous lines 'making of'/'counting of money'; likewise, the second clause of this line refers to commerce, albeit in an illegal capacity, but its five-syllable

¹⁶³ Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957*, p. 46.

¹⁶⁴ Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Heinemann, 1995), p. 115.

stress pattern (u S u u S) both rhymes and eye-rhymes with the second line's equally obscure ending 'the dead end of life'.

Also in the first verse the poet boldly questions the loved one as he satirises the inadequacy of merely contemplated love; such an exclusive internalisation of affection is characterised as worthless. A pattern of psychological questioning remains constant in this verse. The juxtaposition of emotion with images of commercialisation serves to demean the value of love and such a sterile lover is described as 'a thief'. The metaphoric simile 'Do thoughts grow like feathers' is striking in its seeming lightness and momentum and contrasts starkly with the weight and rigidity of its continuation with 'the dead end of life'. The emotional implication here is that thought without resultant action is worthless.

The final two verses deal with varying aspects of the poet's call to take physical action in response to the stimulus of attraction. The central verse affectionately beckons to the loved one to use the senses of sight and touch, and motion to respond to the lover's advances. 'Go through the motions of exploring the familiar; /Stand on the brink of the warm white day', may refer to an arrival at a point in time in a relationship when a decision must be made as whether to fall in love or disengage; however, for the poet at twenty-three years of age this poetic idea may have had additional personal resonance. It may represent Auden's arrival at a decision ('the brink') as to his expression of his exclusive same-sex sexual orientation. Britten's similar personal interpretation of this Auden text is probable.

The final verse continues the poet's urge to take action in pursuit of love. The focus of the preceding sensual stimulation has now turned to sexual consummation. The homoerotic nature of the phallic 'Rise with the wind, my great big serpent' is unambiguous. The poetic impact of the onomatopoeic word '*serpent*' is assured by the

contribution of surrounding sibilant sounds, ‘rise’ and ‘strike’. The exaggerated reality expressed in ‘Silence the birds and darken the air’ is prophetic of Britten’s setting of Auden’s 1936 cabaret lyrics in ‘Stop All the Clocks’¹⁶⁵ as expressed in that song’s text ‘The stars are not wanted: put out each one’. This extreme climactic sensitivity to sexual activity is suggested in Auden’s text ‘alive in a moment’. The subsequent and final line ‘Strike for the heart and have me there’ momentarily sustains this physical tension before final release. The poem encapsulates an emotional journey from the sterile world of the ‘mind’ to the fertile regions of the ‘heart’.

Table 5.14 Auden’s poem: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’

		Metric Foot	Rhym. Scheme	Word patterns Ideas/Images
V.1				
1	What’s in your mind? My dove, my coney;	9	a	Psychological questions
2	Do thoughts grow like feathers, the dead end of life	11	b	Psychological questions
3	Is it making of love or counting of money,	12	a	Questioning
4	Or raid on the jewels, the plans of a thief?	11	b	Continued questioning
V.2				
1	Open your eyes, my dearest dallier;	9	a	Action, sight
2	Let hunt with your hands for escaping me;	10		Action, touch
3	Go through the motions of exploring the familiar;	13	a	Action, thought and motion
4	Stand on the brink of the warm white day.	9		Action, choice
V.3				
1	Rise with the wind, my great big serpent;	9	a	Action, phallic image, sibilance
2	Silence the birds and darken the air;	9	b	Exaggerated reality
3	Change me with terror, alive in the moment;	11	a	
4	Strike for the heart and have me there.	8	b	Ultimate call to action in pursuit of love

¹⁶⁵ Britten, ‘Funeral Blues’, in *Cabaret Songs* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 7.

5.5.7.2 ‘What’s in Your mind?’: musical setting

This poem has been identified as the earliest poem by Auden which Britten set in song. Coincidentally, it also serves as the last art-song composition by the composer of an Auden poem. Therefore, the composition of this song in early 1941¹⁶⁶ represents an eleven-year gap from the poem’s composition¹⁶⁷ and an eight-year gap since its first publication;¹⁶⁸ it is also the only song, considered in this chapter, which was composed while the composer was in America. The posthumous publication of this song in 1997 is based on a manuscript compositional draft (see Table 5.1) which is crossed through, in pencil, by the composer,¹⁶⁹ was obtained by the Britten-Pears Library in the early 1980s.¹⁷⁰

This brief and personal poetic text elicited a simple but dramatic musical setting from the composer. This poem’s continuous psychological and direct questioning of the nature of love is echoed in the melodic shape of the vocal line; lines tend to ascend and remain high as a musical equivalent of the relentless soul-searching and calls of the text to take action, and increasing dynamic levels contribute to this escalation of tension. Exceptions to this predominant pattern are seen in the first lines of the opening and central verses, in which the concluding affectionate terms of endearment, ‘my dove, my coney’ (line 1 verse 1) and ‘my dearest dallier’ (line 1 verse 2), are reflected in a melodic contour which returns, by descent, to the phrase’s opening pitch. In each case the rising vocal line responds to a question ‘What’s in your mind’ or a call to action

¹⁶⁶ Banks, ed., *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of the Published Works*, p. 60.

¹⁶⁷ The poem ‘What’s in Your Mind?’ is dated to November 1930. W. H. Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 59.

¹⁶⁸ ‘What’s in Your Mind?’ was first published in Auden, *Poems* (1933). Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, p. 80.

¹⁶⁹ Britten, ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, pp. 331–35.

¹⁷⁰ The manuscript draft copy of ‘What’s in Your Mind?’ remained in the United States with Elizabeth Mayer after Britten’s return to the United Kingdom in 1942. Reed, ‘Introductory Note’, in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*, ii.

‘Open your eyes’ and the subsequent fall of the melodic line responds to the relaxation effected by an intimate textual reference to the loved one (see Table 5.14). In this way the vocal melodic shape responds directly to a characterisation of the composer’s poetic source.

Britten composes much of this short song around a central melodic motif which is used flexibly in its prime form or in varied and sequential forms, in response to his text, to express the essence of Auden’s poem. This simple four-note motif is based around a rising interval of a perfect fifth in which the initial tonic note is decorated by subsequent lower and upper neighbour notes before arrival at a dominant pitch (see Ex. 5.17, bars 1–4). The initial motif (marked X) seems to be derived rhythmically from the initial four words of the poetic text, in which the Stress-unstress-unstress-Stress pattern of ‘What’s-in-your-mind’ is translated into the following musical accented rhythm, dotted-crotchet/ semiquaver/semiquaver/dotted-minim (long-short-short-long) pattern, whereby the intervening relatively inconsequential secondary words function as decorations of the primary first and fourth words. The *sforzando* dynamic leading to a *diminuendo* together with the melodic ascent of this phrase also provides a perfect musical equivalence of the text of the second line of the poem ‘Do thoughts grow like feathers’, in which the initial accentuation expresses the idea of the depth of mental thought and the subsequent unaccented higher pitched release responds to the image of floating ‘feathers’. Therefore, we may now appreciate that the rhythmic, melodic and dynamic components of this song’s motif align directly with the composer’s reading of the first two lines of text.

Example 5.17: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bars 1–4

Example 5.18: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bars 15–18

The initial sequential piano presentation of the X motif which ascends two octaves anticipates the text as it simultaneously points the question raised and also suggests the process of thoughts floating ‘in your mind’ (see Ex. 5.17). This motif serves a different function when it is used here in the piano accompaniment when compared with its use in the vocal line. After its introductory function this motif then enters into active dialogue with the vocal line (bars 5–8) providing an effective musical depiction of ‘thoughts grow like feathers’. The motif then takes on the role of an instrumental commentary on the vocal line (see Ex. 5.18, bars 15–18). In this example the motif initially echoes rhythmically the text ‘plans of a thief?’ (in a S u u S pattern), while the

subsequent sequence also suggests the action of opening ‘your eyes’; the voice is then allowed to deliver the text unaccompanied (see Ex. 5.18, bar 18) as it has been musically prepared by the piano in the preceding bar.

Britten also inventively uses variants of the X motif (see Ex 5.17) which often provide specific word-painting possibilities. It appears in a number of rhythmic variations: linear perfect-fifth scale marked X1, ‘Do thoughts grow like feathers (see Ex. 5.19a, bars /7–8); rhythmic variant X2, ‘Is it making of love’ (see Ex. 5.19b, bars 11–12); rhythmic variant X3, ‘Or raid on the jewels’ (see Ex 5.19c, bar /14); rhythmic variant X4, ‘exploring the familiar’ (see Ex. 5.19d, bar /28); here, the direct translation of words into music is startling, whereby Britten explores the familiar motif through a variation of that motif. Additionally, this motif also appears in rhythmic variation marked X5, ‘Rise with the wind’ (see Ex. 5.20a, bars 32–33) in which the text is dramatically and energetically depicted by a combination of the ascending motif but also with the first incidence of expressive *tremolando* in the piano. So too, in the rhythmic variation of the motif marked X6, ‘Silence the birds’ (see Ex. 5.20b, bars 36–37); this verbal command is underscored by both the vocal triplet and the chattering of the dynamically changed *forte* to *piano tremolando*. The composer also uses his primary X motif in its harmonic form (see Ex. 5.17, bar 4) and also in inversion, as a descending motif; for example in X7 the piano’s melodic sequential fall seems to respond specifically to the text ‘dead end of life’ (see Ex. 5.20c, bars 9–10). The extent to which Britten inventively deploys this simple musical motif to express different, often contrasting, textual ideas is clearly shown in the above exposition.

Example 5.19a: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bars /7–8

mf X1
Do thoughts grow like feath - ers, the

Example 5.19b: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bars 11–12

p cresc. X2
Is it mak - ing of love or count - ing of

Example 5.19c: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bar /14

p \dot{u} f X3
Or raid on the jew - els,

Example 5.19d: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bar /28

X4
of ex - plor - ing the fam - il - iar;

Britten’s intention in this regard is markedly evident from a deeper exploration of the X4 variant (see Ex. 5.19d), as this is the single occasion in the song when the motif is used to set the consequent secondary clause of a line of text; on all other occasions the motif is used to set the antecedent clause. This conspicuous variation in his pattern allows the composer to use the motif as a literal, ‘exploring the familiar’ (see Ex. 5.19d, bar /28) and to achieve the musico-poetic relations posited above.

Example 5.20a: 'What's in Your Mind?', bars 32–33

f X5

Rise with the wind,

fp

Example 5.20b: 'What's in Your Mind?', bars 36–37

f X6

Si - lence the birds and

fp

Example 5.20c: 'What's in Your Mind?', bars 9–10

f X7

dead end of life;

fp

The text-setting practices in the third verse require further specific comment due to Britten's decision to transform many of his established musical patterns in this

climactic final verse. The descriptive use of both the vocal motif X5 and the accompaniment *tremolando* in setting ‘Rise with the wind...’ has been noted; Britten also musically highlights the two final syllables of ‘...my great big *serpent*’, with the first return of the X motif in the piano in this verse, which has been absent from the piano part for eight bars. Here, these two solitary sequential ascending motifs express the explicitly phallic sexual image of the rising (two-syllable) serpent. Britten’s use of triplets to set the action words of the second line of text in this final verse draws attention to these very different but complementary and rhyming poetic ideas ‘*Si-lence the birds*’ followed by ‘*dark-en the air*’. The momentary attainment of a high ‘a²’, the highest note in the voice part, for the first syllable of the triplet ‘darken the’ is not the song’s climax, but it does contribute to the building of dramatic tension.

Example 5.21: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, bars 40–43

The musical score for Example 5.21 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and features a high note on the syllable 'a*' in the phrase 'a live in a moment'. The piano accompaniment is in a bass clef and features a tremolando effect with a forte (*sf*) dynamic. The lyrics are: 'Change me with ter - ror, a - live in a* mo - ment;'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Britten’s subsequent setting of ‘Change me with terror, alive in a moment’ displaces many of the composer’s established text-setting patterns. The sense of terror expressed in the text causes a transformation of the perfect-fifth motif which is changed to a perfect-fourth motif (see Ex. 5.21, bars 40–41). The sustained and accented high ‘g²’s of ‘terror’ create a correlation of musical and poetic climax; the close juxtaposition of this with the consequent text ‘alive in a moment’ brings realisation that the musical

climax also gives sexual expression. The post-climactic release of tension is expressed by the composer in his *diminuendo* falling melodic line; which is the first incidence of a falling melodic line in the setting of any line of text other than first lines of each verse. Britten also conveys the extremes of tension and a resultant release in his use of an extended three-octave descent of the X motif in the piano (see Ex. 5.21, bars 41–43).

Table 5.15 Britten’s song: ‘What’s in Your Mind?’

	Phrase length	Text expansion	Motif	Text alteration
Intro.	2 bars		Perfect 5 th ↑ motif octave sequence	
Verse 1 /Line 1	3		Perfect 5 th ↑ motif in voice	
L2	4	Triplet ‘dead end of life’	Inversion of motif	
L3	3		Chordal pf	
L4	4			
V.2/L1	3.5		Perfect 5 th ↑ motif octave sequence	
L2	3.5		Inversion of motif	
Expansion	1		Motif ↓ sequence	
L3	3	Triplet ‘Go through the...’	Chordal pf	
L4	2.5	Triplets ‘Stand on the brink...’		
V.3/L1	3.5		Octave <i>tremolando</i> contrary motion pf	
L2	3.5	Triplets ‘Silence the...’ and ‘darken the...’		
L3	3		Altered ↑ motif in vocal climax	‘the moment’ ‘a...’ in poem ¹⁷¹
Expansion	2.5		Motif ↓ sequence	
L4	3.5	‘me’ 2 notes to 1 syllable		

Subsequent to this climactic passage, the final vocal phrase ‘Strike for the heart and have me there’, which is effectively audibly unaccompanied due to the four-bar

¹⁷¹ The text in Britten’s composition sketch is ‘the moment’, while Auden’s text is ‘a moment’. Britten, ‘What’s in Your Mind?’, MS. Britten-Pears Foundation: Compositional sketch, microfiche A29, p. 333.

held chords, returns to the intimacy of the song's opening. The spread chord aptly accompanies 'strike', the first word of this final phrase. The opening G minor motif returns but with two notable transformations: firstly, both parts of the phrase attain the D dominant note resolution (bars 45–48); nowhere else does this occur; and finally, the poignant tenderness of Auden's text encourages Britten to show in relief the personal designation 'me' from the text 'and have *me* there' (bar 47) by way of *rallentando* but also by his singular setting, in this song, of the one syllable 'me' to two notes. These alterations to Britten's established text-setting practices in this song show such textual details in relief.

5.6 CONCLUSION: TEXT SETTING AS SEXUAL DISCOURSE

As the songs of *On This Island* have been shown, in the previous chapter, to constitute primarily a literary-cohesive song cycle based, in part, on a consistent call to social consciousness and political active awareness, the songs considered here are also linked thematically yet no sequential ordering is implied.¹⁷² These six songs (see Table 5.1) present sexuality as a common theme, not as a continuous narrative, but within a diverse presentation of physiological realities both real and imagined. Youthful maturation is expressed as a recurrent theme and presented as a process of growing consciousness and awareness of sexual expression. The individual and joint personal confessional aspects of these songs, for poet and composer, have been engaged with in the course of the analysis of each song where pertinent, and therefore are not reiterated in this present discussion. Rather, the focus here is to present an overview of the diversity of ways in which Britten's sexually-oriented views affect his text-setting practices in these songs.

¹⁷² No cyclic or sequential ordering of these songs is expressed or implied in their posthumous publication in Britten, *Fish in the Unruffled Lakes: Six Settings of W. H. Auden*.

These songs may now be considered to present a progression, from the subdued beginnings of the duet version of 'Underneath the Abject Willow', the first song considered here, in which the message of the song has been shown to be effectively lost in the textual deflection of its duet medium, to the musical and textual clarity of 'What's in Your Mind?', the latest song composition of this current repertory. Interestingly, the duet version of 'Underneath the Abject Willow' is the only song which received contemporaneous publication. This suggests, potentially, that the other songs, with the exception of the non-sexually explicit 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes', were possibly regarded, by Britten, as being too direct an engagement with sexuality in song for publication, given the prevailing legal censorship and artistic and social environment of the late 1930s, which prevailed for some three further decades. This latter song was the only one of these solo voice and piano songs which Britten published in his lifetime, albeit nine years after its composition (see Table 5.1). This progression outlines a development from an inability to see to an advanced stage of question formulation: a stage imperceptibly close to ultimate realisation.

These sundry songs contain common themes and subject matters of sexuality which interrelate, not cyclically, but as a corpus of songs which repeatedly call for the recognition of the mores of sexuality engagement in general social interaction, and particularly in respect of an expression of one's own sexuality. Such a call to undertake this journey into adulthood is explicitly and unambiguously heralded in Auden's closing text of 'Underneath the Abject Willow', which provides a signpost lyrical commencement to this chapter: 'Coldest love will warm to action/Walk then come/[No longer numb]/Into your satisfaction' (see Table 5.3). The varied nature of this recurring textual call-to-action is overviewed in Table 5.2, and reveals remarkable connective-literary consistency throughout these songs. The detail of such literary commonalities

has been explored, both as a cultural backdrop for the preceding analysis of individual songs and in making hermeneutic connections between songs. For example, explicitly masculine texts such as ‘strike and you shall conquer’ from the song ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’ and ‘strike for the heart and have me there’ from ‘What’s in Your Mind?’ have been explored musically. So too, a recurrent encouragement to discard excessive intellectual reasoning (‘What’s in Your Mind?’ and ‘act from thought should quickly follow’ from ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’) in favour of physical spontaneity (to be ‘alive in a moment’, ‘O hurry to the fêted spot’). In the song ‘Fish in the Unruffled Lakes’ the animal kingdom is offered initially as a model of physical perfection and power for mankind, before an emotional awareness of the unique quality for the human species to love one another prevails as a higher-level function. Love lost is the subject of ‘Night Covers Up the Rigid Land’. Conversely, Britten selects texts from Auden which also provide a balancing more-complex view to that provided above. In ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’, Britten engages with a text which deals directly with ‘the casual life outside the heart’, a world of discrimination and fear for a homosexual. In contrast to the preceding settings, which promote sexual expression as a ‘heteronormative’,¹⁷³ aspect, this song begins with a relaxed musical depiction of two male youths sunbathing. The psychological tension of the protagonist increases as he becomes aware of the social implication of prejudice and non-conformity. Ultimately, the protagonist internalises the impacts of idle gossip as he retreats into an unstable world of personal introspection and interrogation. Britten’s intentionality in his selection of texts seems to be in little doubt, aided and abetted by a sympathetic like-minded librettist.

¹⁷³ Brett and Wood, ‘Gay and Lesbian Music’, ix, p. 597.

During the composition of these songs, Britten must also have taken significant artistic encouragement from his previous close-musical engagement with the composer Frank Bridge, with whom he had taken irregular but extended compositional lessons,¹⁷⁴ as Britten's summation of the influence of Frank Bridge on his own compositional development shows:

In everything he [Bridge] did for me [Britten], there were perhaps above all two cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found. The other—obviously connected with it—was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one's mind. He gave me a sense of technical ambition.¹⁷⁵

This statement by Britten which is likely to have been considered and prepared in advance of his tribute to Bridge, reveals that the foundations of Britten's musical aesthetic are founded philosophically upon an intentional impulse to be true to one's self, one's ideas and ultimately one's core sexual being. The Auden texts analysed in this chapter provided Britten with the literary catalyst to fulfil this pre-existing artistic motivation. They also contribute to a greater understanding of Britten's drive for technical excellence in his music; an aspect identified and negatively commented upon by contemporary reviewers of these songs.¹⁷⁶ It also alerts us to a central tenet of Britten's art song, namely that the technical minutiae of text setting occupies a central and conscious role in the fulfilment of his aesthetic motivation as a composer, thereby highlighting and justifying the study of text setting as an imperative in this consideration of these songs.

¹⁷⁴ Britten went to Bridge for compositional lessons from 1927 to 1933 (see 3.9).

¹⁷⁵ Britten, 'Early Influences: A Tribute to Frank Bridge (1879–1941)', *Composer*, 19 (1966), 2–3. As cited in Kildea, ed, *Britten: On Music*, p. 253.

¹⁷⁶ For comments on Ivor Keys' review of Britten's 'Fish and the Unruffled Lakes' (*Music and Letters*, 29/3 (1948), 313) see 5.5.6.2.

Britten's text-setting practices provide the key to revealing the multiple levels of meaning contained in his songs. The analysis of the songs, presented here, has shown repeatedly that they respond sensitively to poetic form, specific word qualities and units of text, and poetic meaning. Images of the male form and masculine perfection have been presented accentually as significant in Britten's songs, for example, in the first verse of 'To Lie Flat on the Back' the piano's sympathetic response, in parallel motion E major tonality (bars 4–5), which reflects upon the preceding text 'and the sunshine on the soft receptive belly' (bars 2–3); also in that verse the idea of 'the boy' is shown in relief by means of tempo, dynamic and rhythmic accentuation. This latter image has also been shown to participate in the strongly alliterative male sequence of images of 'belly', 'bully', 'boy', which are stressed as line-ending cross-rhymes and reinforced by conspicuous tempo *accelerando* and dynamic escalation. At a deeper level, Britten's inventive and economical use of musical material has been shown also to align directly with the word rhythm of his text. For example, in the song 'What's in Your Mind?', we see Britten's use of an original motif, six rhythmic variations, and a harmonic variant, all of which derive from textual rhythm; a motif which seems to encapsulate the musical presentation of the abstract idea of thinking, while the subject of that thought is human sexuality. Here we see convincing evidence of Britten's simultaneous achievement of his dualistic artistic philosophy: to be true to himself musically and to express himself accurately in song within the technical confines of musical grammar.

The masculine vitality of the young man approaching his twenty-first birthday is underscored in 'The Sun Shines Down' in the initial leaping and rapid movement of the piano part (see Ex. 5.8, bars 4–8) which becomes inexorably linked to the alliterative assonant opening text couplet. The juxtaposition of the energy and innocence of a young person's initiation into adulthood and the highly-satirical, almost comprehensive,

catalogue of political corruption which awaits him, is confronted directly by Britten; he responds with a final rare textual insertion of a vocalised ‘la, la, la’ section of music, which provides a musical and literary contribution to this serious/satirical discourse.¹⁷⁷

In addition to this predominant male theme which recurs in these songs, Britten highlights musically aspects of a wider natural environment which convey energy and a life force which may be considered to reinforce these core themes. For example, in ‘Underneath the Abject Willow’, he conveys in his setting the natural flow of the stream and the migratory flight of the geese as elements of a self-propagating life cycle, which are reflected in an increasing use of extended semiquaver runs in which each syllable is set to two notes. The poetic rhythm of the text becomes increasingly responded to in the song, as if nature’s ebullient life energy is dominant and unstoppable, which contrasts starkly with the emotional instability of the lover, who is repeatedly encouraged by Auden’s calls to engage and take a sexual standpoint — a call to which Britten responds with further exact repetitions of the text, in another of Britten’s select rare textual changes to Auden’s poetry. The composer shows his ability within this song-compositional model to achieve expressive colour in an otherwise rigid pattern, in part, in the alignment of textual syntax and musical form, of the use of different rhythmic pattern for antecedent and consequent phrases (see 5.5.2.2).

So too, in the song ‘To Lie Flat on the Back’ we see Britten’s acute sensitivity to poetic form. He identifies the partially-obscured love-sonnet form of Auden’s eight-plus six-line poetic form and yet the composer musically clarifies the structure of a more typical (4 4 4 2) sonnet form. This formal adaptation has been shown to require Britten’s careful musical treatment of the textually significant enjambment contained in

¹⁷⁷ The infrequency of Britten’s textual changes to Auden’s poetry is shown in this chapter in Tables 5.4, 5.6, 5.8, 5.11, 5.13, and 5.15 and in the preceding chapter in Tables 4.3, 4.5, 4.7 4.10, and 4.12.

the fifth line of text, whereby the *ABA'* ternary form song correlates with the themes of Auden's binary form poem. Also in this song the dissonant *piano* dynamic of the opening cluster stresses the latent male energy of this intimate encounter, energy which is prophetic of the turmoil that is close at hand, while in 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land', Britten's musical distinction of the heightened personal intimate nature of the second and fourth verses from the surrounding verses has been seen to be structurally reinforced by the use of continuous setting of these emotionally connective phrases. This accentuation is also musically supported by the tonal shift from the G aeolian mode to G major (bar 34) in the fourth verse for 'all kinds seek their own', in which pure love is reflected in a perfect cadence (see Ex. 5.7, bars 33–35).

In 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' Britten presents a correlation in his setting of the final couplet of this song, between the textual and sexual highpoints, and the musical climax. A musical transformation occurs at this point in the song in response to the realisation of the unique human capacity for emotional and sexual union ('Last night should add your voluntary love.');

this is reflected in a return of the initial combined opening motifs, but now the melodic line is extended to a climactic melodic vocal point, which is further accentuated by the solitary incidence of an emotional melismatic treatment of the hermeneutically significant word 'voluntary' (see 5.5.6.2). Doubling of the vocal melisma in the piano bass contributes to the expression of a concensual outcome.

The musically prominent presentation of aspects of sexuality in these songs leads me to postulate that had Britten compiled and published a second volume of Auden songs, the musical consideration of sexuality would have been the cohesive connective. In effect, these songs of sexuality afforded their composer the musical space to come to

terms with his own sexuality, homosexuality, while simultaneously remaining in the closet due to their non-publication.

Reference has been made to the lack heretofore of any comprehensive research into these songs, and in particular to the lacuna which results from a lack of appreciation of the effects of sexuality on song making, on text selection and text-setting practices; this research has shown that Britten has provided, in these songs, a consistent social outlook, through a myriad of complex text-setting choices. It is rewarding to return to Susan McClary's view, expressed earlier in this chapter, that music need not reveal personal evidence pertaining to a composer, but that a composer may choose to express his sexuality in the music he composes (see 5.2.1).¹⁷⁸ In these sundry songs of sexuality Britten chooses consciously to engage with aspects which have particular contemporary currency for his life. This artistic intentionality is expressed exclusively, in song, by means of his text-setting practices, which produce a complex interpretative discourse when textual connectives are allowed to give direction to our musical appreciation of song.

¹⁷⁸ McClary, 'Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music', p. 211.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 CONCLUSION

The initial central research and related secondary questions posed in this dissertation are as follows:

Question 1 How and to what extent do Britten's song text-setting practices respond to Auden's poetry? (All chapters)

Question 2 (a) What were the conditions of the art-song environment in the 1930s? (b) What is the nature of Britten's exposure to the German Lied tradition? (c) What did he learn from these experiences about the relationship of text and music? (d) What does Britten reveal of this acquired musical knowledge in his German-language song compositions? (Introduction and Chapter 1)

Question 3 (a) What literature is available relating to theories of text setting? (b) How can this literature be synthesised and accessed for the analysis of Britten's songs? (c) What are the elements of text setting? (d) How is the analysis of song different to that of instrumental music? (e) What analytic models and tools are available for a text-setting analysis of song? (Chapter 2)

Question 4 (a) What was the nature of Britten's relationship with the poet W. H. Auden in the 1930s? (b) How did this relationship influence Britten's composition of song? (c) How is Auden's impact on Britten's literary development and poetic discernment revealed in song? (Chapters 3–5)

Question 5 (a) How do cultural aspects permeate and shape Britten's 'song cycle' *On This Island*? (b) How do cultural aspects permeate and shape Britten's six 'songs of sexuality'? (Chapters 4–5)

Question 6 (a) How does the classification of song as song cycle affect our interpretation of a collection of songs? (b) Is *On This Island* a song cycle? (Chapter 4)

Question 7 (a) Can sexuality impact and be reflected in song? (b) What are the musicological models for such an interpretation? (c) Do topicality and biographical context diminish the aesthetic value of song? (d) How did Britten's contemporary social environment affect his publication of song? (e) How did Auden and his poetry seek to effect change in Britten and how is this evidenced in his composition of song? (Chapters 3–5)

6.2 ANSWERING THE SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In addition to the primary research findings of this study there are also a number of secondary research questions which have been engaged with and answered in the course of this dissertation which warrant final discussion. Such a summarisation of research findings is not exhaustive; rather, it seeks to consolidate themed-related findings. A consistent tenet of these findings is, ultimately, their individual and cumulative support of the primacy claimed for text setting in song interpretation:

6.2.1 Addressing the fundamental research question (posed in the opening question of 6.1) has determined the scope, rationale and direction of this dissertation, and contributes significantly to its ultimate thesis. Britten's songs find their genesis in Auden's poetry. Each song analysed here has been shown to reflect consistently, often simultaneously, upon and enter intentional dialogue with the tripartite essence of text:

lyrical form and syntax, word and image (rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia), and poetic meaning (idea and mood). Britten's intentional composition of these intense correspondences, however, does not detract from the artistic wholeness of song; rather they contribute to our understanding and interpretation of song.

Song structure has been demonstrated repeatedly to be derived directly from poetic form; this representation of text in song has been shown to range from direct alignments to complex absorption and adaptation of forms. For example the explicit imprint of Auden's binary-form text has been identified in Britten's song, 'Let the Florid Music Praise' from *On This Island* (see 4.3.1.2), in which the unambiguous *AB* binary musical structure is underscored by means of rhyming scheme, tempo, dynamic and style changes, tonal modulation and declamatory style. Whereas in the song 'To Lie Flat on the Back' (see 5.5.3.2) we experience musically Britten's identification of Auden's socially-disturbing binary love sonnet and the composer's intentional adaptation of a three-verse with final couplet setting from his binary source. This latter musical reading is shown to outline subtle textual transformations in an *ABA'* musical form.

Musical motif and word painting also reflect and mirror text: words, textual segments and images. Britten is seen, for example, to combine variant inventive use of a melodic motif which also incorporates word-painting possibilities in the song 'What's in Your Mind?' (see 5.5.7.2 and Examples 5.17/18/19a/19b/19c/19d/20a/20b/20c). The original motif is presented in Example 5.17, in which textual-rhythmic accentuation of the poem's opening enigmatic text is translated into an equivalent accented melodic musical rhythm. This text-informed musical motif and its variations then form the basis for much of the remainder of the song. Britten's motif is presented as an effective motivic expression of diverse dramatic actions, such as 'open your eyes' (bars 17–18), 'rise with the wind' (bars 32–33), 'silence the birds' (bars 36–37), 'change me with

terror' (bars 40–43). Likewise the piano engages in the presentation of motivic material in which the complex idea of internalised and unuttered thought finds apt musical representation in an anticipatory dialogue with the voice for the sexually-charged text 'What's in your mind...' (bars 1–2), which becomes antiphonal for the text 'Do thoughts grow like feathers...' (bars 5–8). These text-setting practices also typify Britten's incorporation of specific word painting and motif which responds to the essence of his text.

Song mediates the interaction of musical hermeneutics and text; this has been shown to complement, contrast with, and contradict poetic semantics. In his central politically-charged song 'Seascape' (see 4.3.3.2), from *On This Island*, Britten composes a bracing motivic structure which encapsulates the essence of the poem, the 'swaying sound of the sea', rather than present a series of musical images as are presented in the text, while in his erotically-charged song 'Night Covers Up the Rigid Land' (see 5.5.4.2) Britten achieves a dismal opening nightfall scene by means of a monotonal metaphoric depiction of personal isolation resulting from the experience of unreciprocated love. The analysis of his acute sensitivity to verbal rhythm is noted and benefits from Malin's rhythmic approach to song analysis. In this song the composer's musical accentuation of conspicuous obscure words in the first line of text 'rigid land' is identified; this is a significant feature of both Auden's poetic and has become a stylistic aspect of Britten's text-setting practices. The complex but tragic ultimate realisation that the protagonist's male lover is lost is however presented by the composer as a musical transformation from a G minor chord (bar 30) to the key of G major (bars 35–36) which represents Britten's affirmation of the human desire for emotional and sexual expression. A gendered reading of Britten's musical setting of existentialist statements,

‘For each love to its aim is true, and all kinds seek their own’ (bars /30–34) and ‘I love you so I must lie alone’ (bars 36–38), is proposed.

6.2.2 Britten looked to established European musical models for inspiration in song. He found in Lieder a literary-based musical art form which provided an aesthetic framework within which to express his musical ideas—poetic inspiration and musical expression are inextricably linked in this genre. Through his song settings of Auden he transformed this lyrical impulse and consciously chose to rediscover lyricism in English song, in spite of contemporary musical innovations.

6.2.3 The contribution to musicological knowledge presented in Chapter 2 is based on its engagement with the diversity of disparate eminent theorists and the identification of interconnections in an extant body of literature. Particularly important to this study is the logical clear structure of my written research (a response to an extant ill-defined vital topic); the progression of this theoretical chapter is intentionally aligned with the activity of song analysis and thereby combines theoretical intent with resultant practical purpose. The stages of song interpretation progress from the ascertainment of an aesthetic stance — the establishment of ‘a’ reading of the text — forming an appreciation of the mimetic potential of music — performing an exclusive musical analysis of the song (surface- and deeper-level possibilities) — to the preparation of an informed written analytic interpretation of song. These stages emerge as the framing structure of the discourse in Chapter 2 and become the overriding approach taken in Part 2 of this dissertation. The adaptation of Lewin’s structure illustrates the benefit of the expansion of local idea for a broader encompassing argument. Uniquely, this chapter synthesises briefly a complex musicological area while identifying practical tools and approaches — to demystify text setting — to reveal the ‘vocality’ and ‘songfulness’ in song.

6.2.4 The effects of Britten's interaction and collaboration with Auden in the 1930s are revealed as intense, diverse and enduring. Auden's cultural and personal stature is seen to influence Britten, in literary knowledge and discernment, in political awareness and sensitivity, and as a social force for personal and sexual liberation: influences which Britten explicitly recognises. Auden presented this technically-talented young composer with poetry which mediated contemporary ideas, images and meaning, in a language which is vital and characteristically (for its time) caustic, but ultimately remains lyrical.

6.2.5 The political nature of the third song, 'Seascape', from *On This Island* is widely accepted. This original research looks to this central song as a means of reinterpreting the surrounding songs. Political allusion is found to permeate all songs in this song cycle. Likewise, Britten's similar identification of these cultural artefacts is revealed in his musical underscoring of textual detail.

6.2.6 An original case is presented for the reclassification of *On This Island* as a literary song cycle, based upon the unifying effects of textual association and connectives. Britten selects disparate poems and places them in a sequence which reflects upon the chronological passing of time of the texts (reflected in the stylistic musical progression from the neo-Baroque opening song to the jazz-like closing song), and on the liminality of physical and geographical boundaries; interestingly, social isolation acts as a literary unifying feature in Britten's work. Views on Britten's tonal framework in this cycle are updated based on a musico-intellectual approach to the three central songs; the framing cyclicity of the D major songs is widely recognised.

6.2.7 The retrospective interpretation of the presence and significance of sexuality in song is a particular interdisciplinary focus of gender studies. Schubert studies are consulted as a means of providing a theoretical basis for looking at this twentieth-

century song. An artist may choose not to reveal confessional aspects but in the songs, which I now consider to be the six ‘songs of sexuality’, both composer and poet chose to engage in an artistic expression of sexuality, which is explicitly homosexual at times; these songs question a societal ‘heteronormative order’.¹ The circumspect nature of these texts is analysed, often dealing with isolation, lost love, and secrecy, and are reflective of the contemporary social plight of an outsider. Access to this socially encoded detail is presented in Britten’s accentual text-setting practices; repeatedly Britten is shown to musically underscore sexually-significant text, particularly images of the male form and masculine perfection. The topicality of political and socio-sexual cultural environments, the ‘politicization’ of text and song are shown not to diminish the ‘aestheticization’ of the poem or the song; cultural expression requires context. In these songs text setting is found to act as a mediator in a sexual discourse between the song and the text.

6.3 ANSWERING THE PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

A constant research focus of this dissertation is the multifaceted exploration of my opening hypothesis; that lyrical poetry mattered to Britten. The subsequent presentation of arguments reveals the extent to which text influenced Britten’s composition of art song, and is concerned with the identification of this footprint in song. These arguments support the thesis proposed here—for Benjamin Britten text setting is song composition—the act of setting text is analogous to the act of song composition. The relationship of text and music engages with all of the musical elements which are available to a composer in any genre: metre, rhythm, melody, harmony, texture, timbre, compass and range, articulation, dynamics, pace of change and structure. Uniquely song necessitates a textual mediation of these musical components.

¹ Brett and Wood, ‘Gay and Lesbian Music, ix, p. 597.

This dissertation shows consistently that poetry affected the structure and musical detail of the composer's song repertoire; poetic text mattered to Britten. In each of the songs considered in this dissertation the composer selected pre-existing poetic texts, Hölderlin in Chapter 1 and Auden in Chapters 3 to 5. In each case, Britten's deep absorption of this lyrical poetry had far-reaching effects on the resultant music and sustained him throughout initial musical stimulus, song composition and beyond in song performance.

In Part 2 of this dissertation we see repeatedly the benefits of interdisciplinary interaction between poetic analysis and song analysis. Exploration of poetic syntax (including structure), words and word units, and poetic meaning have consciously been presented and their direct and indirect effects on the composition have been identified, analysed and interpreted as a self-contained complete art work—song. These effects represent Britten's text-setting practices. Langer declared in 1957: 'Song is music'; ultimately, my thesis proposes that a detailed text-setting analysis of Britten song is song analysis.

6.4 PATHWAYS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis firmly and repeatedly evidences Britten's acute literary discernment and more importantly identifies its effects, by way of rigorous text-setting analysis of song. Within Britten song studies there is, therefore, interpretative value to be gained by extending the application of this dissertation—critical poetic analysis followed by an analysis of musical text setting—to additional Britten songs for solo voice and piano. This approach has further application in the analysis of both Britten's solo songs accompanied by instruments other than piano (harp, horn and guitar), and for his vocal duets and trios; in each case the textural change will impact the nature of the musical

dialogue between voice and instrument or between voices and accompanying instrument.

Within the study of Britten's settings of Auden there is also scope to engage in the systematic text-setting analysis of Britten's orchestral song-cycle *Our Hunting Fathers* op.8; the larger-scale 'dramatic' context of this work is reflected in Britten's intentional declamatory setting, and multiple levels of discourse are affected between voice and individual and groups of instruments. Text-setting analysis of Britten's settings of Auden's *Cabaret Songs* will reveal abundant musical and socio-cultural content, albeit not in the exclusively art-song realm of this dissertation.

Within the context of the material currently engaged with in this dissertation contextualisation of these works within English song is required. Likewise an exclusively harmonic focused analysis will also enhance an understanding of Britten's text-setting achievements.

Themes of emerging sexuality and the loss of innocence, which are identified in the songs analysed here (from the 1930s), also feature prominently throughout Britten's opera repertoire. Within the genre of song for solo voice and piano, preliminary research on Britten's song cycle *Winter Words* op.52 from 1953 (Thomas Hardy) reveals the conspicuous presence of these themes, particularly in the companion, second and penultimate 'railway' songs; the political, social and sexual themes which exercised Britten in the 1930s continue to inspire him musically. The application of gendered, interdisciplinary post-modernist scholarship to these and later Britten songs will advance an understanding of song in the mid-twentieth century.

Auden's poetry has been shown in this research to affect Britten's composition of song. Further research is required to consider the composer's evolving engagement with the poetry of other poets when compared with his unique close interactive collaboration

with Auden, in order to assess the relative direct responsiveness of Britten to the poetry of other poets. Preliminary research suggests that Britten's 1930s song, based on texts by Auden, marks a unique formative evolution phase for Benjamin Britten as text setter.

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