

Benjamin Britten's absorption of and contribution to the Lied tradition

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Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) grew up in a musical household. His mother was a keen amateur singer who was active in the local Choral Society and also encouraged the family's musical entertainment of guests. In his contribution to Mitchell and Keller's 1952 book, *Peter Pears* lists the repertoire performed in the Britten household; prominent among this repertoire are the songs of Schubert, Schumann and Brahms and of lesser significance some lighter weight songs of Arthur Sullivan, ballads of Liza Lehmann and others, and some few folk songs,¹ thus highlighting the relative importance of German Lieder as a formative influence on this young composer. From an early age Britten's role in this musical household was to provide the piano accompaniment for his mother's voice, who performed her son's early settings; this formative experience of writing for and accompanying high voice was to become a significant and permanent of Britten's vocal writing style.

This article seeks to identify and critically assess the significance of art song to Britten's compositional achievements; while addressing specifically the genres of solo art song with instrumental accompaniment and orchestral song, it excludes the consideration of Britten's vocal duets, trios and dramatic works. This selection reflects the fact that it is in these two genres that Britten approaches most directly the origins of the German art song tradition. In addressing solo-voice art song, the following, separate yet inter-related questions are central to an understanding of Britten's engagement with English art song: What attracted Britten to the genre of art song? Was this association consistent throughout his career? How did the tradition of art song form and shape his aesthetic view of the artist in society? And, finally, how did he build upon these traditions and make his own contribution to this genre?

¹ Peter Pears: 'The Vocal Music' *Benjamin Britten* a Commentary on his Works from a Group of Specialists, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1952 reprint 1972), 59–73.

Britten's Literary Inspiration

Benjamin Britten's international reputation is built upon the success of his writing for voice. In his 1957 BBC radio interview with Joseph Cooper for the series *The Composer Speaks* Britten identifies that it was his love of English poetry which directed him towards writing vocal music.² The quality and variety of the poets he set and the variety of poetry anthologies among his personal library bears testimony to his wide-ranging literary knowledge. Porter identifies the consistent high quality of Britten's selection of poets, including what he terms the 'Greats' of Tennyson, Keats, Donne, Wordsworth and Shakespeare and the 'near Greats' including Auden, Rimbaud, Hardy, Owen, Hölderlin, Pushkin, and Eliot. Yet of greater significance to such poets is the consistency with which he selected poems of exceptional quality.³ From this selection it is clear that Britten was both well-read and poetically discerning.⁴

Britten looked to the Lied as an established literary based musical art form to provide an aesthetic framework within which to express his musical ideas. Poetic inspiration and musical expression are inextricably linked in this genre. For Britten poetry acted as a creative catalyst and provided the source of inspiration to his musical imagination. His recognition of his need for poetic stimulus is made clear in his 1969 BBC radio broadcast in which he states: 'I'm not a poet. I can't describe those feelings'.⁵ In spite of his perceived inability to describe emotions in words

² Joseph Cooper interview with Benjamin Britten. Paul Kildea, ed. *Britten on Music*. 'The Composer Speaks', (1st broadcast BBC general Overseas Service, 7 July 1957; pre-recorded 30 May 1957). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 223–232. Hereafter referred to as Kildea: *Britten on Music*.

³ Peter Porter: 'Composer and Poet' *The Britten Companion* ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 271–273. Lists the following poets: William Shakespeare (1564–1616), John Donne (1572–1631), Francis Quarles (1592–1644), William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin (1779–1837), John Keats (1795–1821), Alfred Tennyson (1809–92), Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965), Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), and Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973). Hereafter referred to as Porter: 'Composer and Poet'.

⁴ Boris Ford lists the poetry anthologies in Britten's library in an appendix. Boris Ford, ed: *Benjamin Britten's Poets – An Anthology of the poetry he set to music*. (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 287–288.

⁵ Editors transcript of recording 'Snape Maltings Fire' (1st broadcast BBC 4, 8 June 1969). Kildea: *Britten on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 335–336.

Britten was, however, able to express fluently his feelings in musical form. In fact, his eloquence in his prodigious letter writing output and interviews suggests he was being too diffident with regard to his own literary expression.⁶

Routh considers Britten's interaction with poetry in terms of an artistic response to 'an already-existing image' which he 'illustrates' with music; with art song the musical image is literary.⁷ Britten looks to the poem for poetic ideas, described in words which are both expressive and suggestive; Routh describes these literary images as 'explicit and implicit' in nature.⁸ Therefore the composer's own interpretation of the poem is relevant, as it is this which will shape the final work.

In the *Britten Companion* Porter considers that Britten is attracted by poetry which 'leaves something more to be said'⁹ – a quality which allows the composer the freedom to interpret and express further, in musical terms, a revealed insight of the essence of the poem, its 'affection'. It is this inherent quality in lyric poetry which exercised the compositional expression of such major figures of nineteenth century Lieder as Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf—an expression which remained compelling to Britten throughout his career. Britten shares his views with us on this aspect in his programme notes on the music of Schumann's *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* W003 (1844–53), in which he quotes Philip Spitta from *Groves Dictionary* (1889). When listening to Schumann's work Britten felt that:

the meaning of Goethe's words was made clear for the first time, so deeply imbued was the composer with the poet's inmost spirit.¹⁰

Although these introductory notes refer to a work by Schumann, nonetheless they give us insight into Britten's own view of the role of the composer as exploring both surface and deeper-inner levels of possible

⁶ Three volumes of Britten's letters and diaries have been published to date covering the years 1923–1939, 1939–1942 and 1946–1951. There are a further two volumes in preparation and it is anticipated that a final volume will be required to adequately record significant extant material.

⁷ Francis Routh: *Contemporary British Music* – The twenty-five years from 1945–1970. (London: Macdonald, 1972), 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁹ Porter: 'Composer and Poet', 271–285.

¹⁰ Kildea: *Britten on Music*, 428–429.

meanings contained in a poem; such remarks not only reveal Britten's sensitivity to the possibilities of word-text relations, but also serve to identify his direct engagement with the German Lied tradition.

Britten reveals his respect for the role that the source poet plays in his creative output even at the level of the work's title. This near-Wolfian gesture places the name of the poet prominently in the title of most of his mature single poet song cycles, for example the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* op.22 (1940) and the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* op.74 (1965).¹¹ An exception to this general practice are his *Winter Words* op.52 (1953) by Thomas Hardy which were so closely associated with the poet that Britten may have considered that any reference to Hardy in the title of the song-cycle might have seemed laboured. In any case this poetic association, through prominent reference to source, underscores the central role of poetry to the compositional process.

Art Song: A Constant Companion

Unlike the reduction in the volume of instrumental music after his return to Britain from America in 1942 and the increase of operatic output resultant from his success with *Peter Grimes* in 1945, art song remained a constant genre in Britten's musical output. With the relative rise in importance of his opera compositions we also see a shift in the nature of Britten's art song ventures: almost all songs composed after 1945 are part of song-cycles or collections. Of his total art-song output (as listed in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (2nd edn, 2001), as compared and verified by Bank's *A Catalogue of published Works* (1999) single songs account for 33, of a total of 158 songs, in other words, 21% of his total output, the vast majority of which are composed before 1945 (see Figure 1, containing a summary of Britten's art song output in chronological order, supporting the opinion posited here). Therefore, we may now consider that Britten had moved away from the miniature form and expanded into the larger forms, in both his song-cycles in art song and opera.¹² This expansion allows for greater performance possibilities.

¹¹ Hugo Wolf (1860–1903) 53 *Mörrike-Lieder*, of 1888 makes reference to Lieder as poems. The prominent use of the poets name in settings is common among other nineteenth-century Lieder composers including C.F. Zelter, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, but none to the extent of Wolf.

¹² Joseph Machlis: *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (London: J.M. Dent, 1963, rev. 1980), 476.

Figure 1. Summary of Benjamin Britten's Art Song Output – by year of composition¹³

Pre 1945	Total No. of songs	No. of Single Songs	No. of Songs in Cycles	No. of Cycles
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

¹³ Data is compiled from Paul Banks ed. *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of Published Works* (Britten-Pears Library: Aldeburgh, 1999) and works listing in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* iv, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 2001), 389–397 by the same author and verified with *Britten Complete Catalogue* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1973).

Summary of Song output (expressed as percentage)¹⁴

	Single Songs	Songs in Cycles
Pre 1945	67%	38%
Post 1945	33%	62%

The attraction of art song for Britten is in large part accounted for by his attraction to vocal lyricism or, to put it another way, his non-attraction to generic-symphonic development. Machlis considers ‘that the grand forms of instrumental music – the sonata and symphony’ – were not the way forward for Britten.¹⁵ His focus is sung melody, preferring the techniques of theme and variation, and also passacaglia, to develop his musical material. Though often compared to Mahler (1860–1911), who greatly developed the genre of orchestral song (*Kindertotenlieder* 1901–04), Britten never uses full orchestra in his mature works, preferring combinations of string together with other solo instruments, as prominently featured in his *Nocturne for Tenor and Seven Obligato Instruments* op.60 (1958), which combines string orchestra with eight different solo instruments: bassoon, harp, horn, timpani, English horn, and flute and clarinet. In this cycle Britten thereby reveals an acute sensitivity to the duet nature of the tradition of Lied, being voice and piano, even in this larger-scale forum of orchestral song. This work also shows his specific particular responses to eight poets reflected in the unique instrumental timbre chosen. The very selection of instrument combination in this orchestral song-cycle is text determined: the choice of bassoon as the solo instrument in the second song ‘The Kraken’ (Alfred Tennyson) stems from the text ‘below the thunders of the deep’; and the selection of the English horn, as solo instrument in the sixth song ‘The Kind’ (Wilfred Owen) is inspired by the words ‘she sleeps on the soft, last breath’, whereby the specific timbre of this instrument fits the text.¹⁶

¹⁴ This data supports the view that a significant relative shift occurred in Britten’s output after 1945 (the year of his first operatic success with *Peter Grimes*), whereby, song cycles and collections replace individual songs as his preferred form.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 476.

¹⁶ *Nocturne* op.60 for tenor solo, seven obligato instruments and string Orchestra (1958) is orchestrated for the following combinations of instruments:

Such direct and appropriate word-painting reveals a composer who engages fully with his chosen text and employs all musical means to achieve his realisation of the literary text.

Allied to Britten's development of orchestral song was his intention to expand the performance possibilities for his song compositions. This larger form necessitated a move of performance space from the salon to the concert hall and was also more attractive for concert programming. In addition to being an accomplished soloist, accompanist and conductor Britten was also a concert promoter, establishing the annual Aldeburgh Festival in 1948 to provide a much needed forum for the performance of art song in addition to opera and instrumental chamber music.

An Aesthetic View of Art Song

Britten's attitude to the role of the composer in society is closely linked to his view of the role of the art song as a genre. He considered that all art, including music, should be useful, communicate ideas (through a synthesis of text and music), be performable and technically efficient—all of which are to the fore in Britten's art songs. In a 1963 interview with *Pravda* he states, quite directly, 'that "art for art's sake" cannot exist' and contends that the composer has his social obligation towards 'the moulding, education and development of the artistic taste of the people'.¹⁷ Donald Mitchell in a 1969 CBC interview asks Britten in respect of the development of new musical languages, whether 'the total abolition of the idea of comprehensible language' has impaired the 'idea of communicating': to which Britten answers in the affirmative.¹⁸ Britten then expands upon this idea and concludes that the musical language used should never become more important than the message communicated, thereby explaining his view of the functional and practical role of the composer.

In a 1963 interview with Murray Schafer Britten reveals his practical and professional bias in relation to the performability of music.

I. v & str.; II. v, bn & str.; III. v, lp & str.; IV. v, hn & str.; V. v, timp. & str.; VI. v & eng. hrn; VII. v, fl. & cl.; VIII. v, seven obligato inst. & str.

¹⁷ Kildea: *Britten on Music*. 'The Artist – to the People', interview for *Pravda* (18 March 1963), 233.

¹⁸ Donald Mitchell's interview for CBC, February 1969. Kildea: *Britten on Music*. 'Mapreading', 327.

He recounts the difficulties that the tenor Peter Pears and he, as pianist, had in the rehearsal of Webern songs, in getting these songs 'perfect' and considers the complexity of the music as an impediment to having them performed frequently.¹⁹ This is not to say that Britten shies away from virtuosic technical excellence. In fact, Banfield considers an essential element of Britten's art song style to be his ability to interplay a 'vividness of both vocal and instrumental personae and the potentially brilliant flexibility (in the hands of virtuoso performers)';²⁰ he highlights the melismatic baroque style opening with the words 'florid music' in the first song of the cycle *On This Island* op.11 (1937) (words by W.H. Auden), as an example where virtuosic interaction is essential to successful performance.²¹

¹⁹ Marray Schafer's interview, 'British Composers in interview'. Kildea: *Britten on Music*, 232.

²⁰ Stephen Banfield: *The Twentieth Century* – The Blackwell History of Music in Britain, vi, gen. ed. Ian Spink. (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1995), 477.

²¹ The 1956 (LW5241) mono recording of the Tenor Peter Pears with Britten at the piano is recommended, due to the particular clarity of expression in Pear's voice.

Art Song as Britten's Text-Inspired Form

Example 1. Britten: 'Let the florid music praise!' *On This Island* op.11 (1937), bars 1–5

Maestoso-non troppo presto

f Sostenuto

Voice

Let the flo-rid mus-ic praise

Piano

ff marcato *f marcato*

In this cycle's opening song voice and piano engage in antiphonal dialogue from the outset. The piano introduction commences with a tied crotchet followed by a semi-quaver-scalic run, in which the fast flowing line is inspired by and anticipates the initial text-line, in particular the word 'florid' (see Example 1).²² Although there is an expectation of a melismatic vocal melodic response, Britten, however, provides a syllabic crotchet-movement vocal phrase which contrasts greatly with the piano part. The treble remains silent while the bass two-bar pedal octave D provides the framework of the outline of the vocal line. In bar 4 the piano is informed by of the earlier piano octaves and its semi-quaver rhythm characterises the word 'florid' in the text. Thereby, we experience the interdependence of the instrumental and vocal lines which are inspired by the chosen text.

²² The use of the word 'florid' is perhaps a reference to baroque ornamentation and in particular to the English Baroque composer Henry Purcell (1659–1695).

Example 2. 'Let the florid music praise!' *On This Island* op.11 (1937), bars /17–19

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is for the Voice, starting with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The lyrics are "Her im - pe - rial stan-dards fly, ...". The middle and bottom staves are for the Piano. The piano part begins with a static tied G in the bass, which then transforms into rapid semi-quaver parallel movement. A *f cresc* (forte crescendo) dynamic marking is present in the piano part. The piano part also includes a static tied G in the bass that transforms into rapid semi-quaver parallel movement.

In the sixth phrase of this song the opening pattern is reversed and this time the piano musically responds to the word 'fly' (see Example 2). The outline of the range of the vocal line is prefigured by the F octaves in the piano, also seen in Example 1. Britten shows his effective use of word-painting in his setting of the word 'fly'. In the vocal line this takes the form of tied-minims leaping up to the octave G. The piano's response to this text transforms the static tied G (in octaves) in the bass into rapid semi-quavers parallel movement, commencing and climaxing also on a G. The forte crescendo also lends expressive impetus to this 'flight'. The voice commences to 'fly' unaccompanied by the piano then, encouraged by this *forte crescendo* in the piano, leaps an octave, initially supported by the piano with semi-quaver parallel octave in contrary movement. These text inspired musical devices serve Britten well in his audible expression of this visual image.

In the succeeding phrase Britten seizes the opportunity to set these intensely-evocative words: 'let the hot sun Shine on' (see Example 3). His musical response takes the form of an E trill on the word 'Shine': this vocal ornamentation expresses the extent and intensity of the hot sun's 'Shine', the relative 'height' of which is further emphasised by the piano decent. This phrase leads directly into a seven bar highly-decorative vocal melisma, in which voice and piano engage in antiphonal dialogue. The initial syllabic text treatment, which is accompanied by piano

crotchets, contrasts greatly with the consequent decorative fanfare (perhaps an extended reference to the word ‘florid’ in example 1. Britten does not focus his specific musical attention on the ‘sun’, as static object, but rather on an action word ‘shine’, thereby musically representing a force of nature.

Example 3. ‘Let the florid music praise!’ *On This Island* op.11 (1937), bars 20–28

The musical score for Example 3 is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 20-24) shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a fortissimo (ff) dynamic and includes the lyrics "Let the hot sun shine on,". The piano part has a forte (f) dynamic and includes the instruction "sf colla parte". The second system (bars 24-26) shows the vocal line continuing with a melodic line and the piano part providing harmonic support. The third system (bars 26-28) features a vocal line with a "molto marcato" tempo and "cresc." (crescendo) instruction, and a piano part with a "cresc." instruction. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics, articulation marks, and phrasing slurs.

These three succinct examples from the first song of this early song cycle illustrate clearly Britten’s sensitivity to poetic text setting and reveal vocal and piano parts which are indeed—text-driven.

German Song: Musical inspiration and catalyst?

Britten found in art song and in particular in the Lied tradition an artistic outlet for his considerable sensitivity to lyrical text-setting. His attraction to this literary based genre was nurtured by his formative early accompaniment of German Lieder: this attraction was to remain a constant throughout his career and came to fruition in his 158 art songs. We have seen Britten's musical responses to text-setting, thus revealing the product of applied poetic discernment. It is evident from his attitude and compositional output that art song mattered to Britten, not alone at the level of initial musical inspiration and catalyst but it also provided him with a genre and aesthetic framework, rich in European traditions, which he absorbs, experiments with and thereby, finds his own unique vocal compositional style, namely through his development of expressive virtuosic vocal melody and novel use of expressive instrumentation.

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