

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Benjamin Britten : the things spiritual.

Elliott, Graham

Award date:
1985

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 24. Apr. 2025

Benjamin Britten

The Things Spiritual

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Ph.D. in the University of Wales

by

Graham Elliott

Summer Term 1985

CONTENTS

	Summary	i
	Acknowledgments	ii
	Frontispiece <i>A Hymn to the Virgin</i> (Original manuscript, 1930)	iii
	Preface	iv
	<u>Part I</u>	
1	Introduction	1
2	Boyhood	4
3	Two Churchmen	12
4	Sir Peter Pears	23
5	Summary	31
	<u>Part II</u>	
6	Plainsong and Hymn Tunes	44
7	The Liturgical Music	86
8	Parable Music I	113
9	Parable Music II	140
10	Parable Music III	163
11	Parable Music IV	182
12	Conclusion	199
	<u>Appendices</u>	
i	Questionnaire	209
ii	<i>Litany and Anthem for S. Matthew's Day</i> - W.H.Auden	210
iii	Opening of unfinished work (1961) thought to be setting of the Te Deum	211
	Bibliography	212

SUMMARY

Since Benjamin Britten's death in 1976, a number of commentaries have been published on his life and work. Most of them observe the facts of Britten's deeply-felt pacifism, and his homosexuality. It has been suggested that Britten felt himself to be outside 'normal' society, and that this accounts for his obvious sympathy for the 'outsider' in his operas. Although this is undoubtedly an important aspect of Britten's total make-up, the present thesis seeks to show that he was concerned with very much more universal concerns, which are frequently to be seen as having a strong spiritual dimension.

Part I examines Britten's early life and the strong presence which the Church had in his childhood and adolescence. It shows the way in which certain spiritual influences were first manifested in his life; and which, like the more specifically musical 'themes' which Donald Mitchell has noted, are capable of being traced through Britten's life. Part I includes comment from two churchmen who were influential in Britten's life, as well as a chapter devoted to the observations of Sir Peter Pears.

Part II examines a wide range of the composer's music which can be seen to have a spiritual dimension. The specifically liturgical music forms a relatively small part of Britten's output, and it has not received wide critical notice in the way that the large-scale works have done. This music is examined here, and it is shown to possess important musical characteristics in common with the bigger works. The four chapters headed 'Parable Music' examine a wide range of Britten's works (including some of the operas) which can be seen to have a spiritual dimension.

Britten could not be described as a conventional Christian; still less is it true to describe him, as Eric Walter White has done, as "keen, wherever possible, to work within the framework of the Church of England", but his spirituality was strongly rooted in the religious experiences of his childhood. This thesis seeks to show that Britten retained a sense of the Christian values absorbed in childhood and adolescence, and that these - along with the specifically Christian heritage of plainsong - were strongly influential in his choice and treatment of themes throughout his career.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge, with gratitude, the help of a large number of people who have talked to me and answered my letters of inquiry. I record my particular thanks to : The Revd Canon G.B.Bentley; Sir Lennox Berkeley; The Rt Revd Dr Leslie Brown, CBE; Eric Crozier; H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh; Bettina Ehrlich; The Rt Hon The Earl of Harewood; H.R.H. The Princess of Hesse and the Rhine; the late Imogen Holst; the late Very Revd Walter Hussey; Hans Keller; George Malcolm, CBE; The Revd Canon J.I.Morton; John Piper, CH; Myfanwy Piper; Marion Thorpe; Sebastian Welford and Sir David Willcocks, CBE.

I owe an especial debt of gratitude to Sir Peter Pears, CBE, for his friendship and encouragement over a number of years: it was from our early informal talks that the present work developed. I am grateful for the unstinting help of the staff of the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh: Rosamund Strode (Keeper of Manuscripts and Archivist); Paul Wilson (Librarian); and Philip Reed (Research Scholar). Dr Donald Mitchell (Literary Executor to the Britten Estate) has read my manuscript at various stages in its development and has offered invaluable encouragement and constructive comment.

I am grateful to the Trustees of the Britten Estate for permission to reproduce copyright material. All quotations from letters or other writings of Benjamin Britten are © 1985 and are made by kind permission of The Britten Estate, and are not to be further reproduced without written permission of the Trustees. Facsimiles of manuscript pages from Benjamin Britten's *A Hymn to the Virgin* (© 1935 Boosey and Hawkes Ltd), *Jubilate Deo*, 1934 (© 1984 Faber Music Ltd) and the opening of an unfinished work (1961) thought to be a setting of the *Te Deum* (© The Britten Estate) are reproduced by permission of the Executors and Trustees of The Britten Estate and the Trustees of the Britten-Pears Library, The Red House, Aldeburgh, Suffolk.

The musical examples are reproduced by kind permission of their respective publishers. I am grateful to Oxford University Press for use of Examples 21, 28 and 29; to Boosey and Hawkes Ltd for Examples 1b, 2b, 4, 6, 7, 8a, 8b, 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b, 16b, 16c, 17, 18, 19b, 23a, 23c, 23d, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30a, 30b, 31a, 31b, 31c, 31d, 31e, 32a, 32b, 32c, 32d, 36, 38a, 38b, 39, 40, 41a, 41b, 41c, 41d, 41e, 41f, 41g; to Faber Music Ltd for Examples 13b, 13c, 14c, 14d, 14e, 15 20, 33a, 33b, 34, 35, 37a, 37b, 37c, 37d, 37e, 37f, 37g.

Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to my Supervisor, Dr Bruce Wood. He has been unfailingly patient in the task of guiding me through this work.

G.J.E.

A Hymn Tune, No. 10

PREFACE

" the manner in which you approach the Christian idea delighted me. I used to think that the day when one could shock people was over - but now, I've discovered that being simple and considering things spiritual of importance, produces violent reactions!" (1)

That extract from a letter written by Benjamin Britten to Imogen Holst soon after the first performance of *The Rape of Lucretia*, suggests that there is a straightforward response to any question which might be posed about Britten's personal faith. The first performance of his third opera was greeted with a good deal of criticism on the part of those people who found themselves confused by a work which was drastically different, in every way, from the universally acclaimed *Peter Grimes* which had preceded it only two years previously. Of all the criticism of this chamber opera, the most strident was from those who found the inclusion of Christian dynamic into the epilogue to be anachronistic and, in some way, rather bogus. (2) Yet it was undoubtedly Britten, rather than his librettist, Ronald Duncan, who insisted on its inclusion -

"He [Britten], by the way, suggested putting in the Christian element into *The Rape of Lucretia*. I don't mean that he wrote specially to have the notion that without forgiveness, Christian forgiveness, the drama of *The Rape of Lucretia* is meaningless - but he suggested it, not Ronny Duncan. Ronny has told me over the years of that." (3)

The insistence on the Christian message in the work, planned and written in 1945-46, contrasts sharply with the views of those commentators who assert that Britten reacted, in adult life, against the religious observance of his childhood and that he was, ultimately, an agnostic humanist. Sharply divergent views have been expressed by those who were close to Britten with regard to the question of whether he had a continuing religious faith; or whether, as Sir Peter Pears has said, he was an agnostic with a great love for Jesus Christ. Christopher Headington, writing in 1981, would appear to agree -

"In certain moods he may have succeeded in feeling with Wilfred Owen's soldier : *we've walked quite friendly up to Death;/Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland* though he could not share the faith of Saint Nicolas (*Lord I come to life, to final birth*)."
(4)

This work seeks to trace the course of Britten's spiritual progress, and to examine this in, and through, the music. Extensive musical analysis has not been found to be necessary, since Britten's major works have already been thoroughly surveyed in the published analyses of other writers.

References :

- 1 *Britten* - Imogen Holst (Third edition); p. 40
- 2 *Benjamin Britten : His Life and Operas* - Eric Walter White; p. 46
- 3 Interview with Lord Harewood, 22 February 1983
- 4 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 147

Part I

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Since Benjamin Britten's death, in 1976, a great deal has been written about the man and his music, and about what the various writers consider to be the driving motives which directed his creativity. Much stress has been given to the issues of his pacifism and to his homosexuality - so much, indeed, that there is a danger of these factors being seen as the only major influences in his work. Professor Philip Brett made his first confident pronouncements on Britten's homosexuality in an article *Britten and Grimes* which was published in *The Musical Times* in 1977⁽¹⁾ and which he reprints in revised form in his book *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes*.⁽²⁾ Numerous other writers have found themselves able to speak of these things since Britten's death, and there is a danger that concentration on this area of Britten's *persona* will allow other equally important motivations to be ignored.

Commentators have occasionally talked in vague terms about what Hans Keller calls the "central metaphysical region of his mind",⁽³⁾ but rarely make more than passing reference to Britten's religious beliefs and observances. In *Remembering Britten* Alan Blyth quotes some substantial comments and observations by friends of the composer. Sir Peter Pears says -

"He was religious in the general sense of acknowledging a power above greater than ourselves, but he wasn't a regular church-goer. In his moral attitudes he was low church, and therefore inclined to be puritanical." ⁽⁴⁾

In the same collection of reminiscences Sir Michael Tippett makes rather firmer claims for Britten as a religious composer -

"We are both of us religious composers, i.e. bound, *religiati*, to a sense of the numinous, but Britten is more properly Christian." ⁽⁵⁾

Tippet's statement is amplified by recollections of Murray Perahia -

"Stimulated by a meeting on a Jewish holy day, the two discussed religious beliefs. Perahia asked the composer if he thought of himself as religious. Britten replied that he was certainly Christian in his music. Although he could not accept Church doctrine, he believed in God and a destiny." (6)

Many writers have commented on the strength and narrowness of Britten's moral attitudes. The way he felt unable to remain part of the *ménage* in America in which W.H.Auden presided over a somewhat Bohemian rooming house for artists, is indicative of what Christopher Headington has noted -

"He was, after all, entirely un-Bohemian and even Puritan, seeming quite consciously to have sought to live 'decently' and free of scandal." (7)

It must be acknowledged, however, that a strong moral sense does not imply a deeply Christian personality, and while most commentators have remarked on the moralistic side of Britten's nature, they do not all ascribe it to a strong Christian conviction. Philip Brett lays great emphasis on the potency of homosexual orientation and he approaches *Peter Grimes* as an allegory of the homosexual condition. (8) This is not, however, the primary viewpoint of all his contributors, and he does include in his book an essay, written in 1972 by Peter Garvie, in which the writer makes a claim for a very definite Christian dimension in *Peter Grimes*. (9)

Garvie does not go so far as to claim that *Grimes's* situation is a Christian allegory: rather does he see the Christian theme in terms of its rejection by the various factions in the opera - even the composer - and this he sees as distinguishing this work from Britten's other works.

"What seems to be missing in *Peter Grimes*, and is persistently present in Britten's later music, is the sense of redemptive continuity. This continuity, a sense of meaning beyond the act, is usually expressed in Christian terms, but it may also be found as a secular transformation, an accord of the human and natural worlds within the creative imagination. (The *Nocturne* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are good examples.) It is tempting to think of *Peter Grimes* in terms of the end as an end, and to wonder whether it was its moral implications that forced Britten to find a response. The treatment of Christianity in *Peter Grimes*

seems to bear that out. Whether it is the socially binding Anglicanism of the Rector or the evangelical zeal of Methody Boles, it is uninfluential for good. It does nothing to heal Peter or his community. The death of Peter is not in the true meaning of the term 'a sacrifice'; it does not 'make sacred'." (10)

While most recent commentators are generally cautious about the treatment of the spiritual side of Britten's nature, one of his earliest biographers, Eric Walter White, makes sweeping claims for Britten's religious condition -

"His religious beliefs are central to his life and his work. As a devout and practising Christian, he has been keen, whenever possible, to work within the framework of the Church of England, and many of his compositions have been planned accordingly." (11)

That statement is difficult to equate with the known facts, for Britten was not, for a large part of his adult life, a regular churchgoer - but it might be wrong to assume that White equates churchgoing with the life of a practising Christian. Perhaps, with the example of Crabbe's churchgoing people of *The Borough* in mind, he takes a directly opposite view! Such an interpretation would be more consistent with the views of Sir Peter Pears, and it is a clue to the spiritual drives which supported and directed the composer.

References :

- 1 *Britten and Grimes* - Philip Brett; Musical Times, December 1977, p. 995
- 2 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett
- 3 Letter from Hans Keller; 31 August 1983
- 4 *Remembering Britten* - Alan Blyth; p. 22
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 67
- 6 *Ibid.* p. 172
- 7 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 35
- 8 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 172
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 177
- 11 *Benjamin Britten His Life and Operas* - Eric Walter White; p. 91

Chapter 2

BOYHOOD

"Peter Pears has said 'Ben had a marvellous childhood', and all one can discover of family life at 21 Kirkley Cliff Road in Lowestoft confirms this. A strict but gentle father who read Dickens to his children and took them on walks, a mother who pampered the boy and encouraged his musical talents, sisters who jumped up indulgently from the piano bench whenever he had a musical idea he wanted to try out - these were some of its happy ingredients. There was also a certain puritanism, which Britten regarded as an advantage to him as a composer because it inculcated disciplined working habits." (1)

Such was the well-ordered life of the boy Britten. He was born, auspiciously, on St Cecilia's Day - 22 November - 1913. The youngest child of a comfortably placed middle-class family. Britten's father was a successful dentist and he was able to support his wife and four children in a house where servants were kept and where the nursery was managed by a nanny. Benjamin Britten's mother was an enthusiastic musical amateur who took an active part in local music making and she held musical evenings at her home. Edith Britten had a pleasant soprano voice and there can be no doubt that Britten's earliest musical experiences were provided by his mother.

Mrs Britten gave her younger son his first piano lessons and so gave rise, almost immediately, to his first attempts at musical composition. These early efforts - and his piano improvisations - were filled with the incidents of his environment and dominated by the sea. It is fascinating to trace the continuity of themes through Britten's life and to discover, in the constant awareness of the sea, that his preoccupation dates from his very earliest memories of boyhood.

From the age of eight years Britten took piano lessons from Ethel Astle, and at the age of ten years he began to receive viola lessons from

Audrey Alston. It was she who first introduced Britten, in 1927, to Frank Bridge - the most important musical influence in his early life.

Britten's academic education followed the predictable course of a child of reasonably well-to-do middle-class parents. He attended South Lodge preparatory school, where he was a day boy and where he excelled in mathematics and games. At this stage he was already composing prolifically and much of the surviving music of that period displays in embryo the features of his mature style. His great attention to detail of every kind has always been a feature of a composer who valued a flawless technique as the necessary accomplishment for clarity of expression.

Since Britten's preparatory school was near to his home in Lowestoft there was no necessity for him to be a boarder. He was able to remain part of a happy and integrated family, indulged but not spoiled, by his parents and his older brothers and sisters. His mother was a dedicated member of St John's Church in Lowestoft, a church with a strong evangelical low church tradition; her husband was not a regular churchgoer. Each weekend there was a mild tussle to establish which of the children were to accompany their mother to church and which would accompany their father on a car drive. (2) Britten's allegiance to his mother and to St John's Church was strong during those years and there is evidence that he played at concerts in the church and in combination with the organist, Mr Coleman. The association lasted into Britten's early twenties: a concert programme dated 9 July 1934 shows that he and Coleman gave a concert of music for piano and organ which included arrangements, made by Britten, of music by Bridge, Tchaikovsky and Mozart.

It was in 1927, during Britten's last year at preparatory school, that Audrey Alston took him to meet Frank Bridge. Bridge had written a successful work - *The Sea* - for the 1924 Norwich Festival, and he had been asked to write a work for the 1927 festival. This meeting marked the start of a remarkable and formative relationship for Britten in which Bridge was

to be his principle teacher and a major influence in the evolution of Britten's philosophy of life. From the time of that first meeting Britten began to pay regular visits to Bridge at his home in Eastbourne in order to receive highly concentrated periods of instruction in composition. Britten has since talked appreciatively about those intense sessions which they spent together during his school holidays. Bridge's insistence on absolute clarity of thought and expression found a ready response in a boy who had grown up in an atmosphere where decency, consideration and good order were part of the ethic of the evangelical tradition of East Anglian religion which surrounded Britten in his childhood.

The Bridge household also provided for Britten an insight into the way that an artist lived, and the awareness which the true creator has of other forms of artistic expression besides his own. Britten's pacifist sympathies, also, were quickened by the example of Bridge's pacifism.

By the time that Britten moved to his public school - Gresham's School Holt - in 1928, he had firmly established himself in a course of advanced studies with Frank Bridge, and he was also receiving regular piano lessons from Harold Samuel in London. This gave him a maturity of musical experience which placed him in a very different category from the average musical entrant to public school. It also made for some uncomfortable initial contacts with the musical hierarchy at Gresham's.

The story of his first encounter with a music master at the school has often been recounted -

"Almost the first person he met was the school music master. But this contact was not auspicious. 'So you are the little boy who likes Stravinsky!' was the greeting he received, and it was accompanied by a frown rather than the welcoming smile that might be expected from a teacher acquiring a talented pupil. Later he was to write with a trace of bitterness, 'At my public school my musical education was practically non-existent.' " (3)

It is not difficult to understand that a provincial music teacher

working at a time when school music was very much a minority interest in most schools, would have felt threatened by a gifted and able junior. Surviving parts of a letter written to his mother soon after his arrival at Gresham's contain poignant evidence of Britten's initial unhappiness with the musical situation which he discovered. One surviving part of a letter is clearly recalling the reaction of the music master to Britten's playing on the piano -

" after nearly eight years of study, I had a very flimsy technick(?) (sic) he as good as said I had none at all. His words were, when I finished playing, 'And who taught you that?' Afterwards he made out that it was hopeless for a boy of my age to play later Beethoven, and that my love of Beethoven will soon die, as it does with everyone. I afterwards played the Chopin polanaize. You might ask Bobby to look up and to tell me by letter whether the bars, 5 - 8, you know



are marked *p* or *f* , I played them *f*, he said they ought to be *pp* practically, and then demonstrated how, playing with no two notes together, and a gripping touch, and terrible tone. I don't think much of his technich(?)! After that he as good as said it would be no good whatsoever for me to go into the musical profession. Music in this school is now finished for me!" (4)

The letter contains other references to the state of music in the school, including a description of the choir -

"Choir practice last night was great fun, I sing alto you know. The numbers are like this:- Trebles about 30, Altos 8(!!), Tenors 4, Basses 14 approximately. Wonderful balance. You never hear the altos." (5)

The same letter contains a touching indication of the spiritual experience and expression which Britten was able to share with his mother. His frustrated outburst after the encounter with the music master leads on to -

"I did feel horrible when I went to bed last-night, but wasn't the Daily Light wonderful, just the one for me."

Daily Light is a collection of Bible readings for daily private use and it

is widely used by people of the evangelical tradition.

Despite Britten's initial reactions to the musical establishment at Gresham's he did settle to life in a school which was rather more liberal than most public schools of that period. His pacifist sympathies were accommodated within a tradition which allowed boys to opt out of membership of the cadet corps; canéing was not encouraged - though it was not entirely absent - and boys were encouraged to speak their opinions in a flourishing debating society. It is clear that something was redeemed after Britten's initial reactions and the school magazine of 1928 noted that -

".... as a viola player 'E.B.Britten proved a very reliable musician in ensemble work' and later his piano playing was thought 'of a high standard' and such as to show promise that 'he should go far'." (6)

Britten remained at Gresham's School for only two years, and during this time he continued to receive his major training during his visits to Bridge, and his piano lessons in London. His time at the school coincided with one of the extended periods of ill health from which he suffered periodically throughout his life. The nature of the illness is not clear from the available evidence, but it was sufficiently serious for it to be necessary that he be sent home for convalescence after a lengthy period in the school sanatorium. It was during this period in the sanatorium that he wrote the lovely motet *A Hymn to the Virgin*, written, in the absence of manuscript paper, on ordinary note paper (see Frontispiece, page iii, above).

It is possible to trace to the period at Gresham's the source of a particularly rich musical influence in Britten's music, for it was at school that he first experienced plainsong. Another incomplete letter to his mother, clearly written very soon after his arrival at the school, contains his reactions to his first experience of school chapel. It was an experience in marked contrast to the style of evangelical Anglicanism which he had experienced at St John's Lowestoft. His account suggests that the tradition was one

which employed only a modest degree of ceremonial, but to the young Britten, unused to any kind of liturgical decadence, it was a "high service". Britten tells his mother that after being shown around the school by another boy -

"We went into Chapel to a sort of glorified Morning Prayer. It is a high service, anyhow they sing plainsong, and in the Creed turn to the East and bow and nod etc." (7)

The letter in which Britten complains of his initial encounter with the music master also contains an interesting reference to the school chapel -

"We have had a very nice service in the Chapel from 10.30 - 11.15. No sermon, but just simple plain Morning Prayer, with Plain song, and three hymns, no hymns we know, but out of the Public School Hymn Book." (8)

Britten's time at Gresham's was relatively brief and it is tempting to assume that he and his parents felt the need for exposure to a standard of teaching which was more suited to the advanced level of his achievements. It could hardly have been realised at that stage that no teaching could supplant the special relationship which existed with Frank Bridge.

At the age of sixteen Britten was awarded an Open Scholarship for composition at the Royal College of Music. His hopes and expectations of the College were high - "All the time he had been at Gresham's School he had looked forward to full-time music in London as a kind of goal; he was full of creative energy and composing as freely as ever." (9)

In the event, Britten's hopes were not fully realised. The London music colleges were not, at that time, notably alert to international developments in compositional styles, and the general standards were bounded by the limited standards of the average student entrant from provincial school backgrounds. The system was set to be 'safe' but dull; to train students to become public school music teachers or orchestral musicians; it was not readily able to cater for a composer of potentially international stature. Britten was assigned to John Ireland for composition lessons - a

match not calculated to inspire Britten's imagination.

Fortunately for Britten, Frank Bridge continued to make himself available as unofficial mentor and guide. They frequently attended concerts together and Britten made good use of Bridge's contacts at the B.B.C. in order to hear a good deal of new music at the regular public concerts which were promoted by the Corporation. In 1933 Britten was able to hear Schoenberg conduct his own music, and in the same period he heard excerpts from Berg's *Wozzeck*, as well as chamber music by Stravinsky. In November 1933 he was much impressed by hearing Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. His rather dim view of the Royal College of Music cannot have been improved by the refusal of the library to obtain a score of this work.

By the time Britten reached the age of twenty his musical tastes had matured greatly. Bridge's style, somewhat Germanic in Britten's view, no longer totally convinced him, and his own preferences had been modified. His boyhood enthusiasms for Beethoven and Brahms had cooled, though his love for Mozart and Schubert remained steadfast throughout his life. To these he added a growing love for the English madrigal school and, in particular, for Henry Purcell.

If Britten found the Royal College of Music less useful to him than he had hoped, it must be acknowledged that there were positive aspects to his time as a student there. He worked hard at his piano studies and in December 1933 he gained the Associateship in piano performance. Among the prizes which he won were the Farrar Composition Prize and a travel scholarship which he hoped to use for study with Berg in Vienna. The project was not realised because of doubts expressed to Britten's parents by the Director of the Royal College, Sir Hugh Allen. The award was subsequently used for a tour in Europe on which he was accompanied by his mother.

Britten emerged from his student days, at the age of twenty, as a

remarkably poised and mature personality and as a composer with a sure sense of his own destiny. Michael Kennedy has suggested that Britten made a symbolic gesture of ending his childhood when, on 23 December 1933, he began to arrange a number of his juvenile pieces into the *Simple Symphony*,⁽¹¹⁾ dedicated to Audrey Alston. The death of his father in April 1934 must have further pointed to Britten that the idyll of childhood was over and that he was in the world with work to do.

References :

- 1 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett; pp. 190-191
- 2 Information given by Mr T.S.Welford
- 3 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 23
- 4 Incomplete letter to his mother (no date)
- 5 *Ibid*
- 6 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 23
- 7 Incomplete letter to his mother
- 8 Incomplete letter, as 4 above
- 9 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 24
- 10 Donald Mitchell has said that it was Frank Bridge who insisted that Britten should study with a practising composer when he became a student at the Royal College of Music.
- 11 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 13. This is not the view of Sir Peter Pears (see Chapter 4, page 28).

Chapter 3

TWO CHURCHMEN

Donald Mitchell has written of the consistency of Britten's themes and concerns and of the remarkable way they were sustained throughout his life (see Chapter 5). There is no doubt that one of the strong influences in his childhood and youth was the awareness of the Church and the religious observance which was encouraged by his mother. That the nature of his religious attitudes changed during the course of his life is not in doubt: that a strong spiritual dimension formed part of his thinking throughout his life would be entirely in sympathy with Dr Mitchell's view of the composer.

Those who would deny that Britten retained a lively personal faith point to the known facts concerning Britten's relationship with the organised Church. He was not a regular churchgoer and he was not a regular communicant. But he did retain a link with the Church through his life, and if the clergy within his immediate area of activity found it difficult to share his attitudes and his artistic professionalism, he did forge some very important personal links with individual clergymen who were able to share his vision and with whom he could share his spiritual quest.

One of his longest clerical friendships was with the Very Reverend Walter Hussey, sometime Vicar of St Matthew's Church Northampton and subsequently Dean of Chichester. Britten's friendship with Hussey was important for the fact that it brought him into contact with a priest who held an enlightened - and at that time, all too rare - view of the importance of art within the total life of the Church. Britten's first encounter with Hussey came very soon after his return to England after his sojourn in America.

It is tempting to see the beginnings of a long-standing friendship

between Britten and Hussey as providential, for it came at a time when Britten was emerging from the influences of the 1930s and what Donald Mitchell has called 'the Auden years'. It was in the thirties that he found himself to be an independent adult earning his own living and forced to re-examine the comfortable institutions of his boyhood years - a period, one suspects, when the his so-called 'loss of innocence' fixation became part of his awareness. It would hardly be surprising if at this time his attitudes to personal faith and to organised religion were also placed under scrutiny.

Such a thesis is supported by the dearth of religious music written in the period between his leaving the Royal College of Music and the year 1940. During that time the only specifically religious music was the *Te Deum* in C major, written in 1934, and an accompanying setting of the *Jubilate* which was written at the same time, but which Britten did not publish during his life. Religious motifs figure in the incidental music which Britten wrote in the 1930s, but little in his 'serious' music. ⁽¹⁾

In 1940 he wrote the *Sinfonia da Requiem* in memory of his parents and the title of this orchestral work, along with the titles of the three movements - I. *Lacrymosa*; II. *Dies Irae*; III. *Requiem Aeternam* - ⁽²⁾ indicate an awareness of the consoling nature of the Latin requiem mass. Britten's return to the tradition of Church-centred choral music, whose forms he was to use for the rest of his career, is consolidated by the two works which he wrote during the protracted journey back to England from America. *A Ceremony of Carols* and the *Hymn to St Cecilia* were written during the six-week voyage aboard the ship *Axel Johnson*.

An approach to Britten by Walter Hussey in the early part of 1943 came at a time when Britten was working on *Peter Grimes*. Hussey was looking for a composer to write a work for his choir at St Matthew's, Northampton, to be performed during the festivities to mark the fiftieth anniversary of

the consecration of the church. Hussey, a man of wide and discerning artistic sympathies, wrote to Britten after hearing him discuss his musical tastes in a B.B.C. radio programme. Hussey told Britten of the 'bee in my bonnet' regarding the important role which the Church should play in fostering the arts in the tradition which had been familiar to the medieval church.

Hussey addressed his letter to the B.B.C., and it was forwarded to Boosey and Hawkes, Britten's publishers. They, on Britten's behalf, replied to the letter saying that Britten was ill and was most unlikely to respond to the request for a new work. The letter was, nevertheless, forwarded to Britten, who eventually replied from the Old Mill at Snape, in a letter dated 5 April 1943. He wrote -

"My publishers have forwarded your letter to me here, where I am recuperating from illness. As I also have a 'bee' about closer connection between the arts and the Church, I am sure that I shall have an idea before next September for an anthem for your jubilee. Something lively for such an occasion, don't you think? Tell me your ideas, and the size of your choir, including details of capabilities (quite confidential, of course!) and whether male or female altos, and I'll see what can be done. It'll have to be printed of course, so what is the latest date that you would like it for rehearsal?" (3)

In addition to the interesting light which the letter sheds on the origins of *Rejoice in the Lamb*, the letter also gives evidence of Britten's legendary practical approach to his work. The piece was, when considered in the context of the very conservative state of English church music, of startling originality; the choice of a text from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* was certainly unconventional. Walter Hussey recalls that the choice of text was made by Britten with some assistance in the selection of passages from Edward Sackville-West (confirmed in letter below).

Progress on the new work was rapid and in a letter to Hussey, dated 26 May 1943, Britten wrote -

"Could I let you know when I have got the words worked out exactly, and then perhaps we could meet, and discuss it in detail. I am afraid that I have gone ahead, and used a bit

about the cat Jeffrey, but I don't see how it could hurt anyone - he's such a nice cat The piece is going well, and I am pleased with it. Christopher Smart is a great inspiration, and I hope you'll be pleased too What is the date of the Festival - Edward Sackville-West who helped me with the selection of the words, and Kenneth Clark both want to come down to it - ?" (4)

In preparing the programme note on the new work for the festival programme Hussey sent to Britten a questionnaire in the form of a school report, to which Britten responded in the same spirit. (5) Britten's letter to Hussey after the first performance of the work displays his unreserved appreciation for the success of the performance -

"Sept. 26 1943 ...

It was all a great experience for me, and my thanks are really due to you for enabling me to have it, and for making it so worth while materially! I do hope that I have given you something which will be of more lasting value than just for this particular occasion, but it was a very beautiful and moving occasion." (6)

The commissioning of *Rejoice in the Lamb* was the start of a lifelong friendship between Britten and Hussey and Britten often showed, in a practical way, his support for Hussey's ventures at St Matthew's by giving recitals at the church with Peter Pears, and sometimes with other musicians. In 1944 Hussey commissioned Henry Moore to create the *Madonna* for St Matthew's and Britten was invited to attend the unveiling ceremony. He was, in fact, unable to attend the ceremony and in a letter dated 28 February 1944 he expresses his disappointment at missing the opportunity of meeting Henry Moore. The same letter casts an interesting light on the relationship which then existed between himself and William Walton, one of the guests at the unveiling -

"I am amused at W.Walton turning up, and to hear that he liked R. in the L., because he doesn't make a secret that he doesn't like my later pieces! But I expect the lovely singing of the choir won him over." (7)

A card from Britten to Hussey, dated 8 December 1944, demonstrates again his support for Hussey's policy of commissioning new works and here

he encourages the next commission with promises of further practical help -

"I still feel that it's better to do without the CEMA aid for the Sutherland - Peter and I'll come back and help you raise money from time to time!" (8)

In the same card he mentions the completion of a new liturgical work for St Mark's, Swindon - the *Festival Te Deum* -

"I have just done a Te Deum for Swindon, which I think might interest you! By-the-way, do you say Sabaoth (J.J.J) - I hope you do!" (9)

The card also offers some insights into Britten's religious interests at that time. He says -

"I am going to read E.Underhill - she was obviously a great woman, but surely C.Williams is wrong - the early Church was pacifist, until Constantine (?) made it the official religion, and it became political???" (10)

It was natural that Walter Hussey should attempt to commission more music from Britten, other projects were certainly discussed but never reached fruition. The only other work which Hussey succeeded in getting from Britten was the composer's one and only work for solo organ, the *Prelude and Fugue on a theme of Vittoria*. The work was written for the 1946 patronal festival at St Matthew's, Northampton and was written to mark the ceremonial entry into the church of the bishop. By tradition the church choir greeted the bishop by singing *Ecce Sacerdos Magnus* by Vittoria. It was a theme from this motet which Britten used as the starting point of his work.

For the 1946 festival Hussey hoped to obtain another anthem from Britten which was to be a setting of words by W.H.Auden. By this time Britten had lost his enthusiasm for setting Auden and the hoped-for work did not materialise. Auden wrote the words and these were sent to Britten. A letter from Britten to Hussey, dated 26 February 1946, casts some light on the matter -

"This is only a scribble (just ain't no time these days) to

say Wystan Auden has sent me direct already part of the St Matthew's anthem, and it is very lovely. Have you seen it yet? But, Walter, you blighter you never told me that it meant more homework for me! You'll have to wait, I'm afraid - because what with Lucretia and the Oratorio with Duncan my schedule is filled for quite some time; Auden's stuff is desperately hard to set, and can't be done overnight. Still, if you have patience - ?" (11)

Auden's words were never set by Britten and they were eventually published in the form of a pamphlet by the authorities at St Matthew's. (12)

There was a further abortive attempt to commission another work for St. Matthew's. Walter Hussey has said -

"I had several times asked Ben about a Mass and he was quite interested, and considered doing one with a part for the congregation." (13)

In a letter dated 22 March 1948 Britten makes a passing reference to the projected work -

"I haven't forgotten the Mass. When my chores are all done, it will materialise, and I hope then I'll be a better composer and less unworthy of the task." (14)

In the correspondence between Britten and Hussey there is one further reference to the mass in a letter dated 1 June 1950 -

"I don't honestly think there's a chance of the Mass for 1951. You see I have to finish Billy Budd (only just started) for the Festival at Edinburgh, and I also have to prepare Dido and Aeneas for the Aldeburgh Festival - so my work is pretty well cut out! But if the moment arrives (and the right notes!) I will certainly do it for you. It is a thing I am determined to do." (15)

Walter Hussey made one further attempt to commission a work from Britten after he moved to be Dean of Chichester. Britten wrote to him on 10 December 1967 -

"I will certainly try to do something for you, only I warn you, it may be a little late (but not too late) in arriving - I can't do it before the spring, but I will alert the publishers! But need I do another Te Deum - I've already done 2, and I have nasty shadow of Morning Prayer hanging over me! A short anthem (preferably not a psalm), or hymn (Wesley or Cowper), or a bit of the Mass in English?? Let me know sometime what you think." (16)

Again, the work did not materialise and it seems likely that the project was a casualty of the period of serious illness which Britten suffered in the spring of 1968 and which threatened the completion of the third Church Parable.

Walter Hussey remained a close friend of Britten to the end of his life, and he was invited to give the address at the memorial service for the composer which was held on 10 March 1977, in Westminster Abbey. On that occasion Hussey commented that "Ben did not feel able to describe himself as an orthodox churchman." Nevertheless he felt that Britten "believed wholeheartedly in a power greater than the universe." Hussey quoted Britten as once saying -

"I am coming to feel more and more that all my music must be written to the glory of God." (17)

Benjamin Britten died in the early hours of Saturday, 4 December 1976, at The Red House, Aldeburgh. His funeral took place three days later in Aldeburgh Parish Church and the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich gave an address which he ended with the words "Ben will like the sound of the trumpets, though he will find it difficult to believe they are sounding for him." (18)

These words of Bishop Leslie Brown were his final tribute to a man to whom he had become extremely close, and to whom he had ministered spiritually during the last years of his life. The friendship developed during the years when Dr Brown, a former Archbishop of Uganda, served as Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich - the diocese in which Aldeburgh is situated. Dr Brown moved to the diocese in 1966 and he recalls that he met Britten for the first time at a social function in 1967. Soon after this meeting he received a letter from Britten asking if he would preach at the Festival Service in Aldeburgh Parish Church on 11 June 1967. The bishop remembers that Britten took no formal part in the service but preferred to sit at the

rear of the church and that Peter Pears read a lesson. It seems that Britten was very moved by the sermon and it is likely that he then discerned that here was a priest who was in sympathy with his own vision of the place of music in God's scheme. The bishop was invited to preach at the Festival Services in 1971, 1973, 1975 and 1976.

The preaching visits to Aldeburgh laid the foundations of a close friendship between Britten and Bishop Brown and the bishop has said that although they did not pursue a relationship of regularly calling upon each other, there was always, when they met, "a kind of intimacy that was unaffected."⁽¹⁹⁾ This closeness proved of important practical value when the Snape Malting concert hall was burned down after the opening concert of the 1969 festival. The bishop heard the news when he returned home after an early Sunday morning celebration of Holy Communion and he immediately telephoned Britten to offer sympathy and help. He undertook to arrange with the Vicar of Blythburgh, and his parochial church council, that the festival be allowed to use Blythburgh Church for some of the events which had been displaced by the fire. Within forty-eight hours Blythburgh Church had been made ready for the first scheduled performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo*.

Bishop Brown's admiration for Britten was boundless and he was always especially impressed by his complete professionalism which he could not help contrasting with the lack of finesse which he saw on all too many occasions in the presentation of public worship by members of the clergy. In his judgement the bishop firmly included himself: it is easy to see how a man of genuine humility and with a real sense of the worthiness of true art as a vehicle for the worship of Almighty God would make an impression on Britten. Leslie Brown became, for Britten, what can only be described as a spiritual mentor. Whatever the nature of Britten's feelings towards the Church of England, it is clear that he found in Leslie Brown a trusted and wise pastor

with whom he was able to share his spiritual quest. It was to Bishop Brown that he felt able to turn for the Church's ministrations in his final illness, but there had been important pastoral links between them before that time.

Britten undoubtedly retained a very typically 'low church' doctrine of the Church sacraments. He was not known to be a regular communicant, but this was not unusual amongst people of his generation, or that of his parents. Even very devout members of the Church of England commonly received Holy Communion on only the principal feasts of the Church. Such a practice was very well known amongst members of the Royal Family and dated back to the influence of Prince Albert, who made his communion on only three or four occasions in the year, but prepared himself with considerable thoroughness (20) for the Sacrament. There is no suggestion that this was the basis of Britten's observance, but it would account for a sense of retaining a link with the Church even without being a regular communicant.

The sense of real spiritual closeness between Britten and Leslie Brown is traced by the bishop to the occasion when Britten was taken seriously ill during the spring of 1968. Britten was taken to Anglesea Road Hospital, in Ipswich. He spent the whole of March in the hospital and when Bishop Brown first visited Britten there he found him in a very distressed state because of the difficulties which he was experiencing in completing his third Church Parable - *The Prodigal Son*. Dr Brown decided to take to the hospital the plaster cast of a statue inspired by the Bible story of the Prodigal Son which had been presented to him while he was Archbishop of Uganda. The work had been sculpted by a young African artist, Elimo Njau. Britten was amazed by the piece and its similarity to the boy in Rembrandt's painting of the subject which is housed in the Hermitage in Leningrad. Britten had seen the picture during a visit to Russia in 1966, and it had made a great impression on him. (21) The bishop allowed Britten to keep the

cast with him until he left the hospital. The bishop has no doubt that this sculpture helped Britten to resolve the difficulties he was experiencing with his own creative process.

During this period in hospital the bishop talked to Britten, as on other occasions, about the nature of God. He recalls that they talked of God the Spirit - "the energising, inspiring, giving power that takes over people and which Ben knew extremely well."⁽²²⁾ Britten talked of his own sense of being taken over by a power when he was composing and he was quite prepared to think of this power as God. The bishop has said that on this basis their talks were able to go forward.

Following his major heart surgery in 1973, Britten spent much of his time in convalescence at his cottage retreat at Horham, where Leslie Brown visited him on two or three occasions. He offered to take Holy Communion to Britten but found that he was not yet ready to receive it. When, as his life was drawing to an end, Britten returned to The Red House, Bishop Brown was called to visit him. On the first visit Britten was still not ready to receive Holy Communion. It was on the occasion of the bishop's last visit to The Red House that Britten asked to receive Communion. As the bishop was preparing to leave he asked "Is all well, Ben?" Britten replied "How could all not be well with those wonderful words [the bishop's blessing] ringing in my ears?" The bishop has since commented that "That doesn't sound like a man who was an agnostic, does it?"⁽²³⁾

These two priests of the Church of England, each with very different vocational experience and with very different artistic sensitivity, were able to relate to Britten in a close and meaningful way. There is no doubt that each provided for Britten important links with the Church in which his boyhood roots were firmly set and to which, despite his doubts and difficulties, he demonstrated his ultimate allegiance by his final act of

receiving its Sacrament.

References :

- 1 Britten did write, in 1939, settings of seven poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, under the title *A.M.D.G.* The settings were for four mixed voices, and the manuscript is inscribed 'Dedicated to Peter and the Round Table Singers.' The pieces were written while Britten and Pears were staying with the Mayer family at Amityville, Long Island, New York. Britten subsequently withdrew the settings and ascribed their opus number - seventeen - to the opera *Paul Bunyan*.
- 2 Donald Mitchell has informed me that Britten wrote, from America, a letter to his sister Mrs Beth Welford, in which he refers to this work as a memorial to their parents. The letter also indicates that it is a lament for the death, as Britten saw it, of Europe. The savage music of the 'Dies Irae' movement becomes much more understandable in this context.
- 3 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 5 April 1943
- 4 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 26 May 1943
- 5 Appendix i
- 6 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 26 September 1943
- 7 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 28 February 1944
- 8 Post card from Britten to Walter Hussey; 8 December 1944.
As part of Hussey's policy of commissioning a variety of artistic works for St Matthew's Church, Northampton, he was planning to invite Graham Sutherland to paint a picture for the church. Sutherland painted the celebrated *Crucifixion* for St Matthew's.
- 9 The composition sketch shows that Britten made alterations at this word.
- 10 Evelyn Underhill and Charles Williams were important and influential writers on religious matters at that time.
- 11 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 26 February 1946
- 12 Reproduced in Appendix ii
- 13 Letter from Walter Hussey; 24 August 1983. Britten's proposals for writing a congregational part create an interesting link with his treatment of the congregation/audience in *Noye's Fludde* and *The Little Sweep*.
- 14 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 22 March 1948
- 15 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 1 June 1950
- 16 Letter from Britten to Walter Hussey; 10 December 1967
- 17 From the sermon preached by Walter Hussey at the Memorial Service for Benjamin Britten in Westminster Abbey, 10 December 1977. Copy in Westminster Abbey Library.
- 18 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 144
- 19 Conversation with Bishop Leslie Brown, 28 February 1984
- 20 *King Without A Crown* - Daphne Bennett
- 21 The Rembrandt painting was the direct inspiration for one of the panels in the Britten memorial window which John Piper designed for Aldeburgh Parish Church in 1979
- 22 Conversation with Bishop Brown, 28 February 1984
- 23 Conversation with Bishop Brown, 28 February 1984. Such comments must, of course, be noted as those of a man who was very fond of Bishop Brown and whose natural courtesy might promote such a remark. It must also be stated that Bishop Brown, when making these recollections, had no doubt about Britten's deep sincerity.

Chapter 4

SIR PETER PEARS

"What is an essential part of you must perfume all that you do." (1)

With these words Britten's lifelong companion and colleague, Sir Peter Pears, summed up the way in which the various facets of Britten's personality are to be discerned in his work. Pears has long been acknowledged as one of the greatest English singers of the twentieth century, and in particular, as the foremost interpreter of the music of Benjamin Britten. He shared with Britten a remarkable personal and professional partnership which lasted for almost forty years from the creation of the relationship in 1937 until Britten's death in 1976. Any attempted assessment of the personal and professional motivations in Britten's life and work must pay due regard to the views of Sir Peter, and the memories of the many years they lived and worked together.

The whole bias of this thesis has been inspired by conversations, over a long period of time, with Sir Peter Pears, in which various aspects of Britten's life and work have been discussed. It was, in particular, his statement that Britten was "an agnostic with a great love for Jesus Christ" which led to the present research. In later conversations Sir Peter, asked again about this statement, reaffirmed his view with some clarification -

"agnostic means 'don't know' and he would certainly admit to ignorance of the entity of God, but he had a tremendous admiration for Jesus Christ, and insofar as he was God in Man he could accept that in a sort of way as a definition that is perfectly O.K."

Sir Peter would give due recognition to the potency of Britten's religious experience as a boy. "He was brought up in a purely traditional

way. His surroundings were low church and evangelical." This evangelical ethic was influential in his working life and, especially, in terms of the very strictly disciplined work schedule which he always maintained throughout his professional life. Pears has said -

"Strict working standards in a sense reflected moral ones. In short, he thought people should behave properly and not betray one another. If, to his way of thinking, they misbehaved, he did not forgive them easily. I think the key to his music lies in his moral point of view combined with his craving for lost innocence brought on by his increasing disillusionment with man." (2)

Sir Peter Pears agrees that Britten's strong moral sense was an essential part of his spiritual identity, and a feature which remained strong throughout his life. He also agrees that Britten's sense of identity with Christianity fluctuated so that he was sometimes more positively Christian than at other times. In a loosely defined sense of the word he was a 'good' man but this did not prevent what might occasionally be seen as cruelty to another person - as Chapter 5 will indicate (see page 39).

Sir Peter is quite positive in refuting the commonly-held belief that Britten was in some way oppressed by a sense of guilt about his sexual nature - "He wasn't haunted: he was possessed by it. He really was one hundred per cent homosexual." He accepted his own nature, while also accepting the social conventions and the need for laws to maintain proper standards of behaviour and protection. He felt intensely loving towards males - "... the *Death in Venice* situation."⁽³⁾

Only the general attitude of society made Britten in any way uneasy about his own sexuality, but it was an undemonstrative form of homosexuality with little in it which conformed to the caricature image of the homosexual 'queen' : indeed his sexuality owed much more to the tradition of the adolescent 'chum' which was a strong feature of public school life of the period of Britten's boyhood. Of Britten's sexuality Sir Peter Pears has said -

"I wouldn't say it cast a shadow in his life, except in a minimal way. He avoided 'hearty' parties he didn't like the 'queenery'."

Britten's dislike of 'hearty' behaviour explains his dislike of the way of life which he and Pears were expected to live when they joined the household at 7 Middagh Street, Brooklyn Heights, over which W.H.Auden presided in New York. The party life and what Britten considered 'loose' behaviour of the inmates bruised Britten's sensitivities. The stay was relatively short for Britten and Pears: they moved to Brooklyn Heights in November 1940 and left in the summer of 1941.

The short time in the Auden *ménage* brought Britten once again into very direct contact with a man who had been a strong presence in his life during much of the 1930s. The period was put to fruitful use in a collaboration to produce the operetta *Paul Bunyan*. But the relationship was no longer comfortable. Auden and Britten had first met on 4 July 1935, when they began to work together on a series of films for the G.P.O. Film Unit. At that time Britten, six years younger than Auden, was somewhat overwhelmed by Auden's brilliance and his strongly positive personality. Auden undoubtedly saw Britten as a brilliant but, in personality terms, immature and 'unawakened' young man. It is a significant mark of Auden's insensitivity to Britten's needs and personality that he could have written him a valedictory letter which was a kind of analytical lecture -

"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.

Every artist except the supreme masters has a bias one way or the other. The best pair of opposites I can think of in music are Wagner and Strauss. (Technical skill always comes from the bourgeois side of one's nature.)

For middle-class Englishmen like you and me, the danger is of course the second. Your attraction to thin-as-a-board juveniles, ie to the sexless and innocent, is a symptom of this. And I am certain too that it is your denial and evasion of the demands

of disorder that is responsible for your attacks of ill-health,
ie sickness is your substitute for the Bohemian." (4)

There is, in fact, much in the remainder of the letter which shows a great affection on Auden's part for Britten, but it would be hard for its sensitive recipient to avoid feeling that he was receiving an end-of-term report from his headmaster.

It has already been suggested (Chapter 3) that the 1930s were a period when Britten, reaching early professional maturity, was forced to re-examine the received views and attitudes of his childhood. Auden was, undoubtedly, a challenging and important influence in this re-thinking process and Britten undoubtedly learned a great deal from the experience of setting Auden's words to music. Discussing this period, Sir Peter Pears has said -

"It was his puberty. He was twenty in 1933 but in some aspects he was a late developer. The *Simple Symphony* explains a lot - reaching back into his childhood."

Of the *Simple Symphony* Sir Peter is not in total agreement with Michael Kennedy (see Chapter 1, page 11) in his view of the piece as a symbolic end to childhood - "only in a way was it a signing off of childhood - childhood is with one all one's life."

Sir Peter Pears was not able to say whether any apparent withdrawal from the Church by Britten in the 1930s was influenced by Auden, although he noted that Auden left the Church but eventually returned. In a similar way it is possible only to conjecture Britten's attitudes to Auden's philosophy as reported by Christopher Isherwood in his autobiography - .

"Wystan was much more apologetic about his homosexuality than Christopher was, and much less aggressive. His religion condemned it and he agreed that it was sinful, though he fully intended to go on sinning." (5)

If it is impossible to assess the degree of influence which Auden might have had over Britten's specifically religious attitudes, it is less difficult to assess Auden's importance in terms of the general direction

which Britten's career followed after his return from America. The failure of *Paul Bunyan* was largely attributed to Auden's unwieldy libretto. The failure taught Britten that it was essential for him to have proper control of his librettist and he saw that Auden's brilliant writing was often too obscure for the purposes of opera. The sense in which this failure gave greater strength and resolution to his personality may be seen in his rejection of the libretto which Auden wrote for the proposed Christmas oratorio on which they planned to cooperate towards the end of the American period. Auden hurried on with the libretto of the oratorio without consultation with Britten and sent him the complete text of the piece entitled *For the Time Being*. Sir Peter Pears recalled that it was far too long to be set musically and Britten had no choice but to reject it. He felt that Auden had not approached the task seriously. That rejection marked a significant break with Auden which was further emphasised by Britten's departure from America and the valedictory setting, during the homeward voyage, of Auden's *Hymn to St Cecilia*. This was Britten's response to the letter, and it marked the end of a significant part in the composer's development - (6) perhaps the true end of what Pears has called Britten's 'puberty'. After this time Britten never really wanted to see Auden again. Sir Peter Pears has said that Auden - "a freeing influence" - regretted the break with Britten, but did not understand the reasons for it. (7)

One of the major legacies of Britten's work with Auden was his remarkable sensitivity to the texts which he chose to set. It is likely, also, that the failure of *Paul Bunyan* served to heighten Britten's sense of the needs of the theatre and allowed him to refine his innate sense of drama in a way which was to serve him so well in his subsequent operas. (8)

Sir Peter Pears has remarked this sensitivity to texts in relation to his religious attitudes and he noted that Britten's religious feelings were "fired by certain texts." This was certainly so in the

choice of the text for *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Britten was always the champion of the underdog and he had a particular sympathy for the poet Christopher Smart, the author of *Jubilate Agno*, from which Britten chose the words for the anthem which he wrote for St Matthew's, Northampton. The poem had only recently been published when Britten selected it, and his unusual choice might well signify the greater awareness which Britten had absorbed through his collaboration with Auden. Britten's natural humanitarian feelings were sympathetically aroused by the plight of the eighteenth-century poet who spent a part of his life in a lunatic asylum. It was during a period when Smart was suffering from mental illness that he wrote *Jubilate Agno*. Surviving parts of the manuscript were discovered in Suffolk and were first published in 1939. It is clear from the correspondence between Britten and Walter Hussey that it was Britten himself who was principally responsible for the choice of passages which he was to set from the poem. It appears from his letter of 26 May 1943 (Chapter 3, pages 14-15) that Edward Sackville-West had a significant part in this, but the 'Questionnaire' which Hussey sent to help in preparation of the festival programme makes it clear that he "didn't use much of his suggested script." (9)

If one is to take Sir Peter Pears's views that Britten's religious feelings were "fired by certain texts", it is perfectly reasonable to seek to chart his religious/spiritual progress through his works, and it is the only sure way of performing the task. The words of Sir David Willcocks, who worked with Britten on many occasions, add force to this argument -

"Any impressions which I may have formed over the years concerning Britten's religious faith are based [largely] on the texts he chose to set to music, and what would appear to me to be his obvious sincerity." (10)

In similar vein the comments of Hans Keller add further corroboration -

"It would be quite impossible for a real artist, a real creator, to set anything he found philosophically unacceptable; a genuine agnostic would behave as Brahms did in the *German Requiem*." (11)

Sir Peter Pears has pointed to the significance of Britten writing, at the beginning of his career, the choral variations *A Boy was Born*. This work signified Britten's concern with the Christmas story which he later sought to develop in the proposed Christmas oratorio with Auden. At the end of his life he was planning to write a trilogy on the Christmas theme and returned again to the Chester Miracle Plays for his words. The libretto was complete and some initial ideas were sketched, but the plan was cut short by Britten's death. It is a reflection on Britten's sympathies that the trilogy would end with King Herod's massacre of the Holy Innocents. Sadly, as Pears has noted, Britten felt at the end of his life that he had never written the Christmas piece he wanted to write.

References :

- 1 The views ascribed to Sir Peter Pears in this chapter have been gathered from discussions over a period of several years since Britten's death. Quotations, except where alternatively ascribed, are taken from an interview with Sir Peter at Aldeburgh on 3 January 1985.
- 2 *Remembering Britten* - Alan Blyth; p. 23
- 3 Sir Peter is here offering a recollection which undoubtedly reflects the truth of his lifelong relationship with Britten; but Donald Mitchell points out that the diaries kept by Britten between 1928 and 1938 reveal a good deal of doubt, in the earlier years, about the nature of his sexuality.
- 4 Quoted in *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 161
- 5 *Christopher and His Kind* - Christopher Isherwood; p. 336
- 6 There was a further setting of words by Auden in *A Shepherd's Carol*. This short piece, for four-part chorus, was written in 1944, as part of the incidental music for a B.B.C. feature programme, *A Poet's Christmas*. The piece is a setting of the final chorale of the proposed Christmas oratorio. The only other setting of words by Auden is in Part 2 of the *Spring Symphony*, which Britten wrote in 1949. He uses Auden's poem *Out on the Lawn*. Walter Hussey's attempt to commission a setting of Auden's words is noted in Chapter 3, page 18.
- 7 Although Britten undoubtedly felt the need to free himself from the very dominating character of Auden after his return to England from America, it would be wrong to see this in terms of personal animosity. Britten was aware of the importance which Auden had represented in the enlargement of his own literary appreciation and he was deeply saddened by Auden's death in 1973.
- 8 Sir Peter Pears has said - in terms of his work with Britten - that Auden was a "bad dramatist", while Britten had a natural sense of the theatre which can be traced to his early childhood (see *Benjamin Britten - Pictures from a Life* - Donald Mitchell and John Evans; nos. 15 and 19).

- 9 See Appendix i; response to question 6
- 10 Letter from Sir David Willcocks; 5 September 1983
- 11 Letter from Hans Keller; 31 August 1983

Chapter 5

SUMMARY

The life and work of Benjamin Britten are remarkably well documented in a wide variety of articles and books: the select bibliography included in *The Britten Companion*, edited by Christopher Palmer, published in 1984, lists nineteen books on the composer and his music. It would be surprising if such a vast amount of material did not contain a good deal of speculation on the subject of the composer's personality and motivation, and about the non-musical forces in his life.

Those who wrote commentaries during Britten's lifetime were careful to avoid any direct reference to his homosexuality. Philip Brett examines the phenomenon at considerable length in his book *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes*,⁽¹⁾ and he refers to the tendency to euphemism on the part of writers who, he states, were prone to use such phrases as "emotional immaturity" to describe Britten's sexual orientation.

There was rather less reluctance to comment on the composer's spiritual nature. Eric Walter White wrote the first edition of his book - *Benjamin Britten : His Life and Operas* - in 1948. In the biographical section he makes some very considerable claims for Britten's status as a religious composer and as a practising Christian (see Chapter 1, page 3). The author makes it clear, in his preface, that the work was written with the cooperation⁽²⁾ of his subject.

The current fashion for regarding the dual influences of pacifism and homosexuality as the dominant forces in Britten's life must owe a great deal to the article - *Britten and Grimes* - by Professor Philip Brett.⁽³⁾ In

this first public pronouncement on Britten's homosexuality Brett reasoned that Britten was, at least in his own mind, an oppressed outcast and that *Peter Grimes* is an allegory of the homosexual condition. (4)

It would be difficult to argue against the case which Brett makes for the homosexual influence in *Peter Grimes*; the degree of influence - and its intent - are certainly open to further consideration. In making his case Brett suggests that Britten's temporary emigration to America was to be explained in terms of homosexual psychology -

"namely that desire, so common in gay men, to seek anonymity and freedom by going to the big city, the far-off country - any place, that is, away from the home where they feel at best half-accepted." (5)

Brett makes a strong case, and it is tempting to be carried along by the sheer strength of his own conviction. But to ascribe to Britten the sense that he was in some way oppressed and cast out by Society because of his sexual orientation is to fly in the face of facts, and the views expressed by Sir Peter Pears (Chapter 4). To see his work, principally, as an allegory of the homosexual condition is to force much of Britten's music into an uncomfortable mould - and to diminish the importance of other strong influences in his life and work. If we are to believe Brett's thesis we might ask how such a revolutionary purpose is to be reconciled with Britten's somewhat conservative musical language and his own expressed philosophy - "I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it." (6) It would be alien to this philosophy to write music with a 'message' which could have the effect of driving a wedge between the composer and a large majority of his audience. Britten was too sensitive an artist to take such a risk, and the works which Brett quotes as having a special homosexual message - *Peter Grimes*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Billy Budd* and *Death in*

Venice - all contain 'messages' which are at least as potent as any discernible homosexual content.

My purpose is not to attempt to demolish Professor Brett's interpretation of Britten's motivation point by point: rather is it to deny that Britten thought, let alone worked, in such exclusive terms as to deliberately write (or even subconsciously create) an homosexual allegory. There can be no doubt that Britten wrote music with a 'message' - the composer who fails to do that lacks the prophetic voice which sets him apart as a special person. In any case we have Britten's own words for it -

"And I can find ... nothing wrong with offering to my fellow-men music which may inspire them, which may touch them or entertain them, even educate them - directly and with intention. On the contrary, it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings." (7)

Despite the attempts of some commentators to see Britten as a repressed person who hid himself in the remote Suffolk fishing community where he could live surrounded and protected by tried and trusted friends of whom he demanded high standards of loyalty and devotion, we should, in truth, see a man who was aware of his gifts and to use these gifts for the benefit of his "fellow-men". His carefully regulated routine was organised in order that he might have the circumstances necessary to allow his gifts to have full and productive use.

The real key to Britten's personality and philosophy might well be contained in the words of Britten's closest collaborator, Sir Peter Pears, (8)
"Ben was a conservative ... a preserver ..." Professor Peter Evans
makes a similar judgement -

Measured against, say, the French 'Six' or Stravinsky in his more suavely neo-classical contexts, Britten appears fairly near the norm of indebtedness to past practice. Measured against the linguistic innovations of Schoenberg and his pupils, or even of the Bartok of the twenties and thirties, the music that brought Britten to the widest notice - the *Serenade* and *Peter Grimes*, for instance - may appear unadventurous in its reliance on traditional vocabulary and resources." (9)

But Evans makes this point in no critical sense, and he continues -

"But a composer is bound to no absolute criteria of topicality. Provided that the language he uses suggests to him still hidden creative potentialities, an urge to set out, perhaps from known premises but towards new destinations, then, should his essential creativity be sufficient to the task, he may produce work that will continue to command a hearing, because it offers an enlargement of our experience too." (10)

If Britten was a "preserver" one may assume that the instinct applied to the society in which he lived, as well as his own musical language. Preservation implies respect, even affection, and it is hard to see how Britten could have been intending *Peter Grimes*, or any other work, to be the sort of sledge hammer which Brett implies. But we may seek, and find, any amount of social comment in *Peter Grimes*, and in much else that Britten wrote - we have a good deal of evidence in Britten's speech of acceptance of the Aspen Award which has already been quoted above.

If it is wrong to see Britten, as Philip Brett (and others who have followed his lead) has done, as a sort of homosexual standard bearer, it is equally erroneous to accept at face value the comments made by Eric Walter White concerning Britten's spiritual identity. (11) In his way each writer makes claims which are too big and too exclusive. If the present rejection of the scale of these claims is to be sustained it must be done by tracing, through the music, those strands and concerns which occupied and influenced Britten from his early childhood into his final years.

Donald Mitchell has written -

"Britten seems to me a peculiarly thematic composer. I am not thinking of the fertility of his melody or of the prominent role that themes and thematic organization play in his music, but of themes in a broader sense - concerns, commitments, attitudes and sources of stimulation which have been his long-standing preoccupations and which are variously reflected in his art." (12)

Mitchell draws attention to a consistency in Britten's work which

means that themes and methods of procedure can be traced through works which cover a wide span of Britten's composing career. An example of this is seen in the links which Mitchell draws between *Peter Grimes* and *Curlew River*, in which, in the latter, he takes a stylized form of operatic drama into the first Church Parable. Mitchell sees this transmogrification as having its route via *Saint Nicolas*, with its dramatic resurrection of the Pickled Boys and their physical movement in an otherwise stationary performing ensemble.⁽¹³⁾

It is Donald Mitchell who draws attention to another crucial aspect of Britten's work when he discusses the importance of the period, in the 1930s, when Britten worked closely with W.H.Auden. Mitchell quotes Auden's introduction to an anthology of poetry which, in 1935, he edited with John Garrett. In this introduction Auden proposes his own theory for the function of art -

"There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love ..."⁽¹⁴⁾

Mitchell states that the latter concept is particularly important for any consideration of Britten's art, for he "so often used parable as one of his prime working methods."⁽¹⁵⁾

Donald Mitchell's combined assertions give strength to any attempt to trace through Britten's life a strong moral strand which is just one of the legacies of his childhood religious experience. That experience was, of course, modified and questioned during the course of his adult life, and there must have been periods when the links were obscured: there is little doubt that this was the case for a large part of that time in the 1930s which coincided with his close working relationship with Auden. That was the significant period when Britten had reached manhood and a degree of financial independence; a period when he found himself thrust into the world where the safe assurance of a close family background could no

longer protect him from the harsh reality of the world, and a world into which his almost magical talents threw him into contact with clever and worldly people for whom he was not emotionally ready. This became, as Sir Peter Pears has said, "his puberty", and it was a time when Britten became politically aware at a time when Establishment religion was not noticeably potent or vocal in the battle against the growing dangers of political extremism which menaced society.

Within the terms of Auden's "parable-art" there is evidence in the music which Britten wrote in the 1930s of his awareness and concern for peace and justice in an increasingly threatened world. There are the obvious commentaries of *Advance Democracy* (written in 1938), and *Ballad of Heroes* (1939); but there are the more potent, because more subtle, satirically-based cycles - *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936) and *On this Island* (1937). These latter cycles are a potent example of the way in which Auden's words released passionate concerns in Britten and are a classic example of the poet's theory of "parable-art". Auden's use of the term must not be seen as having any intrinsically religious significance in the context in which he used it, but the parable method does have strong biblical antecedents and it is helpful to have Donald Mitchell's assertions about Britten's use of the form in mind when considering the significance of Britten's religious, as well as non-religious, music.

If the consistency of 'themes' or "sources of stimulation" is an indication of Britten's concerns, the regular use of religious themes must demonstrate that Britten had a clearly defined sense of the "things spiritual". There is ample evidence of the strength of his religious upbringing and, by analogy with the other 'themes' which remained with him from childhood and early manhood, it would be very strange if the childhood religious experience had not remained as a strong feature of his consciousness. All of this is entirely consistent with the thinking

of a man who was able to acknowledge the existence of "a power above greater than ourselves", and is further explored by Christopher Palmer, who has said -

"For anyone brought up, as Britten was, in an English middle-class environment in the early twentieth century, the church was bound to be one of the most palpable realities of childhood, and it is therefore no surprise to find it playing a very large role in Britten's creative life." (16)

One of the 'themes' within Britten's own personality about which many people have commented is his strong sense of moral values. This goes beyond the sense of 'doing the decent thing' which typifies, for many people, the English public school boy. In Britten the moral consciousness is quite obviously linked to the strict religious observance of his childhood. His sister, Mrs Beth Welford given her own reminiscences of her brother and she recalls him as a -

"strict person in the sense that he liked people to behave properly, dress conventionally, take their morals seriously. He was religious in the sense that he lived by a set of values." (17)

In his book on Britten, Christopher Headington quotes a part of the obituary for Britten which was published in *The Times* on 6 December 1976, which supports Mrs Welford's view, and suggests that all his work had

"some relevance to his personal faith ... his artistic honesty was dictated by his faith, as was his contempt for power and violence." (18)

There is ample evidence in the writings of a large number of people to support the truth of Britten's strong moral sense. There can, equally, be little doubt that this feature of his personality owed everything to his home background and to the discipline of his public school education. But a strong moral sense does not necessarily imply a strong religious faith: indeed, without the influence of a loving and forgiving Christian love it is possible for a strong moral sense to degenerate into a moralistic

stance which can be hurtful to all who are involved. Something of this might account for Britten's attitude to the breakdown of the marriage of the Earl and Countess of Harewood. Following the break he cut himself off from contact with the Earl in order, presumably, to show that his sympathy and support was with the Countess. It was a break which caused great pain to both sides and which was not successfully healed, despite an attempt at reconciliation towards the end of Britten's life. It might well have been this side of Britten which Hans Keller had in mind when he said that "Britten could be almost punitively moralistic His pacificism seemed to evade basic human problems."⁽¹⁹⁾

When such moralistic attitudes are related to religious observance they are often labelled 'fundamentalist' - an often unlovely form of religion where humanity and charity are greatly strained, and not at all in sympathy with the example of the founder of the Christian religion. Such a fundamentalist attitude can often prove very hard for the person who holds such an attitude to religion, as well as for those with whom he is in contact. The modern example of the extreme forms of fundamentalism which are to be seen amongst the 'born-again' Christians in England and in the United States of America gives ample evidence of the intolerance which such people often display to those who deviate from their own accepted norms.

If Britten's religious upbringing veered towards this kind of view it would not be surprising. It is known that his mother took him to St John's Church in Lowestoft, which had a low church evangelical background. Sir Peter Pears has commented on the puritan nature of his low church upbringing, and there can be no doubt that this rather 'colourless' form of religion was a potent force in his life. The particular emphases of that tradition might well help to provide an understanding of

the 'strict' lifestyle which he adopted, which in terms of the positive work ethic was a power for good, but which also had its darker side. In the latter form it could account for the moralistic attitudes he occasionally adopted towards other people, and may have created internal struggles as he came to terms with his own nature.

Such an interpretation would be entirely consistent with an alternative view of the character of Peter Grimes. Grimes is seen by Philip Brett as the victim in an homosexual allegory -

"*Peter Grimes* is about a man who is persecuted because he is different There is every reason to suppose that the unspoken matter is what in 1945 was still the crime that hardly dare speak its name, and that it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed." (20)

But it is equally possible to see the character of Grimes in a much more universal role, and if this were not the view of the huge numbers of people who have seen the opera over the last forty years it seems most unlikely that it would have achieved the outstanding esteem in which it is undoubtedly held. Without question Britten's personality did colour the work, and the personality had to accommodate homosexuality as a part of its make-up, but it is difficult to believe - despite Professor Brett's argument - that this work is primarily an homosexual work.

There is an equally convincing case to be made for the 'outcast' theme in *Peter Grimes* being attributed to a much more general sense of the legacy of Britten's own background. The person who is over-endowed with a sense of Man's sinfulness and fallen state - an awareness which is often strongly emphasised in those of a fundamentalist religious experience - is often reluctant, or unable, to grasp the sense of the forgiving, redemptive power of Christ. It is not unusual for such a person to readily acknowledge this vital fact of Christianity for other people, while remaining over-burdened with a personal sense of sin to the point where they can not really accept a sense of personal redemption. In short the person finds

it difficult to accept the totality of the New Testament command to "Love your neighbour as yourself."⁽²¹⁾ One commentator has made the point that in order to fulfil the commandment it is first necessary to learn to love oneself: the person with an over-developed sense of sin finds that very difficult to do. Such a person suffers from a self-imposed sense of rejection and isolation - surely the position of Peter Grimes - he isolates himself, from the Borough, long before the Borough turns against him. It is his own actions which alienate him from the society in which he should be able to live and he can, therefore, not be seen purely as the innocent victim or the sacrificial lamb.

Peter Garvie has said that "the theme of searching is a key one in the opera."⁽²²⁾ Such an interpretation would be wholly consistent with the suggestion that Grimes suffered from the suggested self-hate complex - for it is symptomatic of such a condition that the sufferer constantly seeks 'the land of lost content.' But in the end Peter despairs of salvation and he commits suicide. Human care and love, in the person of Ellen Orford, fails to reassure Grimes, and the Church makes no attempt to hold out a hand towards him. Peter Garvie sees the work in Christian terms - but a depressingly negative form of Christianity. He talks of what he sees as the absence of "redemptive continuity" in *Peter Grimes*, but he believes this to be "persistently present" in Britten's later music (see Chapter 1, pages 2-3).

Peter Garvie draws attention (in the same essay) to the failure of the Church to support Peter: the "socially binding" Anglicanism of the Rector and the "evangelical zeal" of Methody Boles are equally incapable of ministering to Peter's condition. The Church had failed in the very task for which it existed and showed itself as merely another social club.

Was this failure of the Church something which Britten felt as a result of his experiences in the 1930s? Had he sensed that the Church was unable to hold him as he truly was? Britten might well have felt that a pacifist homosexual could not find a full place in an organization where such people did not officially exist. Furthermore, the Church had failed to provide a significant voice against the political extremism of the 1930s and it would not be difficult to imagine that Britten felt that the Church had let him down.

Man is a spiritual being, and his life is a pilgrimage; not always will he feel faith and hope with full assurance. It might well be that *Peter Grimes* demonstrates Britten's own doubts as a result of a period of great personal and spiritual upheaval. But there is ample evidence in subsequent works that Britten made no permanent rejection of the Church, and Peter Garvie reminds us that intercession is still present, even in despair -

"If there is no redemption in *Peter Grimes*, no making sacred there is at least intercession, and its terms are Christian. The most dominant and powerful phrase that Ellen sings in the opera sweeps downward to the words, 'Let her among you without fault cast the first stone'. Peter's phrase, 'And God have mercy upon me!' moves downwards too, though more abruptly, and he has to reach up to begin it." (23)

In the same essay Garvie continues the point -

"Nothing redemptive comes of this phrase [Peter's plea] in the opera, but one is tempted to say that everything does in Britten's later music - and even in his earliest music, for Variation V of *A Boy was Born* juxtaposes Incarnation and Sacrifice: man's transformation of God's birth in this world, and God's transformation of His death in this world." (24)

In the same paragraph Garvie points to the way in which the spiritual 'theme' is to be traced in Britten's later music, secular as well as sacred -

"For when it is the imagination that provides the redemptive continuity, it still operates upon an experience that takes in dream and nightmare, Incarnation and Crucifixion, and it is their transformation that turns what happens into what is healed." (25)

In his essay 'The Church Parables', Donald Mitchell finds further evidence of Britten's consistent 'themes' when he draws a comparison between the demented hero of *Peter Grimes* and the Madwoman of *Curlew River* -

"How revealing it is that these works, even though they occupy opposite ends of the theatrical scale, have so much in common. The theme of the social outcast, long one of Britten's preoccupations, is pursued in both - though, interestingly, the *dénouement* in the later work is the exact reverse of the outcome in the earlier: Grimes dies mad, but at the end of *Curlew River* the Madwoman has her sanity restored. It is perhaps characteristic of the way in which Britten's art has developed that reconciliation rather than disintegration is what he brings us in the 1960s." (26)

If there has been a spiritual change between the writing of *Peter Grimes* and *Curlew River*, it would be consistent with the definition of Britten's spiritual progression which is proposed in this thesis; but it is right, also, to note the comments of Robin Holloway in a further essay on the Church Parables -

"Worries about the didactic strain in these explicitly moralizing works open up wider reservations still. The church parables officially exemplify Hope, Faith and Love: but it is difficult not to find such neatness a little laboured, especially when *Curlew River* seems to embody all three If the three parables have a common theme it is the drabdest stoicism: make do, knuckle under, hold fast, carry your burden, forgive and forget, dutifully kill the fatted calf. This is cold comfort at best, and at worst, not bread but a stone." (27)

There may be an element of truth in Holloway's judgement: if it is so we may mourn that Britten's heritage of sin-burdened East Anglian puritanism was capable, even later in his life, of casting a shadow over the joyfulness of true Christianity - but, acknowledging the reasons for it, . we must be grateful for the many occasions when his music is filled with the joy of Creation and Incarnation.

Whatever the nature of Britten's spiritual life, there undoubtedly was a strong sense of spiritual awareness. It can not always be construed in traditionally Christian terms - but it is always concerned with the inner

life and its conflicts, as well as its consolations. Many people have noted Britten's single-minded sense of vocation, and the disciplined manner in which he garlanded his genius: it is important to bear in mind that such stewardship of his talents had a very firm biblical precedent - an appropriate parable for this master of 'parable-art'.

References :

- 1 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett
- 2 The final part of the Preface reads -
 "In 1947 and 1953 when earlier editions of this book were being
 prepared, Benjamin Britten was unfailingly kind and helpful in
 reading the text and commenting on it in draft. I am now even
 more deeply indebted to him for the care he has taken in checking
 the proofs of the new edition."
- 3 *Britten and Grimes* - Philip Brett; Musical Times, December 1977, p. 995
- 4 Reprinted in *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett; p. 187
- 5 *Ibid.*; p. 187
- 6 *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* - Benjamin Britten; p. 22
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 12
- 8 Conversation with Sir Peter Pears
- 9 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 2
- 10 *Ibid.* pp. 2-3
- 11 See Chapter 1, page 5, above.
- 12 *The Britten Companion* - ed Christopher Palmer; p. 211
- 13 *Ibid.* pp. 211-213
- 14 *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 25
- 15 *Ibid.* p. 25
- 16 *The Britten Companion* - ed Christopher Palmer; p. 78
- 17 *Remembering Britten* - Alan Blyth; p. 26
- 18 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 149
- 19 *Remembering Britten* - Alan Blyth; p. 90
- 20 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett; p. 187
- 21 *St Matthew*, Chapter 22, verse 39
- 22 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett; p. 174
- 23 *Ibid.* p. 178
- 24 *Ibid.* p. 179
- 25 *Ibid.* p. 179
- 26 *The Britten Companion* - ed Christopher Palmer; p. 213
- 27 *Ibid.* p. 223

Part II

Chapter 6

PLAINSONG AND HYMN TUNES

a. Plainsong

"We went into Chapel to a sort of glorified Morning Prayer. It is a high service, anyhow they sing plainsong, and in the Creed turn to the East and bow and nod etc." (1)

This extract from a letter written by Britten to his mother, soon after his arrival at Gresham's School, was quoted in Part I (page 9), and it demonstrates the contrast in churchmanship in the school chapel with the tradition of low-church worship to which Britten had been exposed in his regular attendance at St John's, Lowestoft. The extract is more significant as an indication of what was, in all probability, Britten's first experience of plainsong. Whatever the impression made on Britten by the plainsong he heard and sang at Gresham's, there is ample evidence that plainsong formed one of the recurring 'themes' throughout his career. Coupled with his evocation of bells and his occasional use of hymn tunes, supplied a fruitful means for evoking the "things spiritual", and frequently provided germinal material for melodic development.

George Malcolm shares the view that Britten first encountered plainsong at his public school - "I have no doubt that Gresham's was the origin
(2)
of Ben's interest in plainsong". This opinion was corroborated by examination of a collection of plainsong manuals and hymn books which belonged to Britten, and are now in the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh. Among the books is a copy of the *Manual of Plainsong* (Novello, 1902), inscribed '21 September 1928, E. Benjamin Britten, Farfield, Holt'. Along with

The Public School Hymn Book, similarly inscribed, the two books were a part of the standard equipment of each boy at Gresham's.

George Malcolm was able to offer no ideas on Britten's method of selecting his plainsong themes. The only theme about which he had any positive evidence was that used for the Procession and Recession in *A Ceremony of Carols* : the Magnificat antiphon for the Second Vespers of The Nativity of Our Lord. "I enquired about this - as it is such an odd version - and was told (either by Ben or Peter - I forget which) that it had been supplied by Alec Robertson."⁽³⁾

The 'odd' feature of the plainsong melody has been observed by Michael Dawney, who noted that "at the words 'exultant justi' Britten adapts part of the plainsong antiphon rhapsodising in the Lydian mode".⁽⁴⁾ Example 1a shows the Magnificat antiphon in *The Liber Usualis*; example 1b shows the way that Britten uses the melody in the Procession of *A Ceremony of Carols*. The 'Lydianised' section is indicated by the bracket. With an eye to practical considerations Britten has added an Alleluia coda in plainsong style, which may be freely repeated until the singers have reached the performing area. Such freedom is an interesting foretaste of the techniques of the Church Parables.

Ex 1(a)

At Magn.
Ant. 1. g 2

Odi-e * Chrī-stus nā-tus est : hōdi-e Salvá-
tor appáru- it : hōdi-e in térra cánunt Ange-li, laetán-
tur Archánge-li : hōdi-e exsúl-tant jústi, di-céntes :
Gló-ri-a in excélsis Dé-o, alle-lú-ia. E u o u a e.

Ex 1b

TREBLES
(unis)



In seeking to trace 'themes' through Britten's output it is quite natural that a link should be traced between the plainsong Procession of *A Ceremony of Carols* and the plainsong processional of the Church Parables. Undoubtedly such a link does exist, but the extent of the use of plainsong differs very considerably. In *A Ceremony of Carols* the plainsong serves to 'set' the scene and creates an ecclesiastical atmosphere for the ensuing 'ceremony' : in the Church Parables the plainsong becomes the very heart of the work, with everything developing from the initial plainsong melody. Yet 'Hodie Christus natus est' does not merely serve as end-pieces for the carols, for Britten incorporates echoes of the plainsong in the central Interlude for the harp alone. Peter Evans comments on this:

"Though the cycle opens and closes with a plainsong (the antiphon 'Hodie' for the Vespers of the Nativity), sung unaccompanied in procession, at this most prodigal stage of his career Britten does not draw his store of motives from this source, as was to be his later practice (see, for example, the *Hymn to Saint Peter* of 1955, but above all, of course, the parables of the 1960s). Yet the plainsong remains potently in the memory, and the central harp interlude is a 'pastoral symphony' in which the chant wafts towards the listener and recedes again out of earshot." (5)

Britten's use of plainsong forms an important linking 'theme' through his musical output, but his use of modal melody and harmony is an even more pervasive facet of his style, and its use is undoubtedly linked to his interest in plainsong. Dawney discusses Britten's fondness for the use of the modes:

"The magic ... lies often in a rare subtlety of tonal feeling and implication, which manifests itself equally in Britten's use of the modes, all of which are to be found in his music, plus some that are unclassifiable. But there is nothing of the neo-antique or of bogus religiosity about this modality, which serves rather as an inexhaustible source of harmonic and melodic progressions that are truly simple but avoid the commonplace. Among the modes his favourite is perhaps the Lydian" (6)

Britten's adoption of the modal principles produces results which are very different from the work of the more self-consciously 'modal' composers such as Vaughan Williams or Herbert Howells, and his use of plainsong is also peculiarly original and unlike the work of other

other twentieth-century composers (though Lennox Berkeley, a devout Roman Catholic, shows a certain indebtedness to plainsong shapes in his melodic lines). The modal influences in Britten's music are discernible from a very early stage and the use of plainsong melodies can also be dated to some of the incidental music which he wrote in the 1930s - well before he incorporated plainsong in *A Ceremony of Carols*.

The Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh contains a surprisingly large number of potential sources for Britten's use of both plainsong and hymn melodies. There are numerous Latin office books, and some of these have markings in Britten's hand which indicate melodies which were used by him, or which he obviously considered using. Three of the books, published in an edition dated 1920, appear to have been used as sources for plainsong melodies which occur in some of the incidental music of the 1930s, and each contains pencilled notes in Britten's own hand. Inside the *Officium Vespertinum* Britten has noted 'Veni Creator 177' and 'Te lucis ante 138'. The 'Veni Creator' melody was used extensively in Britten's music for a radio broadcast on Whit Sunday, 1938. The play, entitled *World of the Spirit*, was written by R. Ellis Roberts. The music was scored for chorus, soloists and full orchestra. It is not known whether Britten made use, at that time, of the second melody which he had noted - 'Te lucis ante terminum' - but the melody was an important element in the first of the Church Parables which Britten wrote in the 1960s.

The second of the three office books - *Vesperae et Completorium de Dominica* - has a note which refers to the setting of Psalm 70 - 'Deus in adiutorium meum'. Britten set this psalm (in Latin) as part of his incidental music for Ronald Duncan's text *This Way to the Tomb*, written in 1945. The psalm setting has recently been published, and shows that Britten employs a considerable amount of melodic writing which has strong allegiances to plainsong, though there is no exact reference to the marked plainsong.

The examples show (2a) the plainsong, and (2b) a passage from Britten's setting which clearly demonstrates the source of his melodic line.

Ex 2a

De-us in adju-to-ri-um me-um m-en-de

Ex 2b

largamente

Do-min-e ne mo-re-ris ne mo-re-ris

Do-min-e ne mo-re-ris ne mo-re-ris

Do-min-e ne mo-re-ris ne mo-re-ris

Do-min-e ne mo-re-ris ne mo-re-ris

It has been noted, on page 48 that the plainsong melody 'Te lucis ante terminum', which Britten had marked in one of his early source books, was to play a vital role in the later Church Parable, *Curlew River*. There is at least one other example of a plainsong melody which Britten used in the 1930s reappearing in the 1960s. In 1937 he wrote incidental music for a script by W.H.Auden entitled *Hadrian's Wall*. In this score Britten used the plainsong 'Jam lucis orto sidere', and it was this melody which Britten used in his third Church Parable, *The Prodigal Son*. Between these two appearances of the plainsong 'Jam lucis orto' there was a further significant use of the

melody in *Peter Grimes*. Britten's use of this melody (Example 3) demonstrates the maturing of his use of plainsong during the course of his career.

In the incidental music the use of plainsong melody often serves as a form of short hand which instantly evokes a religious atmosphere (though it must be acknowledged that the 'Veni Creator' used in *World of the Spirit*, in 1938, does provide important germinal motives, notably in the alto solo, 'The fruit of the Spirit is Love, is Peace, is Gentleness'). In *Peter Grimes*, and supremely in the Church Parables, the plainsong becomes an important generative force.

Ex 3

Jam lucis orto sidere (Hymns Ancient & Modern version)

In *Peter Grimes* this melody appears in the church scene (Act II, Scene 1). In an essay - 'Act II scene 1 : an examination of the music' - David Matthews points out that this melody, sung by the congregation in the church, provides also the music for Ellen's first phrase - 'Nothing to tell me, nothing to say' - "from which the rest of her *arioso* derives: this link between hymn and *arioso* emphasises their complementary nature, both being concerned, in their different ways, with 'making a new start'." (7)

When - some twenty years after *Peter Grimes* - Britten wrote his third Church Parable, *The Prodigal Son*, he again used the plainsong hymn 'Jam lucis orto sidere', this time for the processional entry. By now the plainsong has assumed a greater structural importance than in any earlier work. Peter Evans has written that "the symmetrical nature of the action in *The Prodigal Son* (home - the city - home) is made particularly obvious musically

by the use of the plainsong, 'Jam lucis orto sidere', not only as the frame
of the whole work but as a frame around the central adventure."⁽⁸⁾

If Britten's use of plainsong in the incidental music of the 1930s, as a form of short-hand to invoke a religious atmosphere, shows a use of the form which lacks the intensity of his later employment of plainsong melodies, there was, at that time, at least one example of his use of neo-plainsong motifs to disclose a cynical attitude to the apparent indifference of the Church to problems of suffering with which Britten's pacifist sympathies gave him a life-long concern. Such cynicism is to be seen most bitterly in the movement 'Rats Away', the second movement of *Our Hunting Fathers*, opus 8, which Britten wrote in 1936. Donald Mitchell has stressed the importance and significance of that year - "there is no doubt that 1936 was a key year, historically and politically; and politics was certainly one of Britten's preoccupations at that time."⁽⁹⁾ In this highly significant year he completed his large-scale symphonic song-cycle for high voice and orchestra which was written in collaboration with W.H.Auden. The first performance at the Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival in September, 1936, was followed by a B.B.C. performance directed by Adrian Boult, in April 1937. The work represents an important milestone in Britten's development, and he said of it : "It's my Op. 1 alright."⁽¹⁰⁾ If the 1930s were, as Sir Peter Pears has said, Britten's "puberty" (see page 26), then *Our Hunting Fathers* is a crucial indication of the direction which that maturing process was taking, and the treatment of the 'churchy' motif in 'Rats Away' may safely be taken as an indication of Britten's disenchantment with the Church at that time.

The song has an incantation in which the soloist utters a mock prayer imploring the saints to drive out the rats. The prayer fails and the rats continue their invasion and ultimately overrun the prayer itself: 1936 is a long way from the 'miracle' of *Curlew River* and *The Burning Fiery Furnace*!

In 'Rats Away' the prayer itself is mocked by the use of something very like the plainsong which, in the Church Parables, was to be a potent and binding force for good. The prayer in 'Rats Away' is called by Peter Evans (11) "pseudo-Gregorian incantations". Of the song's ending Donald Mitchell observes : "The image of humankind swamped by vermin and in peril of defeat - the old nostrums having lost their power - remains a very potent one." (12) Mitchell's comment corroborates the suggestion, made in Part I, that the 1930s were a time when Britten examined the certainties of his Christian upbringing and, to some extent, drew away from them. But it is interesting to note that it is 'Amen' which has the final word - albeit a *sotto voce* utterance speaking more of irony than piety (Example 4).

Ex 4

The musical score consists of four staves. The first three staves are vocal lines in G major (one sharp) and common time. The lyrics are: "Et in no-mi-ne (Rats!) Pa-tris et (Rats!) Fi-li-i (Rats!) et San-c-ti Spi-ri-tu,". The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment, also in G major and common time, with lyrics "Rats! Rats! A-men". The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like *cresc.*, *sf.*, *sotto voce*, and *pp*.

From *A Ceremony of Carols* to *Death in Venice* the use of plainsong themes is to be found in works by Britten. It is possible to speculate on his probable intention to use plainsong melodies in the Christmas trilogy which he was planning at the end of his life : he has marked, in *Liber Usualis*, the 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' from the service of Lauds for The Nativity of Our Lord. (Example 5)

Ex 5

At Bened.
Ant. 8. G

G Ló-ri-a * in excélsis Dé-o, et in térra pax ho-
mí-nibus bónae vo-luntá-tis, alle-lú-ia, alle-lú-ia.

There is a further marker in the 'Hodie Christus natus est' melody, which Britten had used in *A Ceremony of Carols* (Example 1a). It is unlikely that this marker is linked to its use in *A Ceremony of Carols*, since the copy of *The Liber Usualis* was that presented to him in July 1959, by the boys of Westminster Cathedral choir "in admiration and gratitude for our Missa Brevis." The likelihood is that Britten intended to use this melody again in the proposed Christmas trilogy, for which he planned to return to the Chester Miracle Plays for his text.

The plainsong influences in Britten's writing are not always explicit - even in surroundings where a plainsong melody might be anticipated - but examples of 'neo-plainsong' are not difficult to find. *Rejoice in the Lamb* might well have been an appropriate case for use of plainsong, but in general the influences here are Purcellian (especially in the concluding Hallelujah chorus), though the tenor solo 'For the flowers are great blessings' owes a good deal to plainsong inflexions (Example 6).

Ex 6

Lento (♩=54)

TENOR SOLO *piacevole ma dolce*

For the flowers are great bles-sings.

For the flowers are great bles-sings. For the

flowers have their an - gels e - ven the words of God's cre -

- a - tion. *espress.* For the flower glo - ri - fies

God and the root parries the *pp* ad - ver - sa - ry....

For there is a lan - guage of flowers. For

flowers are pe - cu - liar - ly the po - e - try of

Christ.

Considerably more surprising, in view of the potent use which Britten makes of plainsong in, for example, the Church Parables, is the absence of any specific plainsong melodies in the *War Requiem*. Yet the work is, in many places, highly perfumed with the odour of plainsong and its associations with ancient ritual and timeless verities. This is nowhere more true than in the treatment of the distant boys' choir. Alec Robertson has recalled that in the written introduction which he was invited to write for the first performance of the work at Coventry Cathedral, he had described the distant boys' choir as "a celestial sound": Britten asked him to substitute the word 'innocent'.⁽¹³⁾ The boys' choir sings only the words of the Latin Mass, and their 'innocent' utterances contrast sharply with the behaviour of the 'world' as represented at the centre of the performance by the chorus, soloists and the main orchestra. The writing for boys undoubtedly represents all that is uncorrupt and eternal: the Christian message unadulterated by man, whose supreme folly is represented by the futility of the wars which he wages. In his writing for the boys Britten creates a line which requires only a slow harmonic pregression in the accompaniment - a characteristic of the 'stillness' of plainsong - and a very fluid rhythm pattern which allows the words complete freedom of accent and stress. He does not use existing plainsong, but he creates something very close to it. In his description of the closing passages of the *War Requiem* Alec Robertson says "the distant boys' choir begins 'In paradisum' to organ accompaniment (the 'quam olim Abrahae' theme now sounds like a Gregorian *cantus firmus*)"⁽¹⁴⁾ (Example 7).

Ex 7

The musical score for Example 7 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Boys (distant) choir, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in a simple, plainsong-like style. The bottom staff is for the Organ or Harmonium, providing a harmonic accompaniment. The lyrics 'In pa - ra - di - sum de - du - cant te An ge - li' are written below the choir staff. The organ accompaniment features a slow, steady harmonic progression.



The Lydian adaptation of the plainsong 'Hodie Christus natus est' as used by Britten in *A Ceremony of Carols* has already been mentioned in this chapter, and Britten's fondness of the use of the tritone which is a marked feature of the mode (F - B natural) has often been remarked. The plainsong tradition and the modal system are inextricably linked, and if Britten makes no use of 'real' plainsong themes in the *War Requiem*, the 'Lydian fourth' is an all-pervading influence. The bells ring out their 'mourning motif' C - F sharp, at the start of the whole work and remains in our consciousness until the final resolution at 'Requiescant in pace. Amen.' Alec Robertson notes this relationship between the tritone interval and the Lydian mode, and he speaks eloquently of Britten's use of its potentialities -

"The tritone can sound awkward, unfinished. From this very fact Britten creates one of his most beautiful and unforgettable effects at the end of the 'Kyrie', 'Dies Irae' and 'In Paradisum', where the change of one note, F sharp to F natural, opens Heaven." (15)

Between *Peter Grimes* and *Death in Venice* Britten incorporated plainsong, or neo-plainsong motifs, in a number of works, sufficient to justify the description of plainsong as one of the consistent 'themes' in his creative processes. In *Saint Nicolas*, written in 1948, plainsong is used in movement IX - 'The Death of Nicolas' - for the chorus chanting the Nunc Dimittis, identified by Peter Evans as Mode iv, fourth

ending (Example 8a). The plainsong is used in the powerful orchestral introduction to the movement. Something very much akin to plainsong is the only possible description of the incantational 'Alleluia' of the resurrected Pickled Boys at the end of movement VII (Example 8b),

Ex 8a

SOPRANOS & ALTOS unis. *ppp*

Lord, now

TENORS & BASSES unis. *ppp*

Doppio più lento

pp

(Piano II, Vc. D.B. with Chorus)

77

Nic. LORD.....

S A let - test thou thy ser - vant de -

T B

Nic. *sempre largamente* I come..... to

S A - part in peace,

T B

sim.

Ex 8b

poco meno mosso (♩ = 66)
THREE SMALL BOYS (entering)

Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia!

Sm. boys
Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia! Al - le-lu-ia!

Plainsong forms the basis of the *Hymn to St Peter*, opus 56a, written in 1955 to mark the 500th anniversary of the church of St Peter Mancroft, in Norwich. The words are taken from the gradual for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and the plainsong is 'Tu es Petrus' - the Alleluia and Verse for the Common of Holy Popes (Example 9).

Ex 9

2.

Lle-lú-ia. * ij. V. Tu es Pé-

trus, et super hanc pé-tram aedi-fi-

cá-bo Ecclé-si-am * mé-am.

The organ introduction is based firmly on the 'Tu es Petrus' plainsong and this remains in the organ pedal part when the voices enter with the words 'Thou shalt make them princes', which Peter Evans says "is based on the ascending pentatonic shape of the plainsong's Alleluia." (16)

After two contrasting choral sections there is a brief organ interlude, based on the second part of the 'Tu es Petrus' melody, and the following choral section recapitulates the opening music, transposed up a major third; only in the closing section of the work is the plainsong sung - by a solo treble voice. Now the plainsong is given complete, but the phrases (17) are separated by quiet choral interpolations.

In 1959 Britten wrote another 'ceremony' for three-part boys' choir which had clear links with the *Ceremony of Carols*. The 1959 work was the *Missa Brevis* in D - a work in which, appropriately, the organ has replaced the harp as the accompanying instrument. The setting was written for George Malcolm and the boys of Westminster Cathedral Choir, to mark George Malcolm's retirement from the post of Master of the Music, and to celebrate the special tone colour which Malcolm had cultivated in the boys and which, in its unrestrained production, came close to Britten's own ideal of the natural sound of the boy's voice. The work is discussed in the chapter on Britten's liturgical music, but it claims a place in this chapter because of the generative use which Britten makes of the plainsong intonation to the Gloria. The Celebrant's plainsong intonation (Example 10a) is immediately taken up by the organ pedals, establishing the 7/8 rhythm (Example 10b), and providing important melodic material for the voices both in the original form and, at the words 'miserere nobis', in inversion. As in the *Hymn to St Peter*, the establishment of the initial plainsong motif is in the pedal part.

Glo-ri-a.... in ex-cel-sis De-o.

Lively (d...approx. 26 (♩=126))

TREBLES

I, II

III

ORGAN

Lively (d...approx. 26 (♩=126))

f *suav.*

Et... in ter-ra pax ho-mi-ni-bus,
*Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o.

Et... in ter-ra pax ho-mi-ni-bus,
*Glo-ri-a in ex-cel-sis De-o.

Et inter-rapax ho-mi-ni-bus bonae volun-ta-tis. Lau-da-mus te.

Et inter-rapax ho-mi-ni-bus bonae volun-ta-tis. Lau-da-mus te.

The musical score is written for three parts: Soprano, Alto, and Bass. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Latin. The Soprano and Alto parts have the same lyrics, while the Bass part has a different set of lyrics. The music is a simple, homophonic setting of the text.

Be-ne-di-ci-mus te. A-do-ra-mus te. Glo-ri-fi-

Be-ne-di-ci-mus te. A-do-ra-mus te. Glo-ri-fi-

60

The Church Parables, composed in the 1960s, demonstrate the most complete assimilation of plainsong in any of Britten's music, just as they represent the most complete fusion of his operatic and oratorio styles - what Peter Pears has called Britten's "*reductio ad coelum*". (18)

The use of the plainsong *Nunc Dimittis* in *Saint Nicolas* has been noted, and a further example of the use of plainsong is to be found in the other work which forms a link between the operatic stage and the church - *Noye's Fludde*. Britten wrote that work in 1957, and it has found a secure place in the repertoire. It is a work which takes its libretto from the Chester Miracle Plays, to which Britten applied the additional dimension of music in the tradition of the original play: a work for ordinary people and based on one of the best known biblical stories - truly music "of use to people, to please them, to 'enhance their lives' (to use Berenson's phrase)". (19)

In the spirit of this universal story it is hardly surprising that Britten includes the timeless music of plainsong.

One of the most memorable themes in the work is the simple incantation which forms the march of the animals into the Ark. The constant repetition of the phrase 'Kyrie eleison' has a remarkably worldly feeling - very much, one suspects, in the tradition of the common man of Chaucer's pilgrims! - and the people for whom the Miracle plays were first acted. But at the end of the march the quiet 'Kyrie eleison' (Example 11a), "momentarily transfers the prayer to a universal level". (20) The 'Kyrie' procession is balanced by another chant sung in celebration of deliverance from the flood, as the animals leave the Ark. This, again, has a strong plainsong flavour (Example 11b).

Ex 11a



Ex 11b

ANIMALS *pp*

Al - le - lu - ia, ... Al - le - lu - ia!
Hal - le - lu - ja, .. Hal - le - lu - ja!
(Rec.)

smooth pp

It is easy to see that the essential way of using plainsong melodies which Britten took as his point of departure in the Church Parables, has a clearly defined genesis. In 1964 the potential of plainsong, with all its echoes of medieval piety - and undoubted echoes of Britten's time as a schoolboy at Gresham's - came to be fused with the strong influences of the Japanese *Nō*-play and the polyrhythmic freedom of Balinese *gamelan* music, to create a new dramatic form for Britten. The first Church Parable - *Curlew River* - takes the plainsong hymn 'Te lucis ante terminum' as its point of origin - a melody which had been marked in Britten's early plainsong source books (see page 48, above). It has already been noted that Britten's choice of plainsong melody for the third Church Parable - *The Prodigal Son* - made use of the plainsong melody 'Jam lucis orto sidere', which had already been used in two earlier works (see page 49). The second Church Parable - *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, written in 1966 - is framed by the plainsong hymn 'Salus aeterna' (Example 12).

Ex 12

Sa-lus ae-ter-na, in-de-fi-ci-ens mun-di vi-ta cin-de-lens hu-ma-na
pe-ru-re sae-cla por-ten-tan-tis nu-mi-nu, (etc)

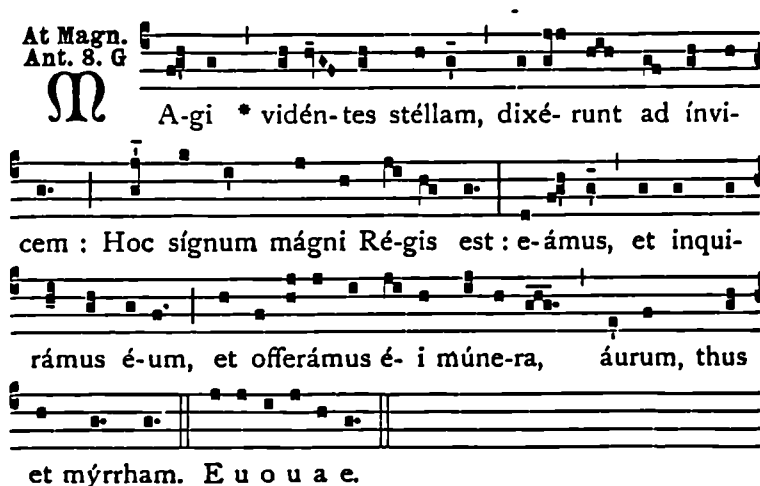
Amongst Britten's last works of the 1970s there are two further significant examples of the use of plainsong melodies. The first - *Canticle IV : Journey of the Magi* - was written in 1971. This work represents Britten's first setting of the poetry of T.S.Eliot. Britten's failure to set Eliot earlier in his career would seem to have no link with any supposed antipathy for Eliot's poetry. Donald Mitchell has drawn attention to an entry in Britten's diary for 1936 in which he expresses admiration for the qualities of *Murder in the Cathedral*.⁽²¹⁾ Mitchell makes the point that

"It was entirely typical of him that so many years passed before he actually set any of Eliot's verse: not until 1971, when in January he completed his *Canticle IV: Journey of the Magi*. It was a poem he had long had in mind but did not attempt the setting until he felt himself ready to take on the challenge that Eliot's language represented." ⁽²²⁾

Arnold Whittall has commented on the affinity between *Journey of the Magi* and the Church Parables - "*Journey of the Magi* is a treatment of the travelling theme which is present in all three Church Parables and *Death in Venice*."⁽²³⁾ Apart from this 'thematic' link the Eliot setting shares with the Church Parables the use of plainsong. In this instance Britten makes a fairly obvious choice of the Epiphany melody - the antiphon 'Magi videntes stellam' (Example 13a).

Ex 13a

At Magn.
Ant. 8. G



A-gi * vidén-tes stéllam, dixé- runt ad ínvi-
cem : Hoc sígnium mágni Ré-gis est : e-á-mus, et inqui-
rá-mus é-um, et offerá-mus é- i múne-ra, áurum, thus
et mýrrham. E u o u a e.

Britten first introduces the plainsong at a late stage in the work, where Eliot's poem is at its most spare and comfortless. His use of an ecclesiastical motif makes positive the Christian implications of the birth to which the Magi had felt drawn, while Eliot's poem is very much more equivocal. The plainsong is introduced very subtly in the piano accompaniment while the three singers utter their repeated 'satisfactory' (Example 13b); from here it assumes an increasing importance. The plainsong undoubtedly represents the Christian dimension in this story of a birth, and its inclusion makes a very much more positive statement of faith than the original poem - and a more positive statement about Christian redemption than much of Britten's earlier 'religious' music. But even in this work the certainty of the revelation does not remain constant: the Magi withdraw to their own lands, and the final line - 'I should be glad of another death' - has little to give comfort in this world. Only the plainsong remains at the end as an echo within the piano postlude (Example 13c), to remind us that things can never be the same again after this half-understood birth.

Ex 13b

The musical score for Example 13b consists of three vocal staves (C-T, T, B) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "it was (you may say you may say) sat-is - - - fac-to-ry". The piano accompaniment features a plainsong motif in the right hand, marked with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo and dynamics are indicated as *ppp* (pianissimo) and *sf* (sforzando). The piano part includes a section marked *p smooth* (piano smooth) and *always 2w* (always 2 whole notes). The score is written in 3/4 time and includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ex 13b cont.

out.

p smooth

sat - is - fac - to - ry

p smooth

sat - is - fac - to - ry

mf

sat - is - fac - to - ry

mf

sat - is - fac - to - ry

cresc.

mf

sat - is - fac - to - ry.

mf

sat - is - fac - to - ry.

p dim.

sat - is - fac - to - ry.

dim.

p

Ex 13c

C-T. *p dim.* *pp*
 I should be glad of glad of an-o-ther o-ther death.
 T. *p dim.* *pp*
 I should be glad of glad of an-o-ther death.
 B. *p dim.* *pp*
 I should be glad of an-o-ther death.

Piano accompaniment: *pp*, 7/8, 2/4, 3/4, *dim.*, *ppp*
 January 2nd 1977
 London

While the strong 'external' musical influence in Britten's last opera, *Death in Venice*, is to be traced to the recitatives in the Passions of Heinrich Schütz, there is some use of plainsong. Here it is used, as in *Peter Grimes*, as a means of evoking a religious atmosphere. The plainsong is employed in Act II, Scene 9, in which Aschenbach pursues Tadzio and his family around the city of Venice. They enter St Mark's Basilica for a service, while Aschenbach, like Grimes, remains outside. Britten's choice of plainsong is made from the Propers for St Mark's Day (25 April). The service begins with music based on parts of the processional Greater and Lesser Litanies appointed for Rogation Days. Example 14a gives the source of this music from *The Liber Usualis*.

ROGATION DAYS.
THE GREATER AND LESSER LITANIES.

AT THE PROCESSION.

Before the Procession, the choir sings, standing :

Ant.
2.
E Xsúrge Dómi-ne, * ádju-va nos, et líbera
nos, propter nómen tú-um. *Ps.* Dé-us áuribus nóstris
audívimus : * pátres nóstri annunti-avé-runt nó-bis.
Gló-ri- a Pátri. E u o u a e. *Repeat :* Exsúrge Dñe.

Then two cantors, kneeling before the Altar, begin the Litany. Each invocation is doubled, unless the Procession cannot take place.

K Yri-e, e-lé-ison. Chríste, e-lé-ison. Kýri-e, e-lé-i-
son. Chríste, áudi nos. Chríste, exáudi nos.

Pá-ter de caé-lis, Dé-us, mi-seré-re nóbis.
Fí-li Red-émptor mún-di, Dé-us, mi-seré-re nóbis.
Spí-ri-tus Sán-cte, Dé-us, mi-seré-re nóbis.
Sáncta Trí-ni-tas, únus Dé-us, mi-seré-re nóbis.

Sáncta Mari-a, óra pro nóbis.

Here all rise and the Procession begins without any interruption in the chant of the Litany.

Sáncta Dé-i Gé-nitrix, óra pro nóbis.
Sáncta Vírgo vírginum, óra pro nóbis.
Sáncte Mícha-el, óra pro nóbis.
Sáncte Gábri-el, óra pro nóbis.
Sáncte Rápha-el, óra pro nóbis.

Omnes sáncti Ange-li et Archánge-li, orá-te pro nóbis.
Omnes sáncti beatórum Spírituum órdenes, orá-te pro nóbis.

Sáncte Jo-ánnes Baptísta, óra pro nóbis.
Sáncte Jó-seph, óra pro nóbis.

Omnes sáncti Patri-árchae et Prophéetae, orá-te pro nóbis.

Sáncte Pé-tre, óra pro nóbis.

Britten's composition sketch book for *Death in Venice* demonstrates his use of the Kyrie eleison melody in the brass chorale in the Overture. Example 14b is Britten's composition sketch showing clearly the heterophonic treatment of the melody. Example 14c indicates the final form which this passage took in the Overture.

Ex 14b Brass

Handwritten musical sketch for Ex 14b, Brass. The sketch shows a heterophonic treatment of the Kyrie eleison melody across two staves. The top staff begins with a forte (f) dynamic. Brackets below the staves identify the 'Kyrie' and 'eleison' sections.

Ex 14c

Handwritten musical score for Ex 14c, marked "43 Very lively *Molto animato*". The score features brass and cymbal parts in 4/4 time. The brass part is marked "f smooth" and the cymbal part is marked "cym.". The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *Ac*, and a final measure with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

The plainsong Kyrie eleison melody appears later in the opera in Scene 9 ('The Pursuit') to evoke the atmosphere of the church service in St Mark's basilica. Here Britten pairs the chorus sopranos with tenors and altos with basses in a two-part contrapuntal texture which he so often used in his church music (see Chapter 7), but in this case we find an example of pure heterophonic technique - the overlapping lines recreating the effects of a reverberant church acoustic on the single strands of plainsong. (Example 14d)

Ex 14d

218 *mf* The family approaches and enters St. Mark's.
Die Familie gelangt an die Markuskirche und betritt sie.

Asch. *mf*
 My eyes are on him — e - ven at his prayer,
 Mein Aug' ruht auf ihm, — ja auch beim Ge - bet,

Asch. *dim.*
 in-cense and sick-ness min-gle in the air.
 Weihrauch und Krankheit drin-gen in die Luft.
tutti + bells
pp cresc.

ASCHENBACH follows. TADZIO kneels a little apart from the others. ASCHENBACH stands amongst the casual populace away from the family.
 ASCHENBACH folgt nach. TADZIO kniet ein wenig abseits von den anderen.
 ASCHENBACH steht mit den gelegentlichen Besuchern, entfernt von der Familie.

219 (same tempo *l'istesso tempo*)
f marked

S. *f*
 Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e - le - i - son.

A. *mf*
 Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

CHORUS *f marked*
 T. *f*
 Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Chri - ste e - le - i - son.

B. *mf*
 Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

Ex 14d cont.

TADZIO is aware of ASCHENBACH's presence.
TADZIO ist ASCHENBACHS Anwesenheit gewahr.

Soprano: Chri-ste au-di nos,
Alto: Chri - - - ste -
Tenor: Chri-ste au-di nos,
Bass: Chri - - - ste -

Piano: *ff express.*

220

Soprano: Chri-ste ex-au-di nos.
Alto: ex - au - di nos.
Tenor: Chri-ste ex-au-di nos.
Bass: ex - au - di nos.

Piano: *ff*

After a brief reference to the Litany of the Saints the priest sings his florid dismissal -'Ite missa est'- (Example 14e) which is one of the settings of these words appointed for Solemn Feasts in *The Liber Usualis* (Example 14f).

Ex 14e

185

S.
San-cte, san-cte Mar - ce o - ra pro no - bis.

A.
O Mar - - - ce o - - - ra

CHORUS
San-cte, san-cte Mar - ce o - ra pro no - bis.

T.
San-cte, san-cte Mar - ce o - ra pro no - bis.

B.
O Mar - - - ce o - - - ra

Piano accompaniment with dynamic markings *f*, *dim.*, and *p*. A rehearsal mark [221] is present above the piano part.

Musical score for the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, Act II, No. 15, "The Priest". The score is for three parts: Soprano (Soprano), Alto (Alto), and Bass (Bass). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and mood are marked "PRIEST freely f dim". The lyrics are "I - te". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

(freely)

Priest

mis - sa - est.

ppp

5. 
I - te, mís - sa est.
Dé - o grá - ti - as.

Ex 14f

The obvious link between this section of *Death in Venice* and Act II, Scene 1 of *Peter Grimes* has been noted on page 66, above. But now Aschenbach's situation achieves a more universal, less personal level by virtue of the universal nature of the Latin liturgy. Aschenbach choses to remain outside St Mark's: for Grimes entry into the church would have meant capitulation to the expectations of the people of the community - an infinitely more daunting prospect, one suspects, than any judgement by the Almighty!

Plainsong is, undoubtedly, one of the pervading 'themes' of Britten's music. He uses it both 'atmospherically', in the operas, and as a vital generative motif in the Church Parables. There are many instances where a plainsong 'flavour' is clearly present in his melodic shaping. Peter Evans has drawn attention to the Queen's prayer at the end of Act I of *Gloriana*, where Britten writes a "quasi-plainsong harmonized in the 'faux bourdon' manner that was an English speciality some two hundred years before her time." (24) Similar links may be traced to the plainsong-related lines in the final section of *Cantata Misericordium* and in *Voices for Today*, where the boys' choir floats a wordless neo-plainsong over the main choir singing the words of Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* (Example 15).

Ex 15

[20] Tranquillo 19

fp (faster than main chorus, $\text{♩} = 120$)

Ab

($\text{♩} = 120$) *fp*

U - ti - ma Cu - mac - i ve - nit iam car - mi - nis ac - tas; ma - gnus ab in - te - gro sce -

U - ti - ma Cu - mac - i ve - nit iam car - mi - nis ac - tas; ma - gnus ab in - te - gro sce -

U - ti - ma Cu - mac - i ve - nit iam car - mi - nis ac - tas; ma - gnus ab in - te - gro sce -

U (h) * ma (gn)

[20] Tranquillo ($\text{♩} = 120$)

fp

without Ped.

b. Hymns

If plainsong - and interest in its inherent modal colouring - offered a new experience for Britten when he went to Gresham's, it is quite certain that he had been exposed to the English tradition of hymn tunes from a much earlier age. Hymn singing in churches of the Nonconformist and evangelical Anglican traditions has always enjoyed an important place in worship - frequently forming a significant point of unity for a particular congregation, the manner and occasion of performance of specific hymns taking on something approaching a local rite. This sense of a shared experience is conveyed in the letter written to his mother soon after Britten arrived at Gresham's School (quoted on page 9), in which he talks of a chapel service - "three hymns, no hymns we know, but out of the Public School Hymn Book."

It is, then, not surprising that Britten made use of hymn tunes in his own works: the surprise is that he did so relatively rarely - the English hymn tune lacked, for him, the generative force of plainsong. Nevertheless, there are two outstandingly important instances of the use of English hymns - in *Saint Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde* - and there are other works in which he uses hymn tunes for reasons of atmosphere, personal allusion or, in the case of *The Choirmaster's Burial*, ironic comment.

As with the use of plainsong melodies, Britten's earliest use of hymns and hymn tunes is to be found in the incidental music of the 1930s. His score for *The Company of Heaven* (1937), for full orchestra, chorus and soloists, makes use of two hymn tunes : 'Christ the fair glory' (*The English Hymnal* 242) and 'Ye watchers and ye holy ones' (*The English Hymnal* 519). The play, with a text written by R.Ellis Roberts, was broadcast on Michaelmas Day, and it was appropriate that Britten should choose the first hymn from the Michaelmas section of *The English Hymnal*. Britten's own copy of this hymnal is to be found in the Britten-Pears Library, and there are markers at the

two hymns mentioned above, as well as at two other tunes (*St Denio* and *Dundee*) which he used in later works. The book is inscribed 'With love from Mother June 22nd/30. Hymn 473'. The first verse of the latter hymn reads -

'Pray when the morn is breaking,
Pray when the noon is bright,
Pray with the eve's declining,
Pray in the hush of night:
With mind made pure of passion,
All meaner thoughts away,
Low in thy chamber kneeling
Do thou in secret pray.'

- another interesting insight into the nature of the spirituality shared by mother and son (see page 7, above).

In 1941 Britten wrote the first of several instrumental works in which he made reference to hymn tunes. The *Scottish Ballad* is a work for two pianos and orchestra. The work makes use of the Scottish metrical psalm tune, *Dundee* (Example 16a) and this is declaimed in the opening bars of the work (Example 16b). The 'Scottishness' of this work has been criticised as somewhat exaggerated, lacking the conviction of Britten's later settings of the words of Scottish writers.

Ex 16a

DUNDEE. (O. M.)
Moderately slow $\text{♩} = 66$.

Scottish Psalter, 1618, as given in
Ravencroft's Psalter, 1621.

The musical notation for 'Dundee' is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The tempo is marked 'Moderately slow' with a quarter note equal to 66 beats per minute. The melody is a simple, diatonic tune with a range of one octave. The first system consists of two measures, the second of two measures, and the third of two measures, ending with a double bar line.

For Ethel Bartlett and Eric Robertson
SCOTTISH BALLAD
 for Two Pianos and Orchestra

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
 Op. 28

Lento (♩ = 66)

2 Flutes (1st & 2nd)
 2 Oboes
 2 Clarinets in Bb
 2 Bassoons
 Double Bassoon (ad lib.)
 4 Horns in F
 2 Trumpets in C
 3 Trombones
 Tuba
 Timpani
 Percussion (Cym. ad lib.)
 Harp
 Piano I Solo
 Piano II Solo
 Violins I
 Violins II
 Violas
 Violoncello
 Doublebasses

Insofar as Britten makes use of the hymn tune during the course of the *Scottish Ballad* it is possible to trace a link between this early work and the generative importance of the Church Parables which he wrote in the 1960s. There is a further interesting link between this work and the nearly contemporary *A Ceremony of Carols*. It has already been noted (Chapter 6, page 45) that Britten altered the plainsong melody 'Hodie Christus natus' by 'rhapsodising' in the Lydian mode: Example 16c shows that Britten treats the hymn melody in similar fashion when it appears in the first violin and 'cello parts towards the end of the *Scottish Ballad*.

Ex 16c

The musical score for Ex 16c consists of five staves, labeled VI. I, VI. II, Vla., Vc., and Db. The first system shows a series of chords and single notes across the staves, with dynamics *sf* and *p sempre sostenuto* indicated. A double bar line with two slashes follows. The second system begins with a rehearsal mark **380** in a box. It features more complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, with dynamics *acc.* and *sim.* marked. Another double bar line with two slashes follows. The third system continues the musical development, ending with a *cresc.* marking at the bottom of the Db staff.

Britten's first important use of hymnody to achieve congregational/ audience participation is found in the cantata *Saint Nicolas*, written in 1948 for Lancing College. The work has been described by Christopher Headington (25) as one that "belongs to the tradition of the Anglican Church." The description is open to debate, but it is certainly true that the two hymns which Britten incorporates into the structure - 'All people that on earth do dwell' and 'God moves in a mysterious way' - are a part of every churchgoer's experience. In using the congregational hymns in *Saint Nicolas* Britten prepared for the more significant use of hymn tunes in *Noye's Fludde* and the

audience songs in *The Little Sweep*. Peter Evans makes a rather disparaging comment on the use of the final hymn in *Saint Nicolas* - 'God moves in a mysterious way' to the tune *London New* - saying that "the comfortable tone of this setting, with its self-conscious harmonic crudities, makes a rather disappointing end to the movement."⁽²⁶⁾ Evans is even less happy with the treatment of 'All people that on earth do dwell' which ends the first half of the work: he talks of the "perverse ... distortions of an originally strong harmonic model."⁽²⁷⁾ It is certainly one justifiable view that Britten's ability to create magic through the simple touch is lacking here because of the overwhelming strength and logic of the original familiar harmonies of both melodies.

With the experience of the congregational hymns of *Saint Nicolas* and the audience songs of *The Little Sweep* behind him it is not surprising to find that the hymns incorporated into *Noye's Fludde* (a work written almost ten years after *Saint Nicolas*) are more successfully integrated into the total structure of the piece. It is noteworthy that the work has a significant blend of amateur and professional participation which defines less sharply the 'amateur' contribution of the congregation than is the case in *Saint Nicolas*. The three hymns in *Noye's Fludde* are vital to the structure of the whole in a way which can hardly be claimed for those in *Saint Nicolas* - an integrated musical resource which points the way to the use of plainsong in the Church Parables of the 1960s. In recognising the importance of the hymns in *Noye's Fludde* Peter Evans has noted that the child performers of this work

"most effortlessly recognize an act of praise as their own when couched in terms to which their conditioning has accustomed them - that is, those of the body of universally familiar English hymnody. The three plainest statements of the work and the evenly-placed buttresses of its structure are settings, for actors and audience together, of hymns: 'Lord Jesus, think on me' is a plea from a sinful world for deliverance in the time of reckoning, 'Eternal Father' is a cry of faith from the centre of the storm, and 'The spacious firmament' a truly 'enlightened' vision of the blessed universe in which man has taken his place

after the covenant of the rainbow." (28)

The work begins with an orchestral introduction which acts as the 'play-over' of the first hymn 'Lord Jesus, think on me'. Britten choses to involve the performers and audience/congregation as equal participants in the drama which is to be unfolded. Noye's children sing separate phrases of the hymn, and the opening minor third of the tune becomes a distinctive feature of much of the succeeding music, and particularly of the orchestral introduction (Example 17).

Ex 17

Majestic (J. 00-72)

PIANO

pp *Orob.* *p* *p* *p*

The Congregation stands
Die Gemeinde steht

CONGREGATION *p*

1. Lord Je - sus, think on me, And purge a - way my
2. Lord Je - sus, think on me, Nor let me go a -
1. Herr Je - sus, denk Du mein, Und rei - ße mich von
2. Herr Je - sus, denk Du mein, Dass ich nicht irr' vom

With Organ and orch. rip.

Con.

sin; From earth-born pas-sions set me free, And make me pure with - ia.
- stray; Through dark-ness and per - ple - xi - ty Point thou the heav-en-ly way.
Sünd; Woll'et mich von ird'ischer Lust be - frei, Mach rein mich wie ein Kind.
Steg; Durch Dun - kel und Ver - wor-ren-sein, Zeig Du den Him - mels - weg

* [Damon's Psalter; Synesius — trans. Chatfield]

The tune of this first hymn - *Southwell* - dominates the opening section of the work, and its penitential feeling - by recalling distant memories of long-ago Lenten church services - imbues the atmosphere with
(29)
a proper sense of penance before the impending doom.

J.B.Dykes's music for the second hymn is of a rather less ascetic nature than the first, and it imposes certain problems for the composer in integrating the somewhat 'period' harmonies. Britten overcomes the difficulty by use of highly chromatic harmonies in the preceding 'storm' music. This second hymn is the only one of the three for which Britten employs the tune traditionally associated with the hymn words he uses. In this case the tune *Melita* is invariably sung for the words of the hymn 'Eternal Father, strong to save'. In *The English Hymnal* this hymn is set in a section heading 'In Time of Rough Weather' : the Flood was certainly that! Surely this hymn, perhaps above all others, would have been a potent memory from Britten's childhood lived in a seafaring community.

Britten creates an ingenious link between his 'storm' and the hymn by use of an angular ground bass: twenty repetitions of the four-bar ground underlie the storm music and the first two bars of the hymn. The effect of the succeeding verses of the hymn is to gradually calm the storm which is raging in the orchestra; by the third verse calm is restored, and the orchestra gives way to the organ and Dykes's own harmonisation of the tune - a safe return to the known ways. The ground returns for the orchestral interlude and the solo strings recall snatches of Dykes's tune.

The final tableau of the work is one of thanksgiving for deliverance from the flood, and Britten again chooses an alternative tune - Tallis's Canon - to that usually associated with the words 'The spacious firmament on high'. The choice of a universally known tune gives a sense of security to the conclusion of the work and awakes memories of youthful fascination

with a tune whose canonic possibilities provide the first revelations of contrapuntal texture for many an innocent chorister. Britten takes an almost boyish delight in adding his own contrapuntal art to that of Tallis. The texture is increased with each succeeding verse of the hymn: one and two over, successively, a dominant and mediant pedal, in the key of G major. The music moves to F major for the third verse; in the fourth the canon introduced in two parts at one bar's distance. At the end of verse four the organ signals the entry of the congregation in the fifth verse. This artless passage is an example of Britten's gentle humour in recalling the rather heavy-handed modulatory excursions beloved of some organists in their attempts to urge a dilatory congregation into action. In this verse chorus and congregation sing a four-part harmonisation of the tune, with canon two in one. The verse is supported by organ alone and the orchestra erupts at the end of the verse to signal the final verse and a great paean of praise with the canon eight in one - a magnificent evocation of God's words "Beastes and all that can flie Out anone they shall hye, On earth to grow and multeplye".

Between the writing of these two works - *Saint Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde* - Britten wrote two works in which hymn tunes also played a part, though in a less obvious manner than in the former works. The Canticle II *Abraham and Isaac* uses a text drawn, like *Noye's Fludde*, from the Chester Miracle Plays, and like all of the Canticles its subject is concerned with spiritual matters. Christopher Palmer has pointed out the similarity of the melodic line of the final words 'For ever and ever, Amen' to the last line (30) of the *Old Hundredth* which Britten had used in *Saint Nicolas* (Example 18).

Ex 18

Abraham and Isaac

For — ev — er and e — — — ver, A — men —

The Old Hundredth

Britten wrote the settings of Thomas Hardy entitled *Winter Words* in 1953 - a year after his second Canticle. This work again makes subtle use of a hymn tune, in the fifth song, *The Choirmaster's Burial*. The ironic use of the hymn tune *Mount Ephraim* (Example 19a) - associated in *The English Hymnal* with the hymn 'For all thy Saints, O Lord, Who strove in thee to live' - makes clear the composer's sympathy with the faithful musician who is now to be buried with no respect for his wish for some music at his funeral. The vicar is one of Wilfred Owen's 'pulpit professionals' whose only concern is for a speedy service. The vicar's vocal line is a parody of the parsonical inflection of many an earnest sermoniser. The song is a miniature 'parable' in the tradition of the Church Parables of the 1960s: wrong is righted by the singing, around the dead man's grave, of the Heavenly company.

Ex 19a

MOUNT EPHRAIM. (S. M.).
Slow ♩ = 68. B. MILNEROV, 1731-1816.

The musical score for 'Mount Ephraim' is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and an instrumental line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Slow' with a quarter note equal to 68 beats per minute. The score begins with a vocal line starting on a half note G4, followed by a series of eighth and quarter notes. The instrumental line provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The third system concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots below the staves.

5

The Choirmaster's Burial

(or The Tenor man's story)

Ex 19b

Simply ($\text{♩} = \text{c. } 52$)

VOICE *p*

He oft-en would ask us That,.... when he died,

PIANO *pp sustain*

Af-ter play-ing so ma-ny To their last rest, If out.... of us a-ny

Should here a-bide, And it would not task us, We would with our lutes Play

pp

o-ver him By his grave-brim.... The psalm he liked best..... The

cresc.

The overture *The Building of the House*, Op. 79, was written to mark the opening of the Snape Maltings Concert Hall in 1967. The work moves at great speed and suggests something of the intense activity which allowed the conversion of the original maltings into a fine concert hall. Into the texture Britten weaves a chorus singing a German chorale - *Vater Unser* - to the metrical version of Psalm 127 ('Except the Lord the house doth make'). The use of a German tune gives a more European - less English - mood to the music: music for a concert hall that was to become an international centre as the principal venue for the Aldeburgh Festival. The overture is very much a celebratory *pièce d'occasion*, relatively straightforward in structure, but it is interesting to note the echo of the generative use of plainsong in the Church Parables of the 1960s, in the way that the chorale provides the melodic germ for the string fugato section (Example 20).

Ex 20

The musical score for Example 20 consists of three systems of music. Each system features four staves: Percussion (Perc.), Violin 1 (Vln. 1), Violin 2 (Vln. 2), and Viola (Via.).

- System 1:** The Percussion staff is marked with a circled 6 and 'quietly'. The Violin 1 staff has a 'nat.' marking. The Violin 2 and Viola staves have 'pp' and 'smooth and dolce' markings.
- System 2:** The Percussion staff is marked with a circled 7. The Violin 1 staff has a 'nat.' marking. The Violin 2 and Viola staves have 'pp' and 'smooth and dolce' markings.
- System 3:** The Percussion staff is marked with a circled 8. The Violin 1 staff has a 'nat.' marking. The Violin 2 and Viola staves have 'pp' and 'smooth and dolce' markings.

Two further instrumental works followed *The Building of the House* in that they contain references to hymn tunes, though in a less overt way. In both instances the works were written for close and admired colleagues and the tunes take the form of a musical dedication. In the case of the *Suite for Harp*, Op. 83, written in 1969, the dedicatee was the harpist Osian Ellis. The incorporation of the Welsh hymn tune *St Denio* pays respect to Ellis's country of birth, and perhaps, his background as the son of a Welsh minister of religion.

The wish to pay tribute motivates the incorporation of a Russian melody - included in *The English Hymnal* as the Kontakion of the Departed ('Give rest, O Christ) - in the *Third Suite for Cello*, written in 1971. The dedicatee is the great Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich. Use of the tune powerfully symbolizes the growing rift between Rostropovich and the Soviet government which led to his loss of citizenship in 1978.

Britten's use of hymn tunes forms a 'theme' throughout his life which is clearly linked with the recurring use of plainsong and is a most significant acknowledgement of the potency of the heritage of Christian music of which Britten was aware from early childhood. Hymn tunes have a rather less important place in the complete oeuvre than does plainsong: undoubtedly the 'universal' nature of plainsong was generally more appropriate to Britten's broad themes than the more 'parochial' quality of hymn tunes.

References :

- 1 Incomplete letter to his mother. See Chapter 2, page 11)
- 2 Letter from George Malcolm; 28 August 1984
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Tempo (Some notes on Britten's Church Music)* - Michael Dawney; Autumn 1967, p. 20
- 5 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 86
- 6 *Tempo (Some notes on Britten's Church Music)* - Michael Dawney; Autumn 1967, p. 20
- 7 *Benjamin Britten 'Peter Grimes'* - Philip Brett; p. 126
- 8 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 498
- 9 *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 19
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 70
- 12 *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 38
- 13 *Requiem - Music of Mourning and Consolation* - Alec Robertson; p. 269
- 14 *Britten's War Requiem* - Alec Robertson; (Musical Times, May 1962)
- 15 *Requiem - Music of Mourning and Consolation* - Alec Robertson; p. 268
It is interesting to speculate, when considering Britten's very considerable use of the melodic tritone - a strong feature of the Lydian mode - whether its use was inspired as a veiled tribute to his teacher, Frank Bridge; Bridge's initials - F.B. - certainly form that interval. Britten's *Variations on a theme of Frank Bridge* are dedicated to 'F B' and the tritone (which appears in the bass part of Bridge's 'theme' is found in the first two chords of Britten's work, and in the fugue subject of Variation X.
- 16 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 432
- 17 Britten conducted the choir of St George's Chapel, Windsor, in a performance of the *Hymn to St Peter* at a private ceremony at Cliveden, Berkshire, in the 1960s. He was at pains to point out to the accompanist that when using piano accompaniment for the work it was important to play the bass line in octaves to give adequate weight to the plainsong.
- 18 Conversation; 3 January 1985
- 19 *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* - Benjamin Britten; p. 22
- 20 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 277
- 21 *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 13
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *The Music of Britten & Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 255
- 24 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 202
- 25 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 90
- 26 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 261
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.* p. 273
- 29 In *Hymns Ancient and Modern, Revised* this tune is used for the Good Friday hymn 'O perfect life of love'.
- 30 *The Britten Companion* - ed Christopher Palmer; p. 82

Chapter 7

THE LITURGICAL MUSIC

Chapter 6 demonstrates the considerable extent of Britten's use of the distinctively Christian heritage of plainsong and hymn tunes in a wide variety of works covering the whole of his career. It is surprising to find that despite this particular Christian 'theme' he wrote relatively little music which was specifically for church use. This dearth of liturgical music is less surprising if I am right in suggesting (in Chapter 5, page 41) that Britten drew away from the institutional Church of his boyhood.

The liturgical music must, undoubtedly, be considered as 'occasional' pieces; but although there is relatively little pure liturgical music, there is a good deal more music which can be used liturgically; and the boundary between liturgical music and that which can be more generally described as 'church' music is no more clearly defined than the boundary between pure opera and the Church Parables, *St Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde*.

Britten's first important setting of the Anglican liturgy was the Te Deum in C major, written in 1934. The music is inscribed 'Written for Maurice Vinden and the Choir of St Mark's, N.Audley St., London'. St Mark's was one of the churches which Britten attended for worship (usually accompanied by his sister Beth) during the period when he was a student at the Royal College of Music.⁽¹⁾ The boys of the St Mark's choir sang the part for boys' choir in the first (broadcast) performance of the work, given on 23 February 1934 by the B.B.C. Singers. The Te Deum was written in July and August of the same year, and it clearly resulted from Britten's work with the choir in the preparation of *A Boy was Born*. The Te Deum was later arranged for string accompaniment, and in that form it was given

at a Macnaghten-Lemare concert at the Mercury Theatre on 27 January 1936,
when it was conducted by Reginald Goodall.

In his review of the *Te Deum* Constant Lambert described it as
(2)
"drab and penitential" but it has secured a firm place in the English
cathedral repertoire while many of the glutinous effusions of the neo-Romantic
repertoire which were still being produced in the 1930s have become tired
and dated. The main thematic material is developed from the two opening
ideas - the ascending C major arpeggio of the vocal parts, and the syncopated
figure of the organ accompaniment (Example 21).

Ex 21

Allegro molto ($\text{♩} = 80-96$)

TREBLES
ALTOS

TENORS
BASSES

ORGAN

pp We praise Thee, —

pp We praise Thee, —

pp We praise Thee, —

pp We praise Thee, —

Allegro molto ($\text{♩} = 80-96$)

pp

Ped. p marcato e non legato sempre

p O God, —

p O God, —

p O God, —

p we ac -

p we ac-know-ledge Thee —

The accompanimental figure requires an incisiveness in performance which is not easily achieved by the pedal stops of the average British organ,⁽³⁾ and it is likely that this figure made rather greater impact in the string arrangement which Britten made for the 1936 performance.

For the first forty-six bars Britten restricts himself to the use of the C major arpeggio, and this remarkable example of economy is again to be seen in his later setting of Psalm 150. The Te Deum is in ternary form - the central section in gentle mood in contrast with the *Allegro molto* of the outer sections. This middle section is written in A major, and features the solo treble voice floating a touchingly simple inversion of the opening triad over the rest of the choir. This lovely moment recalls the detached boys' voices in the fourth variation of *A Boy was Born*, and it has its later echoes in such works as the *Spring Symphony* and the *War Requiem*.

Britten wrote a companion setting of the Jubilate Deo which is dated 10 August 1934. The work was not published during his lifetime and was re-discovered after his death and subsequently published. It breaks away from the traditional practice of writing a 'service' in a particular key: Britten's Jubilate is in the key of E flat major. It is linked to the Te Deum by a similar extended use of tonic tonality in the opening section. The organ introduction is built on a tonic pedal which is transferred to the chorus as an inverted pedal for the first five bars of the vocal part, before returning to the bass and organ pedals. The emphasis throughout the piece is on simplicity: much of the vocal writing is in unison, or two-part harmony in which trebles are paired with tenors and altos with basses. A contrasting *piano* middle section begins at bar 42 at the words 'it is he that hath made us' over a sustained chordal accompaniment. Contrapuntal treatment between the paired voices from bar 68 takes the mood from the

pianissimo utterances of 'be thankful unto him' through a massive crescendo to a D major climax in bar 93, asserting the strength of the phrase 'his truth endureth from generation to generation'. At this point of climax the organ assumes the figuration of the opening choral figure, and this device foreshadows the similar treatment in the accompaniments of the *Te Deum* in E major, written in 1944, and the *Missa Brevis* of 1959. The version of the *Jubilate* published in 1984 has a brief organ link between the end of the canticle and the *Gloria Patri* which remains in the key of D major, creating an awkward link with the vocal E flat entry at the start of the *Gloria* (Example 22a). The manuscript of the work has two versions of this link, and the alternative leads to a pedal E flat which offers a more secure entry (Example 22b).

There was no more liturgical music until the second *Te Deum* which Britten wrote in 1944. This *Festival Te Deum* was written to mark the centenary of St Mark's Church, Swindon. The work falls into the same ternary form as the early *Te Deum* in C major, but the rhythmic complexities make it a rather more demanding work for both choir and accompanist. The polyrhythmic texture of the outer sections anticipates the rhythmic features of the *Church Parables*, and shows the influence of the Balinese music to which Colin McPhee introduced Britten during his sojourn in America. (See also page 93, below).

(4)

Britten reverses the tempi of the sections as compared to the *Te Deum* in C major: his outer parts are now *Andante con moto*, while the central part is *Piu mosso ed energico*. The first part has a good deal of unison writing for the voices to a constantly changing rhythm based on the quaver unit, over an accompaniment of sustained organ chords in a constant 3/4 rhythm (Example 23a). The vocal lines owe much to Britten's interest in pentatonic and Lydian contours, while the rare use of contrapuntal texture does much to illustrate the world-embracing nature of the Church at 'The Holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge thee'.

Handwritten musical score for a piano and voice piece, titled "Ex 22b". The score is written on five systems of staves, each system containing a grand staff (piano) and a vocal line. The music is in 4/4 time and features a variety of musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The first system begins with a piano (p) dynamic marking and a vocal line starting with the word "Lion". The piano part includes a melodic line with a trill and a bass line with a trill. The second system continues the melodic development, with a piano part featuring a trill and a vocal line with a trill. The third system includes a piano part with a trill and a vocal line with a trill. The fourth system includes a piano part with a trill and a vocal line with a trill. The fifth system includes a piano part with a trill and a vocal line with a trill.

The score is written in a handwritten style, with some corrections and annotations visible. The piano part is written on a grand staff, and the vocal line is written on a single staff. The music is in 4/4 time and features a variety of musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ex 23a

Andante con moto (♩ = 144)
(quasi senza misura) *sempre p e comodo*

TREBLES
We praise Thee, O God..... we as-

ALTOS
(quasi senza misura) *sempre p e comodo*
We praise Thee, O God..... we as-

TENORS
(quasi senza misura) *sempre p e comodo*
We praise Thee, O God..... we as-

BASSES
(quasi senza misura) *sempre p e comodo*
We praise Thee, O God..... we as-

ORGAN
p

PEDAL

3

- knowledge Thee to be the Lord..... All the earth doth wor-ship

- knowledge Thee to be the Lord..... All the earth doth wor-ship

- knowledge Thee to be the Lord..... All the earth doth wor-ship

- knowledge Thee to be the Lord..... All the earth doth wor-ship

poco a poco cresc.

Thee, the Fa-ther ev-er - last-ing. To Thee all An-gels cry a -

poco a poco cresc.

Thee, the Fa-ther ev-er - last-ing. To Thee all An-gels cry a -

poco a poco cresc.

Thee, the Fa-ther ev-er - last-ing. To Thee all An-gels cry a -

poco a poco cresc.

Thee, the Fa-ther ev-er - last-ing. To Thee all An-gels cry a -

The middle section of the Te Deum is in lively contrast to the opening and has a rather more conventional rhythmic pattern and is in the tonic minor key. The accompaniment of this section is highly animated and the *ostinato* figuration gives another view of the Balinese influence which Britten had experienced in America, and which may be seen by comparing a passage from Colin McPhee's arrangement of some Balinese music which Britten performed (Example 23b) with the accompaniment from the middle section of the Te Deum (Example 23c).

For Margaret Mead

Balinese Ceremonial Music

Ex 23b

Transcribed for two pianos, four hands by
Colin McPhee

1. Pemoengkah

Animato 120

Piano I

Piano II

Animato 120

Lento 60

Tempo primo 120

rall.

pp

mp

Ex 23c

Fa-ther. We believe that Thou shalt come to be our

Fa-ther. We believe that Thou shalt come to be our

Fa-ther. We believe that Thou shalt come to be our

Fa-ther. We believe that Thou shalt come to be our

judge. We there - fore pray Thee help Thy

judge. We there - fore pray Thee help Thy

judge. We there - fore pray Thee help Thy

judge. We there - fore pray Thee help Thy

The final section of the work returns to the rhythmic patterns of the opening, but now with the addition of a treble solo having a melodic line similar to the choral opening of the work. The choral passage at 'Vouchsafe O Lord to keep us this day without sin' has a complexity of vocal alignment which again provides a link with the heterophonic technique of the Balinese gamelan (Example 23d). This passage is followed by a conventional - but undoubtedly effective - outburst at 'O Lord in Thee have I trusted', before a rapid diminuendo to a hushed ending.

(5)

Ex 23d

The musical score for Example 23d consists of two systems. The first system features four vocal staves and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts enter with the lyrics "Vouch - safe..... O Lord to keep us this day..... .. with - out" and are marked with the instruction "cominciando *pp* e poco a poco cresc.". The piano accompaniment is marked "legato". The second system continues the vocal parts with the lyrics "sin, O Lord have mer - cy u - pon us, .. have mercy u -" and "sin, O Lord have mer - cy u - pon us, u -". The piano accompaniment continues with the same melodic line. The score is identified as "Festival Te Drum" and "M. 15555".

The earliest of Britten's church anthems was written in 1949, for the marriage service of the Earl of Harewood to Marion Stein. The work - *A Wedding Anthem (Ave Ergo Sum)* - is for four-part choir, soprano and tenor soloists and organ. This work is so much a *pièce d'occasion* that it has not found a regular place in the church music repertoire: the considerable length and the technical demands of the piece more suitable for recital use than liturgical performance. The rather fanciful text, by Ronald Duncan, underlines the personal and specific nature of its composition. The work itself has many felicitous moments and it is hardly surprising that some of the solo writing should reflect the music of *The Rape of Lucretia*, written three years earlier and also with Ronald Duncan as librettist.

Two subsequent anthems share the same opus number, even though they were written a year apart. The *Hymn to St Peter* (Op 56a), was written in 1955, to mark the quincentenary of the church of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich. The work makes important use of plainsong melody and it is discussed in Chapter 6, page 58, above.

The companion piece is the *Antiphon* (Op 56b), which was written in 1956 to mark the centenary of St Michael's College, Tenbury. The work is a setting of words by George Herbert, and the setting has a quality of freshness and spontaneity which links it with the later setting of the *Jubilate Deo* which Britten wrote in 1961. The textures have much in common with the writing for children in *Noye's Fludde*.

The work is scored for four-part choir, three solo treble voices and organ. Britten requests that the soloists be set away from the main choir - a link between the gallery choir of *Saint Nicholas* and the distant boys' choir of the *War Requiem*, having its earlier manifestation in the antiphonal group in the boyhood motet *A Hymn to the Virgin*. A succession of five sustained organ chords leads to the swinging rhythms

of the unison choral opening, while the syncopated accompaniment establishes one of Britten's typical hypnotic *ostinatos*. The Lydian vocal line displays a conscious allusion to the seventeenth-century origin of the words with a Purcellian melisma on the words 'God of love' (Example 24).

Ex 24



The choral statements are interrupted by a succession of interpolations by the solo group, and after four similar passages a new mood is established at 'He our foes in pieces brake'. The jagged imitative vocal lines could very easily threaten the unity of this short work, but Britten maintains continuity by preserving the established syncopated accompaniment. The unified elements of swaying choral writing over rhythmically independent accompaniment, lower voice solemn utterances, and the soaring solo treble interludes, carry the music forward to a madrigalian fugato at 'Praised be the God alone Who hath made of two folds one'. The final page consists of antiphonal play

between the solo group and the choir to achieve supremacy of the 'one' of the soloists over the 'two' of the choir. Finally all end on 'one' on the tonic note: perhaps a rather naive conceit, but at one with the literary traditions of the seventeenth-century source of the text.

In 1959 Britten wrote his only liturgical setting of the Latin Mass. The work was written to mark the retirement of George Malcolm from the post of Master of the Music at Westminster Cathedral (see page 59, above). There is little to remind one of the Anglican liturgical style in this music: the dramatic and passionate qualities of the music were created for the richly vibrant sounds of the 'continental' singing style which Malcolm established at Westminster. Britten was greatly attracted by the 'naturalness' of this form of voice production.

The Mass is scored for three-part boys' choir with organ accompaniment and it obviously shares a genetic link with *A Ceremony of Carols*. It is a settings of the Ordinary of the Mass, with the exception of the Credo. The work has a number of subtle touches which link it to Britten's 'children's music' - such as the manner in which the dissonances are tuned by the relative simplicity of the individual vocal lines, and the instantly attractive rhythms of the Gloria. Yet the work is not in the least patronising; it holds a high place in the estimation of Britten's music, and is a durable addition to the liturgical music of the Latin Mass.

Peter Evans has stated that the description of the work as 'in D' is only to be seen in general terms. ⁽⁶⁾ The Kyrie, Gloria and Sanctus all have D major and F sharp major as their tonal centres, and the Sanctus has the additional major third relationship of B flat major. The Agnus Dei stands in contrast to the rest of the work in the tonic minor (D minor) and B flat major tonality.

In a number of respects the Agnus Dei at the conclusion of the Mass

balances the Kyrie at the beginning. The sweeping vocal lines of the Kyrie have an imporing intensity in the plea for mercy which is even more fervently expressed in the Agnus Dei - a movement in which the hammer blows of the organ's repeated chords evokes the crucified Christ, to whom the prayer for mercy is addressed in terms of increasing fervency (Example 25).

Ex 25

The musical score for Example 25 is divided into three systems, each with three staves (two vocal staves and one organ staff). The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

System 1: The organ part begins with a series of chords. The vocal parts enter with the lyrics: "A - gnus De - i, qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta, pec -". The organ part features a series of chords, with a *mf* dynamic marking.

System 2: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics: "- ca - ta mun - di; mi - se - re - re no - bis." The organ part continues with a series of chords, with a *mf* dynamic marking.

System 3: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics: "A - gnus De - i, qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta, pec - ca - ta.. mun - di;". The organ part continues with a series of chords, with a *f* dynamic marking. The organ part concludes with a *p* dynamic marking.

Britten's quite obvious sensitivity to the cruel suffering of the innocent Sacrificial Victim allows us to see a clear link between this liturgical setting of Agnus Dei and the treatment of the same words in the *War Requiem*, where he is able to further sharpen his attitude to this particular cruelty by the juxtaposition of Owen's poem *At a Calvary near the Ancre*. In the *War Requiem* the potency of the 'message' is achieved by the gentle acceptance expressed in the hypnotically waving unison lines leading to the final prayer of the solo tenor ascending to Heaven in the peace of acceptance: the hammer blows of the Agnus Dei of the *Missa Brevis* also resolve into a sort of peaceful acceptance, but the conclusion on a second inversion leaves us above the earth, but not yet securely in Heaven (Example 26). It is interesting to note that Britten emphasises the religious intention of the work by noting the completion date as 'Trinity Sunday, 1959'. The score of 'Curlew River' has a similar religious ascription - 'Maundy Thursday 1964'.

Ex 26

The musical score for Example 26 consists of four staves. The top three staves are vocal parts, each with the lyrics "do-na no-bis pa-cem,". The first vocal staff begins with a *p dim.* dynamic and ends with a *ppp* dynamic. The second and third vocal staves also begin with *p dim.* and end with *ppp*. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment, starting with a *dim.* dynamic and ending with a *ppp* dynamic. The score is for "Aldborough, Trinity Sunday, 1959".

Aldborough, Trinity Sunday, 1959

The links between the Agnus Dei settings of the two Masses are not the only discernible links between the works: in both works the setting of the Benedictus spreads a calming balm of blessedness which suggests that Britten felt an affinity with its sentiments and which serves to make a strong contrast with the brilliant mood of the preceding Sanctus in each of the two works. In each Sanctus there are the bells which Britten used with great evocative potency throughout his career: in the *War Requiem* they are real bells; in the *Missa Brevis* the voices become the bells, and for good measure the peal contains all twelve chromatic semitones (Example 27).

Ex 27

SANCTUS

The musical score for the Sanctus is presented in two systems. The first system includes three vocal staves (I, II, III) and an organ staff. The vocal parts are marked 'Broadly (♩=80)' and feature the lyrics 'San ctus, San ctus,'. The organ part is marked 'Broadly (♩=80) + 4 ft.' and includes dynamic markings *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and *f*. The second system continues the vocal lines with the lyrics 'San ctus, Do - mi-nus De - us,' and the organ accompaniment. The organ part in the second system includes dynamic markings *p*, *mf*, and *f*. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time.

At the words 'Pleni sunt coeli' the 'bell' motif of the Sanctus becomes a *moto ostinato* in the organ pedals, and Britten makes a similar use of the intonation of the Gloria to create a pedal *ostinato* (see Chapter 6, page 59, above).

The *Missa Brevis* is a superb miniature and contains significant emotional and stylistic links with larger-scale works by Britten. It is reported to have been one of his favourite works; his treatment of the Mass provides some insight into his own spiritual attitudes and his sympathy for those parts of the Mass which are concerned with the suppliant sinner's plea for grace: the prayer of the fallen sinner clearly becomes more potent when the sinner has an enhanced sense of his loss of innocence.

Britten wrote his setting of the Jubilate Deo in C major in 1961 - the year in which he was principally occupied with the writing of the *War Requiem*. The score is inscribed 'Written for St George's Chapel, Windsor, at the request of H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh'. The piece is the result of a much bigger scheme to write a complete 'service' for Matins and Evensong. The circumstances surrounding the commission have been recalled by Canon G.B. Bentley, a former canon of Windsor who was Precentor of St George's at the time. Canon Bentley states that a meeting took place at which Britten, the Duke of Edinburgh, Sir William Harris (the Organist at St George's), the Dean and the Precentor were present.

"At the meeting Britten said he wanted to write the music for both Matins and Evensong - the whole office for one day. He even said he'd like to write the psalm chants for that day." (7)

Canon Bentley voiced doubts about the wisdom of writing chants for the psalms since they might not be suitable for anything other than a specific day of the month. "After that grandiose project it was a sad disappointment when Britten produced only the Jubilate"; though the rather traditional Organist of St George's was not convinced by the piece - "The Jubilate was much too

'jolly' for Harris, who was hooked on solemnity in church".

Some letters to Canon Bentley from Britten, dated February and March 1962, show that further writing for St George's was still under consideration and that Britten planned to travel to Windsor to hear the choir. In the end the project came to nothing, but the *Jubilate* has established itself firmly in the cathedral repertoire.

This highly attractive piece has, in common with all of Britten's liturgical music, a strongly rhythmic organ accompaniment which is established from the first bar and which pervades most of the work. The descending semiquaver scale is part of a bell-like motif which is instantly reminiscent of the *gamelan* motifs which had featured in Britten's music since his sojourn in America, and which became even more important after his visit to the Far East in 1955/56 (Example 28).

Ex 28

The musical score for Example 28 is presented in two systems. The first system includes staves for Sopranos and Altos, Tenors and Basses, and the Organ. The organ part is marked 'Lively' and begins with a descending semiquaver scale. The vocal parts enter with the lyrics 'O be joy - ful'. The second system continues the organ accompaniment and includes vocal parts with the lyrics 'in the Lord, all ye lands: Serve the Lord'. The organ part continues with the same rhythmic motif.

The vocal material of the Jubilate is largely based on the rising scale of the opening (Example 28), and as with his earlier liturgical writing, he treats the voices in pairs (soprano and tenor, alto and bass) for much of the time. Now, however, the pairing is not of a straightforward octave doubling but reveals another *gamelan* influence - the heterophonic technique. The harmonic tread displays the same economy as the earlier Te Deum in C major and Jubilate in E flat: a large part of the first section of the work is based on the tonic and dominant chords. As in the earlier Jubilate in E flat the mood of the music becomes subdued at the words 'be thankful unto him' and here the music swings into the mediant tonality of E major. As also in the early Jubilate the music becomes contrapuntal and increasingly excited at the words 'and his truth endureth'. The Gloria is a miniature anthem in its own right and a reworking of the opening organ motif and vocal line, the voices now all employed. There is a magical moment when the music moves sideways into a *pianissimo* utterance in D sharp minor which creates an echo of the earlier key movement at 'be thankful unto him'. The music moves to a gentle 'Amen' only to erupt for a final display of the opening material for almost two pages of repeated 'Amen'.

It has often been assumed that the Jubilate Deo in C major was intended as a companion piece to the early Te Deum in C major; the information supplied by Canon Bentley makes it clear that a completely new 'service' was intended, and the discovery of a setting of the Venite after Britten's death (subsequently published in 1983) shows that he gave some time to the bigger project.

At first sight it seems strange that Britten should set the words of the Venite: this canticle is very rarely sung to a setting in the English cathedral service, being normally sung to an Anglican chant. In fact that is precisely the basis of Britten's setting: the texture is that of the

chant; but in this case he creates a succession of chants in a repeated sequence of keys, each phrase linked to the succeeding phrase by a pivot chord in the organ accompaniment (Example 29). In view of Canon Bentley's recollection that Britten wished to write the chants for the day there is nothing surprising about this setting.

Ex 29

[With movement]

pp

SOPRANO
ALTO

O come, let us sing un - to the Lord:—

TENOR
BASS

pp

ORGAN

pp

Ped.

4

p

let us heartily re-joice in the strength of our sal - va - tion.

p

6

p

Let us come be - fore his pre - sence with thanks - - giv - ing:—

p

mf

pp

Further evidence of Britten's intentions for St George's are found in the Britten archives at Aldeburgh. The manuscript of the 1961 Jubilate in C major is accompanied by a sketch for the beginning of a piece for choir and organ in the key of E flat major. Like much of Britten's other liturgical music the voice parts begin in octaves and there is a strongly rhythmic accompanimental figure of rapid descending scales. It is assumed to be the start of the Te Deum for Windsor which got no further than this sketch. If this is so it is interesting to note that the 1934 Te Deum was in C major and accompanied by a Jubilate in E flat, while the 1961 settings would have reversed
(9)
the same key sequence.

Britten wrote no more music for the Anglican or Roman Catholic liturgies after 1961, but in December 1962 he wrote an anthem which is, in many ways, very much in the tradition of the Anglican anthem - despite its Latin text. The *Hymn of St Columba* is scored for four-part choir with organ accompaniment and the text is attributed to St Columba himself. The work received its first performance at the saint's birthplace - Gartan, Co. Donegal - and it marked the 1400th anniversary of Columba's missionary journey from Ireland to Iona.

A brief organ introduction establishes the D minor tonality and gives another example of Britten's concern to make his organ accompaniments rhythmically vital. In this instance he gives to the organ pedals an *ostinato* in which the accent falls, in contradiction to the voices, on the second beat of the bar (Example 30a). As with the pedal part of the Te Deum in C major this figure seems to imply an over-optimistic view of the incisive qualities of the average British organ! Against this figuration the choir enters in the second bar with a sweeping unison four-bar melody.

Ex 30b

di-es quo-que an-gu-sti-ae,
for-ti-um, di-es quo-que an-gu-sti-ae,
ni-tra-o-rum for-ti-um, mae-

mae-ro-ris ac tri-sti-ti-ae, mae-ro-ris ac tri-gu-sti-ae, mae-ro-ris ac tri-sti-ti-ro-ris ac tri-sti-ti-ae, ac tri-sti-ti-ae.

is in F minor and the opening pedal *ostinato* is transferred to the right hand part. The *reprise* begins in bar 33 with a return to D minor and the pedal figuration from the opening section. The opening vocal line is taken up again but now by the paired voices in canon for two bars. After a climax in bar 35 the music subsides to a hushed ending which is a further reminder of the *Te Deum* settings.

One of the briefest of Britten's works to be graced by an opus number is, ostensibly, a piece of church music. The setting of Psalm 150 (Op. 67) was written in 1962 to mark the centenary of his old preparatory school, South Lodge, which had now been re-named Old Buckenham Hall School. The work is dated 1 May 1962 - the month in which the *War Requiem* received its first performance in the new Coventry Cathedral. The Psalm was first performed at the school in July of that year, and had its first public performance at Aldeburgh on 24 June 1963.

The description of this piece as 'ostensibly' a piece of church music is made advisedly, for its genus is clearly that of *Noye's Fludde* rather than the liturgical music already discussed in this chapter. It is an example *par excellence* of Britten's 'children's music' which, like *Saint Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde* and the Church Parables, is most at home when performed in a church building, though not being exclusively church music. The instrumentation provides for a wide variety of options and shows again Britten's practical approach to the varied availability of instruments to be found within any school: the minimal requirements are stated to be "some childrens' voices, one or two treble instruments, a drum and a keyboard instrument".⁽¹⁰⁾

This little work, lasting only five minutes, represents a clear link between Britten's liturgical music and the wider scope of such works as *Saint Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde*, just as *Saint Nicolas* forges a link with

the composer's great output of opera. The work falls into four sections, with a key sequence of C-F-A-C, and the opening instrumental march provides a clear reminder of the processional music in *Noye's Fludde*. A unifying aspect of much of the music discussed in this chapter has been the economy of harmonic texture and in this opening march the music is built over a tonic pedal lasting for thirty-two bars, followed by a dominant pedal for the following thirty-five bars. The voices enter in bar 68 and the accompanying instruments launch into a repeat of the opening twenty bars of the march. From this point the tonic and dominant pedals alternate while interest and tension are maintained by an increasing chromaticism in the chord structure, and by the gentlest contrapuntal interest between the voices.

The second section makes use of the infectious rhythms of 7/8 time (as in the Gloria of the *Missa Brevis*); added rhythmic interest is created by the inner variation of accents - 3.2.2; 2.2.3. At the end of the section two modulatory passages of two bars each lift the music to A major for a brisk 6/8 section in which 'ev'ry thing that hath breath' is exhorted to praise the Lord - and Britten adds that childrens' delight, a canon (4 in 1). The opening march returns in abridged form for the words of the Gloria - as Peter Evans observes, a neat expression of the words 'As it was in the beginning'.⁽¹¹⁾

If, as Sir Peter Pears has said (Chapter 4, page 29), Britten never wrote the Christmas piece he wanted to write, he did little to fill the gap by writing the sort of carols which some of his contemporaries produced in quantity. He did, however, write some early settings between 1929 and 1931, and a further example in 1944, which he subsequently revised and published in the 1960s.

Three of the carols - *A Wealden Trio : The Song of the Women*, written in 1929; *Sweet was the Song*, written in 1931; *The Oxen*, written in

1966/67 - were all written for female voices. Two carols dating from 1930, when Britten was only sixteen years old, and about to enter the Royal College of Music, have achieved a firm place in the repertoire; Britten inscribed the manuscripts 'Two Choral Songs'. *I Saw Three Ships*, the second of the settings, was written on 12-18 September 1930. It was given its first performance at St John's Church, Lowestoft, on 5 January 1931, and was subsequently revised in 1934, when Britten was visiting his brother's school at Prestatyn. Britten again revised the setting in 1967 and re-titled it *The Sycamore Tree*.

The other of the 'Two Choral Songs' was written while Britten was ill in the sanatorium at Gresham's School; the original pencil copy is dated 9 July 1930, while a copy in ink is dated 3 September 1930. The work - *A Hymn to the Virgin* - has secured a special place in the repertoire and it is a touching miniature which provides interesting clues of the music to come. The piece was originally written in B flat minor (see frontispiece) and was subsequently revised in 1934 and rewritten in A minor. Louis Halsey's description of the work, "a small piece of great charm, but not surprisingly it lacks the individual touch of the later works", ⁽¹²⁾ sounds like an exercise in damning with faint praise: such a view ignores the clear indications of things to come - the gentle modal (Aeolian) opening, and the spacial effects created by the antiphonal group. The work further shows Britten's art in finding the right text to set: in this case a macaronic text dating from about 1300 - an ideal vehicle for the antiphonal treatment, in which Choir I sings mainly the English words while the Choir II has echo effects using the Latin text.

A Hymn to the Virgin is a very lovely piece which has been described by Michael Kennedy as -

"Britten's first surviving piece of church music,

a gentle and fluent work belonging very strongly to the tradition of English religious art but with a freshness that has never faded and with that quality which, for want of a better word, can only be described as 'innocence'". (13)

Of all Britten's vast output of music it was this work which was chosen to be sung at his funeral service in Aldeburgh Parish Church on 7 December 1976.

References :

- 1 Information supplied by Mr T.S.Welford
- 2 *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* - Eric Walter White; p. 28
- 3 Britten was known to have a poor view of the playing of the average which he generally found to be unrhythmic. In his letter to Walter Hussey following the first performance of *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Britten pays particular credit to the organ accompanist - "I have seldom heard such rhythmic playing from an organist". (Letter 26 September 1943)
- 4 *Benjamin Britten: Pictures from a Life* - Donald Mitchell and John Evans; 174, 175, 176
- 5 The technical demands of the work were clearly too great for the choir of St Mark's, Swindon, and Britten was disappointed by the first performance - "The Swindon Te Deum wasn't a great success; the choir was completely incompetent, & a great disappointment". (Letter to Walter Hussey; 13 May 1945)
- 6 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 437
- 7 Letter from Canon Bentley; 19 July 1984
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Appendix iii
- 10 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 283
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Britten's Church Music* - Louis Halsey; Musical Times, October 1962
- 13 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 127

Chapter 8

PARABLE MUSIC I

"There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love ..." (1)

"... it is envisaged that the artist can properly hope through his 'parables' - a concept of special relevance to any consideration of Britten's art, who so often used parable as one of his prime working methods ..." (2)

Donald Mitchell makes clear in the passage from which the second of these quotations is taken, that he considers the 'parable' method to be an important aspect of Britten's complete oeuvre. Such a view is wholly consistent with the generally accepted notion that Britten expresses his humanitarian concerns through his music, and it justifies the search for other, more deeply spiritual, sympathies in his music. The number of works which have a direct or indirect spiritual dimension is considerable, and forms a large proportion of Britten's output. While other commentators may claim that Britten was heavily concerned with the creation of homosexual allegories or, to a lesser extent, political polemics, the sheer weight of the spiritually orientated music is convincing indication of Britten's major concerns.

The strong 'theme' of 'parable' music extends through the whole of Britten's career, and it is to be traced through works on several different levels or scales. Moreover, it makes itself felt in an overtly spiritual, and Christian, sense very early in his career. The choral suite, *A Boy was Born*, was written while Britten was still a student at the Royal College of Music, and at a time when he still maintained a regular habit of church attendance. It was written before he was launched on the traumatic experience of living through the political hell of the 1930s, and

the catalytic influence of W. H. Auden. The Christian theme is embraced without reservation and, more significantly, without sentimentality. Michael Kennedy - who, like Eric Walter White, takes Britten's Christianity for granted - has said of the work -

"The text is brilliantly chosen, a Christmas narrative which needs no narrator It is music written by one to whom the Christian faith had real meaning, as we know it had for Britten, and it manages to illuminate the Christmas message in the English tradition of Folk-song, mediaeval poetry and liturgical worship without resort to the archaizing of Holst or the luxurious chromaticism of Bax, Warlock and others". (3)

There is a good deal of evidence to indicate that Britten drew away from the strong religious stance of his school and student days, but it is interesting to note that *A Boy was Born* has, as the second of the six variations, a movement dealing with Herod's Massacre of the Innocents, and it is known that Britten intended to include this incident in his proposed Christmas trilogy on which he was actively engaged at the end of his life: yet another example of the consistency of his concerns, and an obvious indication of his sympathy for the innocent victim of oppressive power.

It would be easy, in the pursuit of Britten's use of the parable method, to go immediately to the Church Parables of the 1960s, but Donald Mitchell makes it quite clear that he sees the method as relating to Britten's total output. (4) There is, in fact, another sequence of works which, like the Church Parables, are concerned with "the things spiritual", and these - the five Canticles - cover a very much wider period of Britten's career than the Church Parables.

The Canticles span the period between 1947 and 1974, but with a seventeen-year gap between Canticles III and IV. All are extended settings for varied, but always small forces, which have a religious or more generally spiritual theme. They form a sequence of small cantatas on a chamber music scale, and within Britten's complete oeuvre

they form a bridge between the song cycles and the operatic works. The generic title 'canticle' which Britten gave to these works marks them as pieces with a spiritual dimension which requires an ambitious musical treatment within which the theme may be revealed.

Canticle I: My Beloved is Mine was written in 1947, for the Dick Sheppard Memorial Concert on 1 November (All Saints' Day) of that year. Sheppard, a famous Vicar of St Martins-in-the-Fields, London, was the founder in 1934 of the Peace Pledge Union, a movement with which Britten associated himself and for which he wrote, in 1937, his *Pacifist March*. This first Canticle is a setting of a poem by Francis Quarles (1592-1644) which is based on a verse from *The Song of Solomon*. The intense, mystical nature of the poem marks a link with Britten's cycle *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, written in August 1945 following the harrowing experience of accompanying Yehudi Menuhin in concerts given for survivors of the German wartime concentration camps. The Donne settings make a clear link between Britten's previous song cycles and the later Canticles. Michael Kennedy says of the first Canticle that "Britten himself said that it was modelled on Purcell's *Divine Hymns*" - ⁽⁵⁾ further evidence of the lineage of the Canticles. Of *Canticle I* Peter Pears wrote that "the hyper-tension of the *Donne Sonnets* ⁽⁶⁾ has been relaxed, and with a classical shape has come repose and dignity". In *Canticle I* Britten establishes the miniature cantata form which characterises the Canticles and which sets them on a different level from the song cycles. In this case the first two and the last two stanzas are linked to form the two outer 'pillars' of the work, while the third stanza forms the second section ('Recitative') and the fourth stanza forms a third, rapid, section ('Canonic Scherzo').

Quarles's poem is a meditation on a single line from the biblical narrative, which he paraphrases as 'My beloved is mine and I am his'. The

work has the quality of ecstasy which, for the more pragmatic mind, is likely to equate it with the somewhat uncomfortable vision of ecstatic martyrs depicted by such Spanish baroque painters as Murrillo. In the case of this Canticle Quarles reflects on the trust and confidence of Man in the Creator.

Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac was written in 1952 and received its first performance on 21 January of that year, when it was performed by Kathleen Ferrier and Peter Pears accompanied by Britten. It is scored for contralto (or, more appropriately, alto), singing the part of the boy Isaac, and tenor, singing the part of Abraham. For this poignant biblical story of sacrificed innocence Britten draws his text from the Chester Miracle Plays - the source of the libretto of *Noye's Fludde* (written in 1957), and of the proposed Christmas trilogy which Britten was planning at the end of his life.

The mood and sentiments of *Canticle II* are close to Britten's known sympathies for the innocent victim of violence, thus linking the work with his output as a whole, and particularly with *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Owen Wingrave* and the *War Requiem*.

The scoring for two voices allows a link with the operatic works through the characterisation of the two participants in the story. In a remarkable way Britten manages to create a third presence - the voice of God - and this he achieves by a striking synthesis of the two voices. Britten avoids a consistent unison line for the voice of God, though unison is occasionally used; the memorable opening phrase provides an indication of the method by which this vocal synthesis works - a kind of chant (reminiscent of plainsong) whose thirds are prevented from seeming obvious by the semitonal inflections (themselves a reminder of the opening audience song in *The Little Sweep*). The phrases spoken by God are punctuated by what Peter Evans call a "fifthless arpeggio" ⁽⁷⁾ (Example 31a) - a reminder of the bells which accompany the voice of God at the end of *Noye's Fludde* (figure 111),

and where, also, the interval of the third dominates the melodic shape.

Ex 31a

Slow recitative

GOD SPEAKETH

pp

ALTO

TENOR

PIANO

pp

A - bra - ham! My servant A - bra - ham,

A - bra - ham! My servant A - bra - ham,

pp

clearly

clearly

p

A. Take I - saac, ... thy son by name, That thou lov - est the best of all, ...

T. Take I - saac, ... thy son by name, That thou lov - est the best of all,

p

marked

marked

mp

A. ... And in sa - cri - fice of - fer him to me

T. ... And in sa - cri - fice of - fer him to me

mp

Canticle II : Abraham and Isaac is essentially a parable about obedience and sacrifice - though not the ritual sacrifice of Isaac. Rather is it the sacrifice in obedience to God's will of that which is most greatly treasured. It is this 'theme' of sacrifice which links the work with *Billy Budd* (written in 1951, a year before this *Canticle*), in which sacrifice is made

to duty and the law when Vere reluctantly condemns Billy Budd to death, despite his own personal inclination to save him.

Musical and thematic links exist between *Canticle II* and the *War Requiem* of 1961; in the latter work Abraham's personal sacrifice is raised to a universal level in the slaughter of "half the seed of Europe". But the significant factor leading to this slaughter of the youth of Europe in the First World War is the denial of the redemptive power of God which Wilfred Owen's words make so clear. The horrific consequences of Man's denial of the love of God are made abundantly clear in Britten's setting of Owen's version of the Abraham and Isaac story. It is introduced by a direct reference to the "fifthless arpeggio" which introduces the voice of God in the *Canticle*. The tenor and baritone soloists link to form the voice of God - in Owen's version "an angel ... out of heav'n" (Example 31b), before going on to play out the roles of Isaac and Abraham.

In response to God's command the Abraham of the *Canticle* prepares, without question, to carry out the sacrifice of his son - "Lord, to Thee is mine intent/Ever to be obedient". Abraham's eventual revelation to the boy that he is to be the sacrifice is made intensely harrowing by the boy's innocent trust in his father and the belief that the sacrifice which they are preparing will be of the traditional animal. Britten's swaying 6/8 melody adds enormously to the poignancy of Isaac's innocent words (Example 31c), and this same motif is used for the liturgical passage in the *War Requiem* - 'Quam olim Abrahae promisisti', where the irony of words and music takes on an even greater significance in the light of Owen's twist to the biblical story.

Only at the moment of Abraham's announcement "I must thee kill" does the gentle tread of the music burst into an agitated piano accompaniment which reflecting the anguish of the parent who, in obedience to God, must resist

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Fl
Ob
Cl in A
Bsn
Hn in F
Perc BD
Harp
TENOR SOLO
Bar solo
VII
VI II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

74 Slow recitative
(Lento, recitativo)

Gong (soft stick)

When lo!

an an-gel -

74 Slow recitative
(Lento, recitativo)

p cold
p cold
p cold
p cold
p cold
actual sound
(open harmonics on D & A strgs)

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Perc
Harp.
T. solo
Bar solo
VI. I
VI. II
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

Gong

called him out of heav'n, Say-ing -

Lay not thy hand up-on the lad,

called him out of heav'n, Say-ing -

Lay not thy hand up-on the lad,

p
pp

the pleas for mercy of his beloved son, imploring him in such phrases as "For I am but a child. Would God my mother were with me!" Even more poignant is the child's simple acceptance of his fate when he learns that it is commanded by God. He questions his father no more, but simply asks his blessing. Only the piano part makes one final protest at this affront to humanity, quickly sinking to its low A flat below the coldly obedient recitative of Abraham as he prepares for the sacrifice (Example 31d).

Ex 31c

HERE ISAAC SPEAKETH TO HIS FATHER, AND TAKETH A BUNDLE OF STICKS AND HEARETH AFTER HIS FATHER.

pp

A. Fa-ther, I am all rea - - - - - dy.

T. thing. *always p* This woo-dō do on thy

T. back it bring, We may no lon - - - - - ger a -

Ex 31d

The musical score for Example 31d consists of two systems. The first system is a piano introduction in D-flat major, featuring a rising scale in the right hand and a rocking bass line in the left hand. The second system is a vocal recitative for the Tenor (T.), marked 'p simply' and 'dim.'. The lyrics are: 'Come hi-ther, my child, thou art so sweet, Thou must be bound both hands and'. Above the vocal line, the text reads: 'HENCE ISAAC RISETH AND COMETH TO HIS FATHER, AND HE TAKETH HIM, AND BINDETH AND LAYETH HIM ON THE ALTAR TO SACRIFICE HIM, AND SAITH:'. The piano accompaniment for the second system is marked 'pp' and features a rocking bass line. The score ends with a double bar line and an asterisk.

In anticipation of his death Isaac begins his gentle farewell to his father - 'Father, do with me as you will'; again, it is made unbearably poignant by the simple lullaby music in the key of D flat major founded on a rocking bass sequence of D flat and A flat (Example 31e). Here the music clearly relates to the 'Billy in the Darbies' soliloquy in *Billy Budd*, and to the rocking 'Let us sleep now' at the end of the *War Requiem* (and the related 'Dormi nunc, amice' towards the end of *Cantata Misericordium*). After some sixteen bars Abraham joins in a duet whose music continues to draw its melodic outline from the duet for the preparation of the sacrifice (Example 31c), but now the father and son instead have become sacrificer and sacrificed - but still united in their common duty to the God whom they obey without question. Only as the very moment of sacrifice arrives is resolution threatened. The drama is played out in the piano part, with its intense funeral march. As the fatal blow is about to be struck the piano issues a thunder clap and there follows the opening E flat major "fifthless arpeggio" and the participants are assumed into the voice of God. Following the sacrifice of the lamb the two singers become commentators on the lesson of the parable, the rising scale figure of their duet again reminding us of the preparation of the sacrifice (Example 31c), but now the music is in 'God's key' of E flat.

Ex 31e

Quietly and gently
pp smoothly

A. Fa - - ther, do with me as you... will, I must o -
T. feet.

A. - bey, and that is..... skill, Go - des com-mand - ment to.....
T. ful - fil, For needs so it must be. *pp*
I - saac, I - saac,

A. *p* Fa - - ther, greet well my bre - thren....
T. bles - sed..... must thou be. *p*

The parable of *Canticle II* teaches that when Man puts his trust totally in God, God's mercy is total. *Canticle III : Still falls the Rain* is another parable about sacrifice, but now it is the Christian sacrifice of Christ for Man. The work, for tenor, horn and piano, was written in 1954, and is a setting of words by Edith Sitwell from *The Canticle of the Rose*. The Canticle bears the subtitle 'The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn'. Sitwell's poem draws its imagery from Christ's Passion in order to assert God's continuing presence in the world, despite Man's continuously sinful actions. In contrast with the theme of the second Canticle, Man reveals no potential to relieve Christ's suffering in the way that God relieved Abraham's anguish. Peace and redemption are found at the end of the third Canticle because, we are powerfully reminded, God constantly renews His sacrifice for Man - 'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee', and Britten's synthesis of the sounds of voice and the horn at this point is an important link with the similar treatment of the two solo voices in the second Canticle to create the voice of God.

The third Canticle was completed shortly after the first performance, in Venice, of *The Turn of the Screw*. It shares with that opera a very clear structural link in the shared theme-and-variation structure. Arnold Whittall says that the Canticle shows "a return to Christian imagery and ideals after the God-less horrors of the opera".⁽⁸⁾ Certainly there can be no doubt of the Christian symbolism of the Canticle, and there is also no doubt that the 'spirituality' which pervades *The Turn of the Screw* is of a Satanic kind: Goodness is oppressed by the pervasive sense of evil, exemplified by such incidents as the chilling distortion of the canticle *Benedicite* by the children in Act II, scene 2. In the Canticle the redemptive, forgiving God is seen to overcome evil, but in terms of the costliness of the Crucifixion. If, as Michael Kennedy says, *Abraham and Isaac* is to be seen as "a second epilogue to the greatest of his [Britten's] secular parables [Billy Budd]",⁽⁹⁾ then *Still falls the Rain* is surely a Christian epilogue to *The Turn of the Screw*.

In the third Canticle the horn partners the tenor singer as joint soloists accompanied by the piano, and their joint solo role is emphasised by the manner in which they combine in the final section (Variation VI) to expound the moral of the work in a combination which links it to the opening section of *Canticle II : Abraham and Isaac* when the two solo voices are effectively merged to create the third voice, that of God. It is only at this point that the two disparate elements in the Canticle are drawn together - a unification in the all-loving God. In the choice of poetry Britten departed from his own practice by choosing verses by a living poet, and the ecstatic nature of the quotation from Marlowe links the Canticle to *Canticle I : My Beloved is Mine* and looks forward to the final *Canticle V : The Death of St Narcissus*. In all three the mystical element of religious practice is fully present.

The solo tenor performs a series of declamatory recitatives which are unified by the phrase 'Still falls the rain' (Example 32a), while the piano accompaniment offers an echo of the preceding interlude. The interludes for piano and horn are developments of the 'Theme' which forms the opening section of the work (Example 32b).

Ex 32a

VERSE I
Free recitative* (♩ = about 72)

Voice

Still falls..... the.... Rain -..... Dark..... as the world of..... man,

To the memory of Noel Newton-Wood

Ex 32b

Canticle III

Still falls the Rain

* Words by
EDITH SITWELL

The Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn

Music by
BENJAMIN BRITTEN
Op. 55

THEME

Slow and distant (♩ = 48)

The musical score is arranged in three systems. The first system includes a Tenor part (treble clef) and a Piano part (grand staff). The Tenor part is marked 'TENOR' and 'Slow and distant (♩ = 48)'. The Piano part is marked 'PIANO' and 'pp heavily'. The second system includes a Horn part (bass clef) and a Piano part. The Horn part is marked 'HORN (Actual notes)' and 'ppp'. The Piano part is marked 'cresc.' and 'mf'. The third system includes a Horn part (bass clef) and a Piano part. The Horn part is marked 'Horn' and 'pp'. The Piano part is marked 'dim.' and 'p dim.'. The score is written in 4/4 time and features various musical notations including dynamics (ppp, mf, pp, cresc., dim.), articulation (accents, slurs), and fingerings.

The horn 'Theme' is limited at either extremity by B flat (as A sharp in bar 12) and it is B flat which provides the chief point of tonal reference in the work - the 'God-centre' on which the final consolation is intoned (Example 32c), as well as the thirdless chord against which each of the tenor recitatives begins.

Ex 32c

clearly (always p)

Voice: 'Still do I love, still shed my in - nocent light, my Blood, for thee.'

Horn: (p) (always p)

Piano: pp (p)

*
Aldeburgh. Nov. 27. 1954

If the B flat tonality provides the reassuring 'God-centre' of the work, and its final resolution, there are moments of great passion when the tonality strays far from this tonal centre. Nowhere is this more noticeably true than in Verse IV, where the evocation of the suffering crucified Christ, followed by the long melisma of the pleading 'mercy', is a reminder of the pleading Kyrie and the Agnus Dei of the *Missa Brevis*. It is significant that this melisma includes the highest note (top G) which the singer is required to sing in the whole work (Example 32d), while the piano has a series of chorale-like chords.

Sitwell's imagery of the Cross and the blood of Christ has something of the quality of the Jesuit *Spiritual Exercises*, and Michael Kennedy talks of Britten "in a hair-shirt, flagellating his soul on behalf of suffering humanity. The result is uncomfortable ... " (10) Such a view misses the point of the final line and its musical and spiritual resolution. Peter Evans is much closer to the spirit of the work which, for him, "remains among Britten's

supreme imaginative feats in its adaptation of abstract compositional
(11)
procedures to specifically expressive ends".

Ex 32d



It was seventeen years before Britten returned to his Canticale form to describe an extended setting. *Canticale IV : Journey of the Magi* was written during January 1971 and was given its first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival in that year. This was Britten's first setting of the poetry of T.S.Eliot, and it might be supposed that he had 'discovered' Eliot for the first time when he set *Journey of the Magi*. Donald Mitchell quotes a passage from Britten's diary for 5 January 1936 which makes it clear that there was, in fact, a long-standing appreciation of Eliot -

"Listen to a fine broadcast of T.S.Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* ... this is a fine play ... & moving poetry ..." (12)

Mitchell goes on to say that it was typical of Britten that he should wait such a long time before setting any of Eliot's poetry, and that *Journey of the Magi* was a poem which he had long had in mind to set "but he did not attempt the setting until he felt himself ready to take on the challenge the
(13)
Eliot's language represented".

At first sight Britten's decision to set the work for three voices - counter-tenor, tenor and baritone - seems an obvious representation of the three Magi. But the choice poses a number of problems since, unlike *Abraham*

and Isaac, the words are not a dramatic narrative, but the recollections of one of the Magi after the event. Peter Evans comments, a little critically, that Britten's method "leads at times to some prolixity".⁽¹⁴⁾ There is certainly a great deal more word repetition in this setting than is usually found in Britten's settings, the cue being taken, perhaps, from Eliot's own repetition

'And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This:'

If this is Britten's point of departure it does not, in the view of Peter Evans, justify itself -

"But if innumerable other words and phrases are repeated by the composer, then the force of the poet's sparing use of the device is much reduced; and in the instance of Eliot's tersest statement (one not free of a certain self-conscious laconism) - 'It was (you may say) satisfactory' - it can be argued that his point is altogether abandoned when the final word of the phrase is echoed by the singers some eight times." ⁽¹⁵⁾

Evans goes on, however, to concede that Britten was creating a new work of art composed "out of the resonances which the word sets up in the mind",⁽¹⁶⁾ and that the melodic shape of the much-repeated 'satisfactory' is part of the plainsong *Magi videntes stellam* which, at this point, is introduced into the piano part - the only explicit reference to the Christian aspect of the story which has a decidedly ambiguous attitude to the religious dimension in the original poem, and in the earlier musical setting. (See also Chapter 6, pages 63 - 66, above.) But from the moment of the appearance of the plainsong, late in the work, its presence is never far from the listener's consciousness, and the understanding is that this dimly understood birth has a significance which Britten's music makes more certain than Eliot's poem. But uncertainty remains in the half absorbed plainsong of the Magi's 'There was a Birth, certainly' (Example 33a). Eliot gives the impression that after the expectation with which the Magi embarked on their arduous journey they sank into a sense of uncertainty when they returned 'to our places, these Kingdoms'; only their lack of

ease 'in the old dispensation' gives a hint that a world-changing event has taken place. Britten's piano introduction to the brief final section of the work recalls the opening of the work with the semitonal clashes which express the confusion in the minds of the Magi (Example 33b). Britten's piano coda, based on the plainsong melody, leaves us with the final assurance of faith (Example 13c).

Ex 33a

solemn
p cresc.

p cresc.

sustained

cresc.

C-T. There was a Birth, — cer-tain-ly, We had e - vi-dence and no doubt.

T. There was a Birth, — cer-tain-ly, We had e - vi-dence and no doubt.

B. There was a Birth, — cer-tain-ly, We had e - vi-dence and no doubt.

solemn

p

(p)

f

f

f

ff

ff

always cresc.

always cresc.

always cresc.

C-T. — I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were dif - fer - ent;

T. — I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were dif - fer - ent;

B. — I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were dif - fer - ent;

ff

f

f

ff

Ex 33b

Tempo I

Tempo I (heavy)

pp smooth

C.T. We re - turned to our pla - ces, these King - doms

pp smooth

T. We re - turned to our pla - ces, these King - doms

pp smooth

B. We re - turned to our pla - ces, these King - doms

We re - turned to our pla - ces, these King - doms

C.T. King - doms, But no lon - ger at ease here, in the

T. King - doms, But no lon - ger at ease here, in the

B. King - doms, But no lon - ger at ease here, in the

King - doms, But no lon - ger at ease here, in the

Britten's final Canticle was written in July 1974, and was the first, newly composed work of the St Martin's Summer of his creativity which followed the major heart surgery he had undergone in 1973. For Canticle V : *The Death of Saint Narcissus* he again set a poem by T.S.Eliot. Britten's choice of this early, and in many ways unrepresentative, poem has struck some commentators as strange. Lyndall Gordon has called it a poem which (17) "expresses a savage joy in pain"; Peter Evans says it "appears lacerating". (18) It is known that the poetry of Eliot was of particular importance to Britten during his final years, and Donald Mitchell has said that "one of the few poets he was able to read after the heart operation was Eliot, in whose work (19) he found certainty, strength and fortitude".

The work was written in memory of William Plomer, the librettist of *Gloriana* and the Church Parables. It is scored for solo tenor and harp and so returns to the simple requirements of the first Canticle after the more elaborate needs of the middle three Canticles. In the fifth Canticle the piano accompaniment is replaced by the harp - a direct result of Britten's operation which left him unable to play the piano himself. The use of the harp reflected the important role which Osian Ellis had assumed as Peter Pears's accompanist after Britten's illness, and the admiration in which the composer held the performer.

The mood of Eliot's poem is, like the Sitwell poem of the second Canticle, one of ecstatic mysticism which is so often characteristic of paintings of St Sebastian enduring his martyrdom with a look of beatific serenity on his face. Arnold Whittall quotes Lyndall Gordon's observations -

"Like St Sebastian, St Narcissus represents an idea. He is not a realistic character and, of course, Eliot cannot be identified with him. But take away the caricature of twisted motives and excessive egotism and the poem reveals the consuming issues of Eliot's life - his longing for metamorphosis, his vision and loss of vision, and the avidity of his religious emotions" (20)

If, beneath the ecstatic mask with which Narcissus confronts his death, there is a genuinely God-orientated being - a 'dancer before God' - it is reasonable to assume that Britten accepted the concept, and that the "certainty, strength and fortitude" which Donald Mitchell talks of had a definite spiritual dimension.

In his survey of the works written during the last few years of Britten's life, Peter Evans traces the 'theme' of death through some of the representative works,⁽²¹⁾ and the motif reaches a sort of climax in *Death in Venice*, with the seed of destruction being wholly contained within the character of Aschenbach - "The death, spiritual as much as physical, which its ravages bring about offers no redemptive gleam within or outside the dramatic context; the abyss is man's destiny ..."⁽²²⁾ Evans goes on to talk of the "fortitude of spirit that enabled Britten to complete this merciless work under the shadow of his own serious illness".⁽²³⁾ If Britten . was fully aware of the precarious nature of his own health when he wrote the opera, the suffering of Aschenbach must, indeed, have had a profound effect upon him. The Christian would view as a period of spiritual grace the period following the heart surgery when Britten was able to return to creative work - a time to come to terms with the death which he now knew would come sooner rather than later. Peter Pears has said that when the end came Britten was "not in any terror of dying I don't think that he really had any particular conviction of what was going to happen after that, but he was certainly not afraid of dying".⁽²⁴⁾

The works which he wrote in that last period of his life after the operation are an important means of perceiving Britten's spiritual approach to his own end - an end which he contemplated without fear and, so far as Bishop Leslie Brown has been able to say, in faith (see Chapter 3, page 21, above).

Of the works written in the last three years of Britten's life, Peter Evans says that in pieces like the *Suite on English Folk Tunes* and *A Birthday Hansel*, he "triumphantly disregarded" the shadow of approaching death; in other works the shadow is confronted with a reassurance which is to be seen in the *Third String Quartet* and *Canticle V : The Death of Saint Narcissus*. In many ways the quartet is a summing up of Britten's musical methods, and its fifth movement is a 'recollection in tranquility' of his beloved Venice; but the work is not a signing off in any final sense - the last bars lack a conclusion and the music seems to continue into infinity, even though we are no longer able to hear it (Example 34).

Ex 34

120

pp

124

rall.

mf

rf

pp

pp cresc

mf

rf

pp dying away

SuHolk - Venice
October/November 1975

In similar fashion there is a remarkable sense of acceptance and understanding in such works as *Sacred and Profane*, *Phaedra* and the final Canticle; all are shadowed by the presence of death but remarkably free of hysteria. Britten's stoical approach reminds us of the words of Wilfred Owen, which he included in the *War Requiem* -

'Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;'

Like Owen's soldier, like Billy Budd, like Aschenbach, Narcissus embraces death with calm acceptance, and the carefully controlled musical structure is an ideal partner to the subtleties of the poem.

In his description of this "extraordinarily concentrated" piece Arnold Whittall points out that Britten exploits the resonances of the harp to "enhance the ambiguous harmonic possibilities of 'unrelated' triads which coalesce around a single note".⁽²⁵⁾ The use of semitonal conflict is very common in Britten's music, and it is used in the piano introduction of *Canticle IV : Journey of the Magi* (see page 128, above); in the final Canticle the tension is created by the superimposed triads of C sharp minor and C major, which Whittall has noted and the shared E natural is the single note around which they coalesce (Example 35).

Ex 35

The musical score for Example 35 consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line (VOICE) and a harp accompaniment (HARP). The vocal line is in 4/4 time, marked 'With movement (♩ = 72-80)' and 'p'. The harp accompaniment is in 4/4 time, marked 'p' and 'warm'. The lyrics are: 'Come un-der the sha-dow'. The second system continues the vocal line and harp accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time, marked 'p'. The harp accompaniment is in 4/4 time, marked 'p'. The lyrics are: 'of this gray rock-'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Although the C major triad makes a strong bid for tonal ascendancy - especially in the second and in the final sections - it is the "single note", E natural, which exercises the strongest influence in the piece and holds the clue to spiritual peace - and it is the note on which the singer finally comes to rest, the note on which the harp finally resolves - and the safe haven to which the singer flies at many points during the course of the work.

The Canticle is quite brief, but its emotional and musical range are considerable. St Narcissus might be seen as just another of Britten's tragic victims - innocence is certainly persecuted - but the allegory of Christ's death is clear; 'He could not live men's ways, but became a dancer before God'; and if a redemptive purpose is not always clear for some of Britten's other 'victims', it is clearly present here. Peter Evans has said of the work -

"The last canticle is as moving as any of the set, and many words could be expended on our emotional reactions to it. As ever, it succeeds not only because Britten was able to share the poet's vision, but because he encompassed it in a musical organism of perfect aptitude". (26)

All five Canticles are united by their common concern with spiritual and moral issues, and by the relatively small demands of their scoring. But far from being an isolated group they have important links with the Church Parables, written in the 1960s, and, as has already been shown, with the operas and *Saint Nicolas*, *Noye's Fludde* and the *War Requiem*. Another work which provides a link in the succession of 'moralities' is the *Cantata Misericordium*, written in 1963, eighteen months after the completion of the *War Requiem*.

The work was composed for the centenary of the International Red Cross. It is a setting of a Latin text by Patrick Wilkinson based on the parable

of the Good Samaritan, and is scored for chamber forces: string orchestra, string quartet, tenor and baritone soloists, harp, piano and percussion. The larger instrumental resources, by comparison with the Canticles, and the choral framework of the action, clearly foreshadow the Church Parables; at the same time the choice of the New Testament parable "links the miracle-play theme of *Noye's Fludde* with the biblical material of the second and third parables".⁽²⁷⁾ A further link between the cantata and *Canticle IV : Journey of the Magi*, all three Church Parables and *Death in Venice* is represented by the theme of travelling, which Arnold Whittall has noted as a familiar one in Britten's later works.⁽²⁸⁾

In attempting to identify the particular moral theme of the cantata Eric Roseberry says that "Compassion is a theme to which Britten has constantly returned and it is the theme of this cantata".⁽²⁹⁾ Such a view underplays the Christian nature of the compassion - the fact that Christ himself related the parable (St Luke's Gospel, Chapter 10, verses 30 - 37). Roseberry makes this understatement of the Christian implications of the work more explicit when he says that it is framed by a prologue and epilogue "pointing the moral in terms sufficiently general to avoid a specifically Christian interpretation".⁽³⁰⁾ Roseberry's purpose is probably to suggest that the work has a multi-cultural and a multi-faith theme, but a reading of the introduction to the parable would be very difficult in anything other than Christian terms.

CANTATA MISERICORDIUM

CHORUS

Beati misericordes.
Beati qui dolore corporis afflictis succurrunt
Audite vocem Romani:

TENOR

'Deus est mortali iuvare mortalem'.

CHORUS

Audite vocem Iudaei:

BARYTONUS

'Proximum tuum, sicut te ipsum, ama'.

TENOR ET BARYTONUS

At proximus meus quis est?

CHORUS

Iesu parabola iam nobis fiat fabula.

CHORUS

Blessed are the merciful.
Blessed are those who succour the afflicted in body
Hear the voice of a Roman

TENOR

'For man to love man is God'.

CHORUS

Hear the voice of a Jew

BARITONE

'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'

TENOR AND BARITONE

But who is my neighbour?

CHORUS

Let us enact now a parable of Jesus

Cantata Misericordium was Britten's first choral work after the *War Requiem*, and many commentators have seen it as an epilogue to that work, rather as *Canticle II : Abraham and Isaac* has been seen as having a relationship with the preceding opera, *Billy Budd*. Quite obviously the special partnership between tenor and baritone soloists links the two works, and the passage 'Dormi, nunc, amice' is reminiscent of the haunting 'Let us sleep now' of the reconciled soldiers in the *War Requiem*. But in the cantata the anger and violence of war (and the divine wrath of Dies Irae) are absent: it is not the violence of the attack on the traveller which is decried; the emphasis is on healing and reconciliation. The use of Latin might, on a superficial level, appear to link the work with the Latin text of the *Missa pro defunctis*; but here the use of Latin is a means of avoiding any particular national slant to the work rather than a desire to suggest the language of the Universal Church - though the ultimate purpose and result are the same. A more significant contrast with the *War Requiem* (and one which is wholly consistent with the pacific nature of the subject) is that the tension-creating tritone which pervades the *War Requiem* is, in the cantata, supplanted by the more spiritual interval (as in the 'fifthless' arpeggios of the second *Canticle*) of the third; but the superimposition of thirds in the opening 'beati' of the chorus shows the tension-creating possibilities which are exploited throughout the work (Example 36.).

CORO

S. *mf* *f* *pp*
Be-a-ti, Be-a-ti mi-se-ri-cor-des,
p
A. *mf* *f*
Be-a-ti, Be-a-ti mi-se-ri-cor-des,
p
T. *f*
Be-a-ti, Be-a-ti mi-se-ri-cor-des,
p
B. *f*
Be-a-ti Be-a-ti mi-se-ri-cor-des,
p

The cantata begins with a relatively brief contrapuntal passage for string quartet, using a motif in its ascending form and in inversion, which embraces the pleading motto of the work (Example 35b). The quartet motif is used, in a slightly varied form, on a further three occasions during the work to mark the passage of time between appearances of the three passers-by. The string motif leads directly to the beatitude, which is given utterance by, the chorus, establishing its role as the 'moral commentary' both in the opening prologue and throughout the piece. It is the framing prologue and epilogue, with its 'message', which links the work with *The Rape of Lucretia*, while the framing of the action also brings to mind *A Ceremony of Carols* and the Church Parables.

The moral crux of the work is summed up in the words of the chorus -

'Morbus gliscit, Mars incedit, fames late superat;
Sed mortales, alter quando alterum sic sublevat,
E dolore procreata caritas consociat.'

('Disease is spreading, war is stalking, famine reigns far and wide. But when one mortal relieves another like this, charity springing from pain unites them') -

but the powerful music which condemns the 'Dure sacerdos' has familiar echoes in Britten's disdain for the vicar in *Winter Words* (see Chapter 6, page 81, above), and in the withering words of Owen in the *War Requiem* -

'Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.'

at the end of the work, however, one is left not with the sense of a campaigning and sermonizing piece; the virtues of charity and mercy are supreme, and in the memory there remains the gentle 'sleep' motif of the tenor soloist pronouncing a benediction which has a strong affinity to the gently swaying 'Envoi' of the second Canticle.

References :

- 1 Words of W.H.Auden quoted in *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 25
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 133
- 4 *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 25
- 5 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 187
- 6 *Benjamin Britten: a Commentary on his works from a group of specialists* - ed. Mitchell and Keller; p. 72
- 7 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 405
- 8 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 162
- 9 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 201
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 212
- 11 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 410
- 12 *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 13
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 13-14
- 14 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 411
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Eliot's Early Years* - Lyndall Gordon; p. 62
- 18 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 414
- 19 *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 13
- 20 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 272
- 21 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 414
- 22 *Ibid.* p. 415
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p. 144
- 25 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 273
- 26 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 418
- 27 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 208
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Sleeve note by Eric Roseberry for Argo recording of *Cantata Misericordium* ; The Decca Recording Co Ltd, 1965, SXL 6175
- 30 *Ibid.*

Chapter 9

PARABLE MUSIC II

Cantata Misericordium is a biblical parable which ends with a clear spiritual 'message'; in this the work has a close relationship with the three Church Parables, the first of which (*Curlew River*) was written in the early months of 1964 - less than a year after the completion of the cantata. Like the cantata, the Church Parables are set between a framing introduction and epilogue, in which the moral and spiritual 'message' is expounded - respectively Faith, Hope and Love. Robin Holloway finds this sequence "a little laboured", since he believes that *Curlew River* embodies all three qualities. He goes on to suggest that "if the three parables have a common theme it is the drabest stoicism: make do, knuckle under, hold fast, carry your burden, forgive and forget, dutifully kill the fatted calf".⁽¹⁾ To take such a view of the works is to completely ignore the Christian ethic which is undoubtedly at the heart of the Parables, as it is the inspiration for *Cantata Misericordium*. The nature of the Christian approach is quite obviously coloured by Britten's own background (see Chapter 5): it may be too austere for Holloway's tastes but it is, nevertheless, Christian.

The three Church Parables were received by many people as a strange and new manifestation of Britten's genius; they saw a special indication in the composer's own Foreword, in which he talked of the "tremendous impression" made upon him by the Japanese Nō-drama he had experienced during his visit to the Far East between November 1955 and March 1956.⁽²⁾ It is quite certain that the experience did exercise a profound and formative influence on the Church Parables - and on much of the composer's other music - but some of the techniques, and notably the use of heterophony, have been seen

to exist in Britten's music before the Japanese and Balinese experiences of 1955/56. Those earlier manifestations of the *gamelan* tradition have usually been attributed to Britten's encounter, while living in America, with the composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee (see Chapter 7, pages 89 and 93, above). McPhee had transcribed some Balinese music for two-piano performance (see Example 23b, page 93, above) and Britten had performed, and recorded, this music while in America. The influence of the *gamelan* is strongly present in Britten's first opera, *Paul Bunyan* - notably in the Prologue and 'Look at the Moon!'. David Matthews has pointed out the Balinese influence in Interlude III ('Sunday Morning') in *Peter Grimes* ⁽³⁾ as another example of the initial McPhee influence, and other examples have been pointed out in previous chapters of the present thesis.

The Far East tour was, therefore, an opportunity for Britten to renew and to intensify his experience of a musical culture which had already exercised a hold over his imagination. Now he was able to experience the *gamelan* music at first hand, and he made copious notes about its scales, instrumentation and rhythmic textures. From Ubud he wrote enthusiastically to Imogen Holst "The music is *fantastically* rich - melodically, rhythmically, texture (such *orchestration!!*) and above all *formally*. It's a remarkable culture At last I'm beginning to catch on to the technique, but it's about as complicated as Schönberg". ⁽⁴⁾ The renewed musical impetus of the *gamelan* technique exercised an immediate influence in works such as the ballet score *The Prince of the Pagodas*, written soon after Britten's return from the Far East, in 1956 - notably in Act II, scene ii. The percussion effects in *Noye's Fludde*, written in 1957, also have an obvious origin in the Balinese visit.

The outcome of the Japanese Nō-play experience required a rather longer period of gestation, and it was not until the first of the Church Parables was written in 1964 that it came to full fruit. Britten had written

much earlier to William Plomer (librettist for *Gloriana*), who had lived in Japan, talking of the dramatic possibilities of the Nō-drama. Detailed discussions followed, and by November 1958 Plomer had produced the text for an opera based on the *Sumidagawa* of Juro Motomasa (1395-1431), the play which so much excited Britten when he had seen it in Japan. Imogen Holst has written that the play "made a tremendous impression on Britten. The economy of the style, the slowness of the action and the strange mixture of chanting and singing were an entirely new 'operatic' experience". (5)

In the early stages of the discussion between composer and librettist Britten was anxious to preserve the Japanese model as far as possible, but further discussions during 1959 led to a radical change in the libretto. In 1958 *Noye's Fludde* had received its first performance during the Aldeburgh Festival at Orford Church. The event clearly prompted discussions about a possible venue for the performance of the planned work based on the Nō-play. Britten wrote to Plomer of the discussions which he and Pears had been having in a letter to Plomer dated 15 April 1959, he set out his 'pros' and 'cons' for a major change in the libretto, and his explicit wish that the work become a piece unequivocally set in the Christian tradition -

"Pros. The little bits of Zen-Buddhism, which don't mean much to me could be replaced by something which does." (6)

Once the Christian framework of the play had been agreed - and performance planned in Orford Church - it is not surprising that Britten chose to set the work in the manner of the medieval mystery play, a form which he had set with conspicuous success in *Noye's Fludde* in 1957. Nevertheless, the work was to retain a great deal of the influence of the Nō-play in the simplicity of its set, the highly stylised movements of the characters, the all-male cast and the very economical use of instrumental accompaniment without conductor. Britten wrote of the transformation from Japan to medieval England in a Foreword to the score, dated 1964 -

"The memory of this play [*Sumidagawa*] has seldom left my mind in the years since [his visit to Japan]. Was there not something - many things - to be learnt from it? The solemn dedication and skill of the performers were a lesson to any singer or actor of any country and any language. Was it not possible to use just such a story - the simple one of a demented mother seeking her lost child - with an English background (for there was no question in any case of a pastiche from the ancient Japanese)? Surely the Medieval Religious Drama in England would have made a comparable setting - an all-male cast of ecclesiastics - a simple austere staging in a church - a very limited instrumental accompaniment - a moral story? And so we come from *Sumidagawa* to *Curlew River* and a Church in the Fens, but with the same story story and similar characters; and whereas in Tokyo the music was the ancient Japanese jealously preserved by successive generations, here I have started the work with that wonderful plainsong hymn 'Te lucis ante terminum', and from it the whole piece may be said to have grown." (7)

The translation from ancient Japanese convention to medieval Christian drama was effected with remarkable smoothness, and the monastic setting made the all-male casting a perfectly natural convention. The richness of the instrumental textures removes any possible risk of tedium from the unrelieved male voices, and the treble voice of the Spirit of the dead boy in *Curlew River* stands in sharp relief to the texture of the mens' voices: the link with the resurrected Pickled Boys of *Saint Nicolas* is unmistakable. The Christian nature of the drama is conveyed at the very start of the 'ceremony' by the use of the plainsong hymn 'Te lucis ante terminum' - "that wonderful plainsong hymn" which is rarely far from the listener's consciousness throughout the first Church Parable. The use of the hymn as a procession and recession to prepare and frame the action is a linking motif among all three Church Parables, and also a clear link with a much earlier work, *A Ceremony of Carols*. The setting in a medieval church in the Fens clearly reflects Britten's awareness of the heritage of East Anglian churches and his love of exploring those fine buildings on his 'church crawls'. While planning the work he wrote to William Plomer "... we might get a very strong atmosphere (which I personally love) if we set it in pre-conquest East Anglia (where there were shrines galore)". (8)

Although the planning for *Curlew River* was taking place in the late 1950s the work itself was delayed by other compositions, particularly the *War Requiem*, *Cantata Misericordium* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. Work on *Curlew River* was resumed in 1963 and the piece was completed on Maundy Thursday 1964. Both *Curlew River* and the third Church Parable - *The Prodigal Son* - were largely written during visits to Venice and the influence of the resonant Venetian basilicas is intermingled with that of the Balinese gamelan, the ancient plainsong of the Church and the atmosphere of the medieval miracle plays, to produce works which are both remarkably original and which contain a universal moral and spiritual 'message'.

At the beginning of *Curlew River* the performers, the Abbot with his company of monks, acolytes and instrumentalists, process to the performing area singing all three verses of the Compline hymn, 'Te lucis ante terminum' (Example 37a).

Ex 37a

Slow (Lento)

ALL VOICES

1. Te lú-cis an-te tér-mi-num, Ré-rumCre-á-tor, pó-sci-mus, Ut pro tú-a cle-mén-ti-a,
 2. Pro-cul re - cédant sómni - a, Et nó-c-ti - um phantás-ma-ta: Ho-stém-que nó-strum cómpri-me,
 3. Præsta, Pá - ter pi - is-si-me, Pa-trí-que cómpar Ú-ni-ce, Cum Spí-ri-tu Pa - rá-clí - to,

dim. and rall.

All Voices

1 Sis præsul et cu - stó - di - a. A - - men.
 2. Ne pol - lu - - an-tur cór-po-ra.
 3. Régnans per ó-mne sée-cu-lum.

This plainsong melody is not merely a convenient means of creating a mood of medieval piety for the work which is to follow; it is the source, like the plainsong melodies used at the beginning of each of the two subsequent parables, "in rhythmic and intervallic character, if not in mode or timbre, of much of the works' materials".⁽⁹⁾ But in no sense is this marvellously moulded work a medieval pastiche: plainsong, the highly stylised movements of the Nō players, the orchestral economy and colour and the heterophonic techniques of the *gamelan*, and the English miracle play, are all drawn together to create a new form through which Britten could pursue his aim of achieving maximum effect with maximum economy - as Peter Pears has said of the Parables, they are Britten's "reductio ad coelum".⁽¹⁰⁾

In addition to providing important melodic and rhythmic resources for the work as a whole, the Compline hymn contains, in its second verse, an echo of the drama which is enacted in the Parable -

Procul recedant somnia,	(From all ill dreams defend our eyes,
Et noctium phantasmata:	From nightly fears and fantasies;
Hostemque nostrum comprime,	Tread under foot our ghostly foe,
Ne polluantur corpora.	That no pollution we may know.)

'Fears and fantasies' there certainly are, represented by the dementia of the Madwoman and the way in which she is mocked. Divine grace restores the woman's sanity, and this same grace is implored in the hymn for protection against evil.

After the 'authentic' Amen closes the singing of the hymn a further two Amens lift the tonality through minor third transitions and prepare the ear for the extensions of the plainsong melody which are such a significant feature of the melodic - and by use of the heterophonic technique, the harmonic - evolution of the whole work. The minor third of these transitions is a prominent feature of the plainsong melody and the interval is recalled melodically throughout the piece (Example 37b).

Ex 37b

dim. and rall.

All Voices

1. Sis práesul et cu - stó - di - a. A - - men. A - - men.

2. Ne pol - lu - an - tur cór - po - ra.

3. Régnans per ó - mne sáe - cu - lum.

P

MONKS only (without Basses)

dim.

Tenor Solo

Monks

A - - - - - men.

[1]

At the conclusion of the hymn the shift from vocal monody to the exotic colours of the instrumental group is made via the ecclesiastical sounds of the organ, while its cluster chord and the accompanying drum beat give the first taste of the *gamelan* sounds which overtake and absorb the plainsong for the enacted parable. The cluster chords of the organ remind one of the similar methods employed for the accompaniment of the boys' choir in the *War Requiem*, and they have a relationship with the manual chords in the solitary work for solo organ - *Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria* - which Britten wrote for St Matthew's Church, Northampton in 1946. Against this wash of organ and drum sound the Abbot explains the nature of the succeeding drama, his melodic lines closely linked to the plainsong tune - exactly so when he sings of God's grace (Example 37c).

Ex 37c

[2] [5']

Abbot

How in sad mischance
Wie in bitt'-rer Not

A sign was gi-ven of God's grace.
Ein Zei-chen kam von Got-tes Gna-de.

MONKS (in unison) *pp*
MONCHE

A sign of God's grace
Ein Zei-chen der Gna-de.

Organ

Drums

At the conclusion of his introduction the Abbot exhorts the congregation to 'pray for the souls of all that fall By the wayside, all alone'. His exhortation is echoed, metaphorically and literally, by the attendant monks in a complex use of heterophony (Example 37d), which was probably inspired by Britten's listening to the singing of the monks in San Giorgio in Venice: the blurring effect of the resonance on a single melodic line in a reverberant basilica has a similar effect to this random alignment of vocal lines, producing a random harmony which is one of the most novel features of Britten's technique in the Church Parables.

Ex 37d 4 *lively* They exhort the congregation.
(*vivace*) *Sie rufen die Gemeinde auf.*
f sust.

The musical score for Example 37d is a page from a musical manuscript. It features five vocal parts: Abbot, Tenors, Baritone, Basses, and Organ/Drums. The lyrics are in English and German. The score illustrates heterophony with staggered vocal entries. The Abbot's part begins with a melodic line, followed by the Tenors, Baritone, and Basses, each entering at different points. The Organ and Drums provide a rhythmic accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'O pray for the souls of all that fall By the way-side, all a lone -' and 'O be - tet für See - len, die am Weg - Ein - sam ster - ben oh - ne Freund'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *sust.*, and *ff*.

In his discussion of Britten's use of heterophonic treatment of monody in *Curlew River*, Peter Evans talks of "that renunciation of harmony as a primary phenomenon which is so arresting a feature" of the work.

"It is rather like beginning again from monody, and creating a new role for harmony: that plainsong should have suggested this role will not surprise anyone who has heard it sung in a large resonant church, for there the line is supported upon

a mass of reverberations from earlier notes. Thus we hear monody transformed into a species of polyphony - one that Western music chose not to pursue very far." (11)

In a remarkable way Britten manages, in the Church Parables, to draw together the tradition of the Far East with the tradition of the early Church and to bind the two influences from much earlier stages in his life: a clear example of Donald Mitchell's view of this 'peculiarly thematic composer', whose "concerns, commitments, attitudes and sources of stimulation have been his long-standing preoccupations and which are variously reflected in his art". (12)

The Abbot's address to the congregation/audience is followed by an instrumental interlude which has the practical purpose of providing a period for the performers to put on their costumes and masks for the dramatic presentation. The interlude also serves to frame the parable and to separate it from the 'reality' of the opening. This triple framework of procession, address and interlude are repeated in reverse order at the end of the parable. The interlude is firmly based on the plainsong melody, treated heterophonically, and it serves to carry the melody into the heart of the parable. The influence of this melody is never far distant, though it does not again appear in its pure form until the repeat of the hymn for the recession. The melody is most prominently felt at moments when the Christian significance of the parable is touched upon, such as the Traveller's prayer for all wayfarers (Example 37e).

Ex 37e

Traveller

expressive

May God pre - serve way - far - ing men!
Be - schü - tze Gott die Wan - d'r'er all!

May God pre - serve way - far - ing
Be - schü - tze Gott die Wan - d'r'er

Instr.

Hn. f

Harp Via

Drums

148

The Ferryman's later recollection of the boy's prayer - Kyrie eleison - also makes use of the plainsong melody (Example 37f). Britten's use of one of the most ancient Christian prayers for mercy and forgiveness recalls the incantation of the animals as they enter the Ark in *Noye's Fludde* and it foreshadows the church scene in *Death in Venice* at the point where Aschenbach's obsession with the boy has completely overtaken him.

Ex 37f

131 *p* 65

Ferryman

He spoke these words calmly, like a man. Then he said a prayer: "Ky - ri - e — e -

Er sprach dies ganz ru - hig, wie ein Mann. Dann be - le - te er:

Organ *p* *ppp*

Inst. *dim.* *pp(clearly)*

Harp

Ferryman

- le - i - son! Ky - ri - e — e - le - i - son!" And then he died. —
 TRAVELLER, ABBOT and CHORUS Und er starb —
 REISENDER, ABT und CHOR

ppp (132)

Ky - ri - e — e - le - i - son! Ky - ri - e — e - le - i - son!

Organ

Harp

The Ferryman's recall of the boy's prayer for mercy is anticipated by his own prayer for mercy as he sets sail for the journey across the river, and again the plainsong of the processional hymn is prominent, for this prayer, like Kyrie eleison, is at the heart of this parable about God's grace. The plainsong melody is present in the interlude music for the hoisting of the sail and is always present in the organ accompaniment to the Ferryman's narrative during the journey.

The influence of the plainsong casts a generally benign feeling over this work, but such chromatic lines as the horn motif create a sense of tension in its association with the Ferryman and the dangers of journeying across the river. The tension is also conveyed in the agitated music for the flute and the its associated character, the Madwoman, whose demented leaping phrases include the tritone (A - D sharp) which is present in so many of Britten's works. In the *War Requiem* the tritone, C - F sharp, is a pervading presence which ultimately resolves into the striking F major resolution in the final bar: in *Curlew River* the agitated augmented fourth finds peace in the arrival at the grave of the dead boy and the prayer for his eternal rest (Example (36g); the Madwoman's tension had been in not knowing the fate of her lost son, and the sight of his grave has released the tension, if not the grief, of his loss. The Madwoman's duet with her alter ego, the flute, which follows the arrival at the grave, is poignant with the grief of loss, but it is no longer clouded with madness. Michael Kennedy describes this section as (13)

"perhaps the most inspired example of the creative impulse from plainchant".

Ferryman *f* That his young soul may rest in peace, — We all can pray. — May Heav'n re-ceive — it!
Daß sei-ne Seel' in Frie-den ru - - he, Be - ten wir. — Der Himmel emphan - - ge sie!

Traveller *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

Abbot *dim.* grave of your young child. — That his soul may rest in peace, We all can pray. —
jun - gen Kin-des Grab. — Sei-ne Seel' in Frie-den ru - he, Be-ten wir. —

S. T. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. — *dim* That his soul may rest in peace
Dies ist dei-nen jun - - gen Kin-des Grab. — 'Sei-ne Seel' in Frieden ru -

U. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

R. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

O. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

Bt. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

H. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

C. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

B. *mf* This is the grave of your young child. —
Dies ist dei-nen jun - gen Kin-des Grab. —

I. N. S. T. *f* *mf dim* *mf dim.*

Drums *dim* *(mf)* *(P)*

At the conclusion of the Madwoman's lament the mourning bell signals the transition from dementia to conventional grief. This is the first use of the bells which, from this point, signify the crux of the parable - and which are a very distinct link with the Far Eastern tradition. It is interesting to speculate that as the plainsong and the resonances of the Roman Catholic ritual are so evident in this work, the ringing of bells to announce the central climax of the drama could be linked to the ringing of the Sanctus bell at the moment of Consecration in the Mass. From this point the participants in the drama cease to be mere spectators of the *Madwoman's pilgrimage* and become sharers in her grief, offering a note of consolation in the singing of the hymn 'Custodes hominum'. The hymn is the liturgical 'parable' within the parable, and its position is reminiscent of the interpolated liturgical moments in *Peter Grimes*, and the scene inside St Mark's in *Death in Venice*, as well as the somewhat perverted Benedicite in *The Turn of the Screw*. But in the first Church Parable the purpose is quite different, for it is a subtly conceived extra dimension to the human parable: a commentary on the heavenly state of the lost boy. The hymn 'Custodes hominum' is the Office hymn for Vespers on the feast of the Guardian Angels (2 October). Its choice is an obvious reference to the fate of the boy and to the healing nature which his Spirit has on the demented mother. The hymn is found in *Liber Hymnarius* (Solemmes, 1983) (Example 37h).

AD VESPERAS

H.III
C Ustódes hóminum psállimus ánge-
 gi-li quos Pater áddi-dit cæ-léstis cómi-tes, insi-di-ánti-
 bus ne succúmbe-ret hó-stibus. 2. Nam quod corrú-e-rit
 pródi-tor ángelus, concéssis mé-ri-to pulsus honó-ribus, ar-
 dens inví-di-a péllere ní-ti-tur quos cælo De-us ádvo-
 cat. 3. Huc, custos, í-gi-tur pérvigil ádvola, avértens pá-
 tri-a de tibi crédi-ta tam morbos ánimi quam requi-é-
 scere quicquid non si-nit incolas. 4. Sanctæ sit Trí-a-di-
 laus pi-a iúgi-ter, cuius perpé-tu-o númine máchina
 triplex hæc ré-gi-tur, cuius in ómni-a regnat gló-ri-
 a sæcu-la. A-men.

The predominantly white-note music of this section is disrupted by the intrusion of the flute's D sharp, at figure 89, heralding a final frenzied outburst from the Madwoman. The hymn continues undisturbed and at the reference to the Holy Trinity ('Sanctae sit Triadi'), the treble voice of the Spirit of the Boy is heard from beyond the grave; the new tone colour of the boy's voice has a transforming effect on the music and eventually halts the majestic tread of the hymn. At figure 94 the Spirit of the Boy manifests itself, represented, again, by a new tone colour - appropriately, the piccolo. The Spirit returns to the grave and its distant voice pronounces a benediction on the mother, and promises reunion in Heaven. The simple plainsong inflections of the vocal line are those of a priest in blessing and the voice is accompanied only by the 'ecclesiastical' sounds of the organ. Only at this point is the mother completely freed of her madness, and the collective Amens signal the end of the drama.

The instrumental interlude follows immediately on the final Amen and leads to the Abbot's brief summary of the nature of the parable. The lesson is that prayer and grace may heal the fallen and he offers praise to God 'that lifteth up The fallen, the lost, the least; The hope He gives, and His grace that heals'. And so 'In hope, in peace, ends our mystery'. The performers withdraw from the stage area, singing again the Compline hymn.

Curlew River is a remarkable work by any standards for the way in which Britten imposes strict limits on his resources and then triumphantly overcomes the apparent difficulties of such restrictions and turns them to advantage. Peter Evans says that its "renunciation of so many well-tried methods ... is unique among Britten's work"; and that although he was to find many further applications of techniques "he first practised in

Curlew River, none was to recreate the dreamlike suspension of time and the hermetic world of feeling which characterize that work".⁽¹⁴⁾ The work is a remarkable example of the way in which Britten's style evolved as a synthesis of the various important influences in his career - a fusion of the ancient traditions of East and West, which produced, in the *Church Parables*, works whose moral purpose is firmly rooted in the Christian tradition.

The second Church Parable - *The Burning Fiery Furnace* - was completed in 1966. While it follows the formula of *Curlew River*, the source of the story is now biblical, though as an Old Testament story, it is still part of the function of the 'parable' to point out the Christian significance of the story. In comparing the work to the first Church Parable Michael Kennedy says that it "has more direct action, more humour and a score in which the distinctive voice of the alto trombone plays a role as significant as that of the flute [in *Curlew River*]".⁽¹⁵⁾ In his Foreword to the libretto William Plomer says that the success of *Curlew River*

"and the experience gained from it have enabled the composer to allow himself, in this second 'parable', a greater freedom and richness of texture within the prescribed limits... It is directly based upon the familiar Biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, which is to be found in the third chapter of the Book of Daniel. It may be felt that in this version the character of Nebuchadnezzar, the cult of 'the god of gold'. and the resistance movement - ultimately triumphant - of the three young Jewish exiles are not without some relation to our own times".⁽¹⁶⁾

As in *Curlew River*, a plainsong hymn is the melodic source of much of the work's thematic material - in this case 'Salus aeterna' (see Chapter 6, page 62, above). The hymn is to be found in English translation in *The English Hymnal* number 10, where it is one of the hymns for

Advent. Two passages link the Christian hymn 'frame' with the Old Testament story upon which the 'parable' is to be based -

'To lost ones and perishing
Gavest thou thy free deliverance,
Filling all the world with joy.

O Christ, our souls and bodies cleanse
By thy perfect sacrifice;

Robin Holloway has considerable reservations about the appropriateness of Britten's further use of the parable formula after the success of *Curlew River*, though he does find something new to admire in the developed use of the instruments in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* -

"... glorious fun with the 'cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music'. By far the best thing in the work is the march inspired by this list of instruments, and there is hardly a better instance in all Britten of his delight in gratifying our desire for a half-expected surprise than the moment when the players transport the delectable little invention all round the church". (17)

The liturgical crux of the drama, which in *Curlew River* was provided by the hymn 'Custodes hominum', is provided by a setting of the Benedicite which Holloway considers to be a "doleful vision of the age of gold".⁽¹⁸⁾ That is not a view shared by Michael Kennedy, for whom to hear "the final Benedicite in the gathering darkness of a noble church or cathedral is to participate in a musical experience of rare spiritual force".⁽¹⁹⁾ Undoubtedly the strong presence of the interval of the fourth which pervades the Benedicite, and which is a significant feature of the processional/recessional plainsong hymn, gives to this section a strong scent of medieval Christianity in its organum-like textures, and provides a sympathetic preparation for the Abbot's exposition of the 'parable' : 'Good people, we have shown you here The burning trial of faith'.

According to the artist John Piper (a close friend of Britten from the time of their first collaboration in 1932), Britten drew inspiration for *The Burning Fiery Furnace* from a capital in Autun Cathedral which was known and loved by both of them.⁽²⁰⁾ If the inspiration for the second Church Parable did owe something to the visual arts, there is even more evidence that the third Church Parable drew its inspiration from another work of art (see Chapter 3, page 20). Britten spent the Christmas of 1966 in Russia, where he visited the Hermitage museum in Leningrad, and was greatly moved by Rembrandt's picture *Prodigal Son*. The subject was to be the theme of the third Church Parable.

The Prodigal Son was written in the Spring of 1968 and work on it was started during another visit to Venice, and despite the serious illness which disrupted the writing of the work, it was completed in time for its first performance in June 1968 during the Aldeburgh Festival. The instrumentation is the same as for *Curlew River*, with the addition of a trumpet. While the first Church Parable reinterpreted an ancient Japanese story in Christian terms, and the second drew on an Old Testament story from which a Christian parable could be drawn, the final Parable came full circle by drawing its story from the New Testament (St Luke, Chapter 15, verses 11 - 32).

Critical opinion regarding the wisdom of writing a third work within the strict confines of the form which Britten prescribed in *Curlew River* has been varied. Robin Holloway says that by the time Britten wrote the third Church Parable "the sense of genre has become distinctly dutiful, and the musical impulse tired";⁽²¹⁾ Michael Kennedy is less direct, but suggests that "it might have been wiser not to add a third to the well-contrasted two Parables".⁽²²⁾ Peter Evans also acknowledges the difficulty "of reaching beyond uniformity",⁽²³⁾ but he perceives what is so easily overlooked in these works: the uniformity is a deliberately consistent part

of the stylisation retained by Britten from the Nō-play model which had inspired the Church Parables; that stylisation served to throw into sharp relief the most economical points of tonal, vocal and dramatic contrast. The treble voice of the Spirit in *Curlew River*; the pagan sounds of the alto trombone in *The Burning Fiery Furnace*; the D trumpet which expresses all the worldly pursuits against which *The Prodigal Son* warns, are all examples of the subtle means employed in the Parables. The touches are carefully judged, and Britten - appropriately in a form whose purpose is to highlight the moral message, rather than leave the observer with an over-strong sense of the 'story' - avoids elaboration of 'realistic' details which would be essential in 'secular' opera.

The dramatic and musical starting point in all three Church Parables is the plainsong processional hymn; in the third Parable the hymn is 'Jam lucis orto sidere' (see Chapter 6, pages 49-50), the Office Hymn for the monastic service of Prime (translated in *The English Hymnal* number 254). Here, as in the other Church Parables, the hymn is significant for the spiritual implications of its words, as well as the more obvious musical potential of the hymn tune. At the end of the work the Abbot expounds the familiar moral message of the parable -

'More joy shall be in heaven
Over one repenting sinner
Than over ninety-nine
With nothing to repent.'

But the hymn adds a further dimension in its admonition to avoid self-righteousness -

'Would keep our inmost conscience pure;
Our souls from folly would secure;
Would bid us check the pride of sense
With due and holy abstinence.'

At the end of each Church Parable the Abbot summarises its moral lesson, but it is the plainsong hymn which summarises both the musical and spiritual point of the piece. In this final Parable the plainsong provides a second, inner frame; in addition to the processions, it encloses the central drama within the

drama which shows the dissolute behaviour of the Younger Son when he travels to the city. In all three Parables the plainsong melody symbolises the spiritual sure ground towards which the 'parable' beckons. The 'message' is expounded clearly on two levels in the Parables: the Abbot's summary and the more subtle plainsong summary. But there is also a third level of summary: the 'liturgical' one provided by the hymn 'Custodes hominum' in *Curlew River*, the Benedicite in *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, and Cantate Domino in *The Prodigal Son*. The liturgical interpolation in each of the Church Parables refers the drama to the enclosing religious ceremony: it also defines another of those threads of continuity in Britten's music whereby the liturgy is present in works as diverse as *Our Hunting Fathers*, *Peter Grimes*, *Saint Nicolas* and *Death in Venice*, and in the litany-like Threnody in *Albert Herring*.

Britten's three Church Parables were the main 'operatic' products of the 1960s; their form was inspired by the Far East experiences of the mid-1950s, and their music was the logical outcome of the gamelan interest which first came to him in the early 1940s. In purely practical terms the form allowed him to exploit the acoustic and atmospheric properties of Orford Church which had made it the ideal venue for *Noye's Fludde*, and which provided a radically different venue from the Aldeburgh Jubilee Hall for operatic works in the Festival. On a musical level the Parables allowed Britten to achieve the ultimate paring away of all but the most essential elements in music and drama, and this in itself was part of a 'thematic' process which originated in the practical necessities of creating music for films in the 1930s with the smallest instrumental resources. The process continued through the chamber orchestration in several of the operas, and reached the summit of economy in the Parables.

Following *The Prodigal Son*, Britten's next 'parable' based on traditional or biblical spirituality took the form of another Cantic - *Journey of the Magi* - written in 1971 (see 'Parable Music I' above). By way of a postscript to the Church Parables, and providing a link with his next opera, *Owen Wingrave*, Britten wrote a work whose 'parable' was drawn from contemporary sources, in the same way that the *War Requiem* cried out against the twentieth century phenomenon of mass slaughter in war, and *Owen Wingrave* demolished the myths which propped up the notion that to fight for one's country was unquestionably honourable. The work - *Children's Crusade* - was completed on 10 November 1968, written to mark the 50th Anniversary of The Save the Children Fund, and first performed in St Paul's Cathedral on 19 May 1969. The work is a setting of an English translation (by Hans Keller) of a text by Bertolt Brecht, the "heartrending ballad of the wandering band of lost children in the first icy winter of the last war". (24)

The work is a secular 'parable' of the type which Britten wrote in the 1930s (such as *Our Hunting Fathers*, *Advance Democracy* and *Ballad of Heroes*). But the framed structure (like that of the Church Parables) takes us through a journey of experience and moral discovery leading to a summing-up in which, like the Church Parables, the 'message' is made explicit. Unlike the Church Parables the consolation of Faith, Hope and Charity are not sufficient in themselves: this twentieth century parable is too immediate and too brutal to eschew the human pathos of the situation. But it is not an entirely secular piece in the manner of the protest works of the 1930s, and although *Children's Crusade* is a powerful political statement of protest, the reflective interlude, 'So there was Faith and Hope too,/But no meat or bread', admits the Christian dynamic into the parable, even though the sinfulness of Man is here almost overwhelming. One should not be surprised that Britten's political statements of the 1960s looked beyond the purely human dynamic in the control of the affairs of men and nations,

in marked contrast with the political statements of the 1930s and the notion that the will of Man needs only to be directed aright in order to restore sanity and order. The post-war attitudes were seared by the knowledge that political idealism was not, on its own, a sufficient force to overcome the evils in the world. Fascism had been defeated by war, not by political argument, and it was now supplanted, as a threatening force, by the ideology of Communism. The teaching of the Gospels is never far from Britten's music from the 1940s until the end of his life: he was clearly aware that Man's potential for good needs spiritual support.

References :

- 1 *The Britten Companion* - ed. Christopher Palmer; p.223
- 2 Libretto printed in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* - ed. David Herbert
- 3 *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes* - ed. Philip Brett; p.122
- 4 *Britten* - Imogen Holst; p. 58
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 59
- 6 Letter from Britten to William Plomer, quoted in PhD thesis *Benjamin Britten : Death in Venice* - John Evans (University of Wales, 1983)
- 7 Introduction to libretto printed in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* - ed. David Herbert
- 8 Letter from Britten to William Plomer, quoted in PhD thesis by John Evans (see note 6, above)
- 9 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p.211
- 10 See Chapter 6, page 63
- 11 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 469
- 12 *The Britten Companion* - ed. Christopher Palmer; p.211
- 13 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 234
- 14 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p.480
- 15 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 234
- 16 Introduction to libretto printed in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* - ed. David Herbert
- 17 *The Britten Companion* - ed. Christopher Palmer; p. 221
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 235
- 20 Information in letter from John Piper, 31 August 1984. According to Colin Graham the inspiration came from a sculpture in Chartres Cathedral (*The Operas of Benjamin Britten* - ed. David Herbert; p. 49)
- 21 *The Britten Companion* - Christopher Palmer; p. 221
- 22 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 237
- 23 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 490
- 24 Britten's own words quoted in *Britten* - Imogen Holst; p. 81

Chapter 10

PARABLE MUSIC III

"*Peter Grimes* has passed into history it was the opera with which Britten began his self-appointed task of forging and establishing an English operatic idiom. He succeeded, but two ingredients were indispensable to that success: technique and the discovery of a spiritual *leitmotiv*." (1)

No one would challenge the notion that all Britten's operas have a 'message': in that sense they are all Morality plays in the tradition of the Chester Miracle Plays from which he drew *Canticle II : Abraham and Isaac* and *Noye's Fludde*, and from which he was to draw the libretto for the Christmas sequence on which he was working at the end of his life. But it would be wrong to suggest that the 'message' is always Christian, except in so far as the Christian tradition does encompass many of the moral concerns which are manifest in the operas.

In the opinion of Michael Kennedy, Britten's "*leitmotiv* took the form of a parable". (2) Kennedy sees the motif as being significant in humanist terms - the popularly held view of Britten's obsession with the corruption of innocence. Philip Brett sees the motif in terms of the composer's sexuality. But if Donald Mitchell is correct in seeing a remarkable consistency in Britten's themes "concerns, commitments, attitudes and sources of stimulation", (3) it is right to expect that the Christian nature of Britten's spiritual concerns, as seen in the Canticles, the Church Parables and the other works intended for church performance, will also be perceptible at times in the operas.

In many respects the opera *Peter Grimes* gives a clear exposition of those concerns with which Britten engaged throughout his life. Philip Brett has seen the 'message' principally in terms of homosexual allegory, (4)

but it is possible to interpret the work in a much wider and inclusive rather than exclusive, context (see Chapter 5, above). *Peter Grimes* is not a Christian parable - there is no apparent redemption - but it is a moral parable, and the parable has Christian implications and a strong Christian undertone.

If the Christian message in *Peter Grimes* is veiled, it is quite explicit in the opera which followed it. *The Rape of Lucretia*, written in 1946 (and revised in 1947), is in many respects markedly different from *Peter Grimes*. For practical reasons Britten wrote for chamber forces, imposing a solo, as well as ensemble, role on the members of the orchestra. The extreme economy of the instrumental writing, the distinctive role given to the harp, the 'framing' of the action by the Male and Female Chorus, and - most distinctly - the exposition of the Christian 'parable' in the Epilogue, all point towards the Church Parables of the 1960s. This Christian commentary on a pre-Christian story brought questions and criticism from some commentators when the work first appeared, but for Britten it was something quite natural and he was puzzled by the criticisms (see Preface, page iv, above).

Britten's next opera, *Albert Herring*, was first performed in June 1947. The instrumentation was the same as for *The Rape of Lucretia*, and like that opera it received its first performance in the intimate setting of the opera house at Glyndebourne. As in *Peter Grimes*, the opera was set in East Anglia, on Britten's home ground. The moral message (despite the generally humorous nature of the work) is very close to the sentiments of *Peter Grimes* : that innocence becomes corrupted; that the greater the innocence the greater is the sense of rejection felt by the fallen. But this is not a moralizing work: the mood is comic and the orchestration witty and brilliant. The moral is allowed to speak for itself to those with the

sensitivity to see it, and it is the more poignant for that.

In *Peter Grimes* the Established Church was portrayed as a social centre for the community, rather than a potent force for Christian evangelism: the Vicar in *Albert Herring* is cast in a similarly innocuous role. The list of Characters describes him as 'Vicar of St Mary's Church. Amiable, forty-fiveish and easygoing' - a damning description! Britten's parodying of the respectable village worthies in *Albert Herring* is always gentle and very 'English' - "The Vicar ... is given a mixture compounded of Victorian hymn-tune and of folk-song as it might be arranged by Vaughan Williams".⁽⁵⁾ The nine-part Threnody in Act III begins as another parody of Anglicanism - a sort of psalm chant - but the poignancy of the situation (the assumed loss of Albert) overtakes the parody to produce genuine pathos - a glorious moment of contrast in this brilliantly comic opera.

Britten began the composition of *Billy Budd* in 1950, but the project was first discussed with the joint librettists, E.M.Forster and Eric Crozier, in 1948. The work was completed in the autumn of 1951, and received its first performance on 1 December 1951. It was revised from four acts to two in 1960. The opera marked Britten's return to the use of the large orchestral forces of *Peter Grimes* after the chamber operas of the intervening period; the all-male cast foreshadows the scoring of the Church Parables.

There are other anticipations of the Church Parables in this opera: the framing Prologue and Epilogue are a reminder of *The Rape of Lucretia*, but they are also the predecessors of the 'frames' of the Church Parables; and the soliloquy of Captain Vere, portrayed as an old and troubled man recalling the tragic story, has a similar purpose to that of the Abbot in the Church Parables who expounds the moral 'message' of the works. *Billy*

Budd is undoubtedly one of Britten's most potent 'parables'.

The opera deals with profound relationships between men, yet it is not primarily a story about homosexuality - though there are strong homosexual overtones. The appearance of the impressed man, Billy Budd, on the *Indomitable* causes a good deal of interest. He is assigned to duties which he finds congenial and is immediately popular with his fellow crewmen. There are homosexual connotations to the nicknames given to Billy Budd by Dansker - first Baby, and when Billy objects, Beauty. The first sense of the evil Claggart's perverted attraction to Billy is conveyed by his command to Squeak to 'Keep an eye on that man' : there is instant fascination, and probably a sub-conscious recognition that the gulf between them can never be bridged in terms of a human relationship, and so fascination must be replaced by jealousy and enmity. Following the brawl, instigated by the quisling Squeak, Claggart's true and corrupt motives are revealed in a soliloquy which makes his perverted love quite obvious, and which almost turns him into a figure for whom one feels compassion -

'O beauty, O handsomeness, goodness! Would that I
lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which
I was born. There I found peace of a sort, there I established
an order such as reigns in Hell.'

From this point the Christian symbolism in the story becomes increasingly clear. Claggart's phrase '.... the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers' is a direct reference to St John's Gospel (Chapter I, verse 5) - 'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not'. The twisting of the end of the phrase is symbolic of the twisted logic of Claggart which compels him to plot the destruction of that which he would love: 'If love still lives and grows strong where I cannot enter, what hope is there in my own dark world for me?'

This soliloquy marks the start of the central drama of the opera. As Claggart vows to destroy Billy his accomplice, the Novice, appears,

prepared to perform the role of Judas in this conspiracy. Claggart concocts a charge of inciting mutiny against Billy Budd and brings the matter before Captain Vere. Exasperated by the charge made by Claggart, Billy Budd's stammer becomes uncontrollable and in frustration at his inability to answer the charge he lashes out at Claggart, and with an unlucky blow kills him. The distraught Captain Vere is a witness to the event; his duty overcomes his personal inclinations, and he orders that a drum-head court be immediately convened. The verdict of the court goes against Billy - there is no doubt that he did kill Claggart and there could be no other verdict. Captain Vere must summon all his sense of duty and honour in order to condemn to death this man who is loved by the crew, and also by Vere himself. Billy accepts the verdict philosophically. In his farewell aria Billy tells of the visit of the chaplain who has told him the story of Christ's crucifixion. The child-like recollection of this story (the only specifically Christian reference in the work) makes Billy's unsophisticated goodness the more poignant as he accepts his own fate while feeling compassion for Captain Vere - 'Chaplain's been here and good his story, of the good boy hung and gone to glory, hung for the likes of me. But I had to strike down that Jemmy Legs - it's fate. And Captain Vere has had to strike me down - Fate.'

As Billy goes to his death his final words are of blessing on the captain - 'Starry Vere, God bless you!' As Vere reflects on the incident in the Epilogue the Christian significance of Billy's sacrifice in terms of Vere's redemption are made clear -

'O what have I done? But he has saved me, and blessed me,
and the love that passes understanding has come to me.
I was lost on the infinite sea, but I've sighted a
sail in the storm, the far-shining sail, and I'm content.'

The Christian nature of the sense of blessing is strengthened by the obvious reference to the words of the blessing at the end of the Holy Communion

service in the Book of Common Prayer - 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding' : the same words of blessing to which Bishop Brown refers (see Chapter 3, page 21). The Epilogue brings the whole story back to a universal human level: the 'parable' was acted out on the detached 'stage' of the ship at sea, just as the central action of the Church Parables is acted out in a highly stylised fashion on an actual stage which is also deliberately stylised in order to make the symbolic significance of the action the more clear.

The writing of a major opera without the contrasting possibilities offered by female voices was a considerable challenge to Britten. He chose to use a large orchestra, but he used it in a way which avoided the danger of swamping the lower voices, and there is no doubt that the experience which he gained in writing for chamber resources in *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* helped to overcome the problems. The music has, on the whole, greater subtlety than that of *Peter Grimes* and a great sense of the bleakness of life at sea, as well as the evil against which Billy stands, as exemplified by the personality of Claggart. Despite the large size of his orchestra Britten avoids sonorous tutti writing and prefers the soloistic use of separate sections of the orchestra. Erwin Stein points out that "woodwind and brass predominate over strings; their colours seem to fit the character of the opera well".⁽⁶⁾

The opposing elements of good and evil which are central to this 'parable' are expressed from the start of the Prologue by the struggle between B flat and B natural (Example 38a).

Ex 38a



This struggle between B flat and B natural is soon revealed to be more than a simple melodic clash: rather is it a fundamental opposition between harmonies of B flat major and B minor. The tonal opposition reasserts itself at the beginning of Act II of the opera. At first the B flat major tonality is opposed by G major, but the initial B flat major/B minor struggle returns to represent the sea mist, and the confusion of Vere. The hanging scene takes place in the remote key of E. In the Epilogue the B flat major/B minor struggle is worked out anew. Only when Vere sings the lines 'I was lost on the infinite sea' to music which was part of Billy Budd's final aria, is the tonal struggle finally resolved onto B flat major.

The creation of tension by the juxtaposition of chords and harmonies whose roots are a semitone apart is a common feature of Britten's harmonic language: nowhere is it more effectively wedded to the mood of a work than in this opera, where conflict between English and French in conventional warfare, enmity and jealousy between individual men, and above all, the struggle between good and evil are portrayed. The ultimate tonal resolution is not the dramatic healing of all ills, it is the offering of a vision of peace which Vere glimpses in the Epilogue, and it ends still very much in this world rather than the next, for the opposing B minor is not far away even at the end of the work (Example 38b).

There can be no doubt about the fundamental theme in *Billy Budd* - the conflict between good and evil. But not all would see the resolution in terms of Christian allegory. Arnold Whittall views the *dénouement* in terms of pacifism rather than Christianity; (7) though Michael Kennedy is unequivocal in seeing a work where the Christian implications are so clear as to have no need for underlining in the manner of *The Rape of Lucretia*. He observes that Billy is sentenced by a man who does not believe him guilty (a Pontius Pilate figure); he sees that "his vigil before execution suggests Gethsemane" and that Billy's call to Vere from the scaffold is the equivalent of 'Father, (8) forgive them'.

Ex 38b

(♩ = 69)

Vere

f

I am an

ff Tutti *poco a poco dim.*

dim.

old man now, and my mind can go back in peace ...

sempre più p

..... to that far - a - way sum - mer of sev - en - teen hundred and nine - ty - seven, ...

freely

..... long a - go, now, years a - go, cen - tu - ries a -

ppp completely dying away

SLOW CURTAIN

- go, when I, Edward Fair-fax Vere, commanded the In - dom it - a - ble

(*ff*)

End of Opera

Britten's next opera after *Billy Budd* was the Coronation opera *Gloriana*. The work met with considerable antipathy from the Establishment members of the first-night audience, for it avoids the grandly ceremonial in order to deal, again, with conflict. This time it is the conflict between the Queen's private inclinations and her public duty: not very different from the dilemma of Captain Vere. Like Vere, Queen Elizabeth has no doubt that public duty must be paramount. Like Vere she has to destroy that which her humanity would have her love: Vere condemned Billy Budd; Elizabeth signs the death warrant for the execution of Essex, and the semitonal conflict of *Billy Budd* is recalled. The Christian element is present, exemplified by Elizabeth's prayer at the end of Act I. It clearly shows her belief in the sanctified nature of kingship, and affirms her determination to do her duty -

'But God gave me a sceptre,
The burden and the glory -
I must not lay them down:
I live and reign a virgin,
Will die in honour,
Leave a refulgent crown!'

- but the whole opera is earth-centred in worldly duty and tradition, and the sacrifice is costly in human terms, with little sense of a Christian *dénouement*.

In *The Turn of the Screw* (written in 1954) Britten moves even further away from the Christian 'parable' and becomes involved in a story where the conflict of evil and virtue is weighted heavily on the side of evil. The sense of evil builds throughout the opera until, at the end, the boy, Miles, dies - the ultimate sacrifice of innocence to evil. The precise nature of the evil is never specified: we only know that the dead Peter Quint is central to the presence of evil. The fact that the nature of the evil remains undefined is wholly consistent with the original story of Henry James. Myfanwy Piper (Britten's librettist) has said "neither Britten nor I

ever intended to interpret the work, only to re-create it for a different medium".

While it is true to say that *The Turn of the Screw* is principally concerned with the struggle of evil against innocence, and that there is here no sense of Christian redemption as there is in *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Billy Budd*, the moral struggle is set out as an acted 'parable'. The scene is set by a Prologue which begins from the point of view of, as it were, everyday life. This is the point of departure in the earlier operas, and it is part of the frame which encloses each of the Church Parables. But there is no Epilogue in *The Turn of the Screw* because there is no moral 'message' and no spiritual *dénouement*. Evil has claimed its victims and the impotence of the Church in this work is heightened by the parodied Benedicite which the two children sing in Act II, scene 2 : it does not convert a sacred text into something profane but it does turn an item of the liturgy into nothing more than a children's song. The scene immediately preceding the children's Benedicite is the colloquy of the Ghosts, when the quotation from W.B. Yeats - 'The ceremony of innocence is drowned' - sums up all that this work represents. Following such a powerful indication of the reality of the situation, the children's parodied canticle assumes a much more sinister significance.

Britten's next 'operatic' production after *The Turn of the Screw* was a complete antithesis of that work, and a reassurance that innocence was not corrupted for all time. *Noye's Fludde*, written in 1957, is a work in which the youthful innocence of children plays a crucial part. It is a work in which the Church is a vital ingredient: the source of the text (the Chester Miracle Plays), and the preferred setting for the action ("Some big building should be used, preferably a church - but not a theatre....").⁽¹⁰⁾ The relationship between this work and Britten's major 'operatic' output of the 1960s - the Church Parables - is quite

clear. The first performance was given in Orford Church, and the setting was certainly influential in Britten's decision to set the Church Parables in a medieval ecclesiastical setting in East Anglia. The action is 'framed' - not by plainsong, as in the Church Parables, but by well known and loved English hymns. Like the plainsong processions in the Church Parables, the opening hymn in *Noye's Fludde* provides thematic material with which Britten links the hymn to the following action, but it is not yet used to the extent that the plainsong melodies were to be used in the Church Parables (see Chapter 6, above). The animals process into the Ark, making their artless incantation of 'Kyrie eleison' sound like a children's ditty, but the notion of movement of this dramatic kind is foreshadowed in the movements of the Pickled Boys in *Saint Nicolas* and is recreated as the march around the church by the instrumentalists in *The Burning Fiery Furnace*.

The 'children's music' aspect of *Noye's Fludde* has often been stressed. It was, of course, written to employ a high proportion of children as performers both on the stage and in the orchestra. Only the parts of Noye, Mrs Noye and the Voice of God are played by adults, while the orchestra requires a professional string quintet, solo recorder, piano, organ and timpani, but also uses a large body of children (or amateur) players. Nevertheless, this work is more than a simple juvenile entertainment: like the Church Parables, it has its religious *dénouement* at the end of the work. The Voice of God sets the scene after the opening hymn (in the manner of the Abbot/Tempter in the Church Parables), and it is the Voice of God which concludes the 'parable' in words of forgiveness and benediction -

'My blessinge, Noye, I give thee heare,
To thee Noye, my servant deare,
For vengeance shall noe more appeare,
And nowe fare well, my darling deare.'

At the beginning of this exposition of the 'parable' by the Voice of God (figure 111), the *gamelan*-like bells add their own epilogue to this parable of God's forgiveness and grace. The bells here represent Heaven and the spiritual world in a way in which bells were again to be used to represent the appearance of the consoling Spirit of the Boy in Curlew River. At the conclusion of the words of the Voice of God, in *Noye's Fludde*, the bells continue to ring out their message of spiritual reassurance (Example 39).

Ex 39

[119] *very tenderly sehr liebevoll*

GOD'S VOICE

My blessinge, Noye, I give thee heare, To thee Noye, my servante deare,
Ich segne dich, Noah, mein guter Knecht, In Liebe, den du dienstest recht,

pp Bells

Ped. always

slowly and dying away langsam und verklingend

God's Voice

For vengeance shall noe more appeare, And nowe fare well, my darlinge deare.
Die Rache ich auf ewig acht, Und nun leb wohl, mein liebster Knecht.

dim. *ppp*

[120] Exit Noye. Noah ab.

pp cresc. Bells Orch.

with Ped.

broadening to the end

Bells, etc.

Tutti f *long*

Aldburgh, Dec 1957

Between *Noye's Fludde* and the three Church Parables which spanned the 1960s, Britten's sole operatic work was his setting of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The opera was completed on 15 April 1960 and received its first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 1960. The libretto is a masterly adaptation of the Shakespeare play by Britten and by Peter Pears. Britten wrote for chamber orchestra, but the forces are a little larger than those required for *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring*.

This glorious work stands out in sharp contrast to Britten's other operatic works. Here is no social or spiritual 'parable': Britten seeks only to recreate in musical terms the most magical of plays with music which so often justifies John Piper's view that Britten's music is not only 'parable music', but that "it is often 'miracle music' too". (11) The work is, in many ways, a summing-up of Britten's longstanding preoccupation with the themes of sleep and night. The juxtaposition of natural and supernatural are additional important ingredients in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for which the experience of *The Turn of the Screw* was a preparation.

For anyone who is able only to see Britten's operatic work in terms of homosexual allegory and the repressed feelings of the outcast this opera must be a very considerable challenge! Heterosexual love can hardly be more movingly celebrated than the duet 'I swear to thee' in Act I, or the lovers' quartet in Act III when reconciliation is validated by Britten's music.

In proper fairy tale fashion the chiming of midnight signals the end of the magical play; only the brief epilogue remains, apparently restoring the 'normal' world. But, of course, we are still in the world

of magic and make believe. The eventual realisation that we, the audience, are not part of that enchanted world is made the more poignant by the simple beauty of the benediction pronounced by Oberon, Tytania and the Fairies, to music of a Purcellian loveliness (Example 40).

Ex 40



There was a gap of ten years between the writing of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Britten's next (and penultimate) opera, *Owen Wingrave*. The work was written in 1970 in response to a commission to write an opera for television performance. The libretto was, like *The Turn of the Screw*, written by Myfanwy Piper and based on a story by Henry James. As in the earlier opera there is a large element of the supernatural in a story which is brooded over by a country house. The opera is a 'parable' for the pacifist cause, but its unrelieved sense of the oppressiveness of the family military tradition - even shared by Owen Wingrave's fiancée, Kate - leaves one feeling relief for Owen when his night in the haunted bedroom results in his own death. There is little loveliness in the life which the family lives, and little sorrow for Owen when he leaves it. This might have been Britten's definitive pacifist allegory, but the lack of a spiritual element in its *dénouement* makes it difficult to engage fully in the sentiments which are represented.

If Britten and Myfanwy Piper were less fortunate in their choice of Henry James for the source of *Owen Wingrave* than they had been in using him for the source of *The Turn of the Screw*, there can be no doubts about their wisdom in selecting Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, as the source of the final opera. The fact that Britten laboured to complete the opera while suffering the increasingly serious symptoms of heart disease, which was to lead to his premature death, has given this work a remarkable poignancy for those who have interpreted the disintegration of the artist Aschenbach as symbolic of Britten's own illness and death. In fact the opera was not Britten's last work, and though he never fully recovered from the heart surgery which he had to undergo as soon as he had completed it, the work was not prophetic of any moral or spiritual disintegration, nor should it be seen as marking his physical decline.

If the superficial links between Aschenbach and Britten are easily dispelled it is true that there are important features about this opera which are inextricably linked to Britten's life and work. Aschenbach's fatal preoccupation with Tadzio does represent a sense of Britten's life-long concern with youth - the children's music, the use of boys' voices, is part of that - but Aschenbach was not a covert pederast, and neither was Britten. In following Tadzio Aschenbach was pursuing not a real person, but an ideal of unblemished and uncorrupt humanity - an ideal which is made more potent when contrasted with the disintegrating body of Aschenbach himself. Tadzio is the idealisation of innocence with which Britten was concerned throughout his life. He could not be an emotional or sexual object because he is never directly involved in the central drama as a 'real' personality. Tadzio's very inaccessability enhances the sense of uncorrupt innocence, and his childish games make it inconceivable that he should be an object of

physical desire. To see this work in homosexual terms is as mistaken an interpretation as to see *Peter Grimes* or *Billy Budd* as homosexual allegories. Aschenbach interprets Tadzio's unspoilt beauty in terms which are, for him, to prove fatal, but this does not imply that the quest is a purely physical desire for the boy; but rather, as Arnold Whittall observes, do the "sexual and spiritual merge".⁽¹²⁾ Peter Pears's summing up of the central character is perhaps as close as one can get to a definition of the opera -

"Aschenbach asks ... what it is he has spent his life searching for. Knowledge? A lost innocence? And must the pursuit of beauty, of love, lead only to chaos? All questions Ben constantly asked himself." ⁽¹³⁾

Britten's last opera, which many regard as his greatest, was written in the knowledge that he was suffering from serious heart disease. Under this concentrating influence he wrote a work which was a summing up of many of the musical and philosophical concerns in his life. The work also provided the most demanding role for Peter Pears in what Britten knew was likely to be his last major operatic part. The role of Aschenbach is a tribute to Pears's interpretative powers and to his position in Britten's life as an *alter ego*. The freedom of Aschenbach's recitatives, noted in similar fashion to the recitatives in the Passions of Schütz, is clearly influenced by Pears's singing of the Evangelist part in the Passions, and perhaps, as Donald Mitchell has observed, here is an indication that *Death in Venice* is Britten's Passion.

The rhythmic freedom of the recitatives certainly owes much to the Schütz models, but it also owes something to the linear freedom which Britten used so fully in the Church Parables. This feature is combined with the heterophonic textures which have been noted in Chapter

6, pages 68 - 74, above. *Gamelan* textures are plainly evident in this use of heterophonic tonal conglomerates and in the characteristic use of bells. Bells are one of the many consistent 'themes' which are traced through Britten's career: after the Balinese experience of the mid-1950s they tended to be real bells - but the 'bell' motif was an important feature of the church scene in *Peter Grimes*. They are important again in *Death in Venice*, where again they punctuate a church scene. In this final opera the ritual is that of the Universal Church, while in the former opera it is the familiar parochial worship of the Church of England. In both cases it serves to show that the subject of the opera is outside the 'normal' social circle.

The 'innocents' in many of Britten's earlier works are represented by the boys' choir and by children in general. The 'innocents' in the final opera are again present; in this case they are the dancers. They do not sing, but they are always accompanied by the rich *gamelan* textures of a percussion ensemble providing a sound 'stage' which sets these people on a remote plain making them - and particularly Tadzio - unattainable. This is one of the three sound levels within which the work is set: the other two are the 'real' level of Aschenbach's recitative accompanied by the everyday sounds of the piano, and the richer orchestral sounds of the city of Venice and of the other characters in the story.

The city of Venice is, in itself, an important 'theme' in Britten's life. He is known to have loved it and to have been fascinated by the beauty of its buildings and its history, as well as having a strong sense of the poignancy of the decay which is everywhere evident in a city that has outlived the social and economic conditions for which it was created. The first and third Church Parables had been partly written in Venice, and it was in Venice, at the Teatro la Fenice, that

The Turn of the Screw had received its first performance in 1954. The last of Britten's visits to Venice took place in November 1975, only a year before he died. The strength of the influence of the place is felt in the Third String Quartet, a work written in the last year of his life and given its first performance after his death. The last movement of the quartet is entitled 'La Serenissima' and it incorporates material from *Death in Venice*. At the conclusion of the opera Aschenbach, watching the children at play, slumps dead in his chair. At the moment of his death he receives the only positive sign of recognition from Tadzio - 'a clear beckon'. Aschenbach's death is inevitable and it comes without drama or struggle. There is no clear sense of any continuity beyond this death, which passes unnoticed by the other participants in the scene. One is inevitably reminded that Britten approached his own death with calmness and acceptance and, according to Peter Pears, he had no fear of dying and no particular conviction of what might follow. ⁽¹⁴⁾ The end of the final movement of the Third String Quartet does at least suggest that Britten was not thinking of the end as a final stopping of all things (see Chapter 8, page 133, above).

The tracing of the various 'themes' and cross references in *Death in Venice* is a rich and rewarding task. Links exist with works which cover most of Britten's creative life. The *gamelan* influence in the sound textures is unmistakable, and the Nō-play influence carried over from the Church Parables in the stylised form of the movements of the boy Tadzio and his circle are just some of the indications of the cumulative nature of Britten's experience and technique. Such a musical consistency is matched by the consistency of Britten's personal, moral and spiritual concerns. Donald Mitchell has summarised an important element among those concerns -

"there is clearly a sense in which in both Billy Budd and Tadzio we witness the paradoxical enchantment and destructive power of Beauty - whereupon we realize that *Death in Venice* is not a fresh departure, but fresh evidence, rather, of a long-standing preoccupation of Britten's." (15)

The fatal beauty of Billy Budd and of Tadzio undoubtedly forms a strong link between the two operas. But Billy also represents Goodness - there is further evidence of this in the correspondence of E.M.Forster (see Chapter 12, page 199, below) - and there is no doubt that a serious consideration of *Death in Venice* reveals not an homo-erotic work, but another opera in which the conflict between good and evil, purity and corruption, is confronted.

References :

- 1 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 168
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 See note 12, Chapter 9, p. 162
- 4 *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes* - Philip Brett; Chapters 13 and 14
- 5 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 185
- 6 *Benjamin Britten: a Commentary on his works from a group of specialists* - ed. Mitchell and Keller; p. 199
- 7 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 130
- 8 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p.197
- 9 *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* - ed. David Herbert; p. 11
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 250
- 11 Letter from John Piper, 31 August 1984
- 12 *The Music of Britten and Tippett* - Arnold Whittall; p. 260
- 13 *Britten* - Christopher Headington; p.139
- 14 *Remembering Britten* - Alan Blyth; p. 23
- 15 *The Britten Companion* - ed. Christopher Palmer; p. 249

Chapter 11

PARABLE MUSIC IV

For Britten the pacifist, the folly of war was among the worst betrayals of innocence: the use of millions of young men as cannon fodder in a futile struggle which sought only to vindicate nationalist aspirations, was an overpowering evil, and the reality and poignancy of that evil was epitomised by the writing of Wilfred Owen, whose life was wasted only a few weeks before the signing of the Armistice ended the First World War. The link between Owen, the pacifist chronicler of the First World War, and Britten, resulted in the creation of the *War Requiem*, one of the most remarkable of the composer's works.

The *War Requiem* has been described by Anthony Milner as " a watershed in Britten's career".⁽¹⁾ It represents the gathering together of the experiences of Britten's life in a synthesis which is not only a combination of oratorio and song-cycle, but, in the words of Peter Evans,

"a conscious resolve on the composer's part to put the experience of his entire creative activity ... at the service of a passionate denunciation of the bestial wickedness by which man is made to take up arms against his fellow." (2)

If Britten never wrote the Christmas piece he wanted to write, as Sir Peter Pears has suggested (see Chapter 4, page 29, above), he certainly achieved in the *War Requiem* the summation of those pacifist feelings - one of the most potent 'themes' in his life - which are to be traced through his whole career. Sympathy for the pacifist cause formed a bond between Britten and Frank Bridge, and in musical terms resulted in the composition of the *Pacifist March* of 1937. It also provided the subject matter for some of the film and song music of the 1930s. These works, with the *Sinfonia da Requiem* of 1940; the *Ballad of Heroes* (written in 1939 and having, as Donald

Mitchell has pointed out, important features in the trumpet writing in the Scherzo in common with the *War Requiem*); ⁽³⁾ and later works such as the *Missa Brevis* and the second Canticle, are in Peter Evans's view, consummated in the *War Requiem*. It is significant that after this very public exposure of his deeply felt pacifist feelings, Britten followed the work with the far less demonstrative *Cantata Misericordium* (see Chapter 8, pages 135-138 above) which in turn led to the new territory of the Church Parables. It was as if Britten, having presented the vast public canvas of the *War Requiem*, felt a need to return to the intimacy of smaller forms. From the point of view of this present dissertation it is significant that the works which were written in the post-*War Requiem* period included a substantial number which had a specifically spiritual *dénouement*.

In one most important respect the *War Requiem*, as a pacifist work, differs from the pacifist pieces of the 1930s to which it is a successor: those works were purely humanist in their anti-war stance, while the *War Requiem*, by its use of the Christian ritual of the *Missa pro defunctis*, offers a vision of eternal peace which warring man can not, of himself, achieve. Just as the pacifist awareness of the futility of war is something which can be traced in many of Britten's earlier works, and has been seen to reach consummation in the *War Requiem*, so the handling of the liturgical text may be seen to have its preparation in the liturgical settings of the 1940s and especially in the *Missa Brevis* of 1959.

The *War Requiem* summarised Britten's musical and philosophical concerns in a work which had a public success achieved by relatively few new works - comparable with the remarkable acclaim with which *Peter Grimes* was received in 1945. Both works made use of large-scale orchestral resources, and in both cases Britten's succeeding works turned

away from the large orchestra. In seeking to trace the various 'themes' which run through Britten's work it is also interesting to see the links between the *War Requiem* and *Death in Venice*. Both works are unfolded on three distinct levels: in the opera there is the 'real' level of Aschenbach's monologue, the general life of Venice, and the idealized world of Tadzio and his circle; in the *War Requiem* the personal drama of the two soldiers (the tenor and the baritone soloists), the liturgical drama (the main choir and the soprano soloist), and the ethereal level of the 'distant' boys' choir. There is a further example of this three-level structure in *Saint Nicolas*: the main choir and soloist, the gallery choir, and the Pickled Boys.

The opening bars of the *War Requiem* create, in a remarkable way, the mood of a work which is to prove almost overpowering in its portrayal of the poignancy and wastefulness of war. The Introit - 'Requiem aeternam' - acknowledges the original processional nature of this part of the liturgy, but its slow and hesitant rhythm suggests the dragging of weary and unwilling feet, rather than the easy gait of the plainsong processions in *A Ceremony of Carols* and the Church Parables (Example 41a). Within the first four bars of the work this rhythmic motif combines with the 'mourning' interval on the bells (the tritone F sharp - C), to create a sense of desolation which is not fully displaced until the final resolution of the tritone onto the F major chord at the end of the work.

The tritone interval is, in fact, the most important unifying element in this work: thematic interaction and development are relatively unimportant in a work which relies to a remarkable extent on the dramatic contrasts which are made possible by the three spatial and tonal levels of the performing body, and the powerful irony which Britten points out in the tension between the liturgical text and Owen's poems. These poems are treated

Ex 41a

I. REQUIEM AETERNAM

Slow and solemn $\text{♩} = 42-46$
(Lento e solenne)

ORCHESTRA

Flutes 1.2 pp sm

Clarinet 1 in B \flat pp sm

Bass Clarinet in B \flat pp sm

Bassoons 1.2 pp sm

Double Bassoon pp sm

Horns in F 1.2 pp sm

3.4 pp sm

Trombones 1.2 pp sm

3 pp sm

Tuba ppp ppp

Timpani ppp ppp

Percussion pp Gong Bells p

Piano pp pp

CHORUS (seated)

Sopranos Requiem, Requiem aeternam,

Altos pp

Tenors Requiem, Requiem aeternam,

Basses

Slow and solemn $\text{♩} = 42-46$
(Lento e solenne)

Violin I muted pp sm

Violin II muted pp sm

Viola muted pp sm

Violoncello div muted pp sm

Doublebass muted pp sm

very much in the manner of medieval tropes, adding a vernacular commentary to the words of the liturgy. Such a use of parallel texts was common on the pre-Tridentine liturgies and may have been influential in Britten's planning of the *War Requiem*, but it is certainly not unique in twentieth century writing - Vaughan Williams's use of the device in his *Benedicite* is only one obvious example. In the *War Requiem* the strength of the confrontation between the vernacular poems and the Latin texts is a vitally important source of structural development.

The immediacy of impact of the Owen poems may well account for the manner in which this work has been judged to be primarily an anti-war document, while the spiritual significance of Britten's use of the framework of the Requiem Mass has been credited with less importance than it deserves. The liturgy does, in fact, serve a similar purpose to the framing prologue and epilogue in *The Rape of Lucretia*, and the plainsong which encloses *A Ceremony of Carols* and the Church Parables. Furthermore, the constant repetitions of 'Let us sleep now', which the reconciled enemy soldiers weave through the *In Paradisum*, serves very much to identify the 'parable' which this work presents, just as the *dénouement* of the Church Parables is presented by the Abbot at the conclusion of each of those works.

If, in the final movement, the words of Wilfred Owen are used to illuminate the liturgical text, there is, at the conclusion of the *Agnus Dei*, an example of Britten's use of the liturgical text to add potency - and a spiritual dimension - to the Owen poem. The movement ends with the tenor soloist singing the phrase 'Dona nobis pacem' (Example 41b). These words are taken from the *Agnus Dei* of the Tridentine Mass, words of prayer for the living; at this moment Britten brings all mankind into

ORCHESTRA

Cl 1,2 in B \flat *ppp*

B Cl. in B \flat *ppp*

Bsn. 1,2 *ppp*

D. Bsn. *ppp*

S. *pppp*
re - qui - em - sem - pi - ter - - nam. (m)

A. *pppp*
re - qui - em - sem - pi - ter - - nam. (m)

T. *pppp*
re - qui - em - sem - pi - ter - - nam. (m)

B. *pppp*
re - qui - em - sem - pi - ter - - nam. (m)

CHORUS

V.I. *ppp*

V.II. *ppp*

Via. *ppp*

Vc. *ppp*

Db. *ppp*

T. Solo *ppp*
Do - na - te - bis pa - - - cem

the ancient prayer for peace, and the whole work takes on a deep significance for the living as well as for the departed.

For at least one commentator, writing an introduction to the 1963 recording of the *War Requiem*, there was no doubt about the spiritual significance of Britten's decision to link Owen's poems to the liturgy of the Requiem Mass. William Plomer (the librettist for all three of the Church Parables) pointed to the masterly decision to link the two elements in the work, rather than setting the Owen poems as a cycle. Plomer observed that the theme of the poems and the liturgy is death -

"... death inseparable from grief and from guilt, death ordained by God for every man, often caused by human stupidity and cruelty, but death associated, in spite of everything, with ideas of mercy, forgiveness and peace." (4)

While acknowledging Owen's "clear disillusionment with the failure of a Christian civilisation to practise what it professes", ⁽⁵⁾ Plomer believes that Owen shows himself to be an essentially Christian person, and that the linking of his poems with the Christian rite is totally appropriate. For this synthesis Britten was responsible, and quite obviously he was aware of the potency of the combination, and of its spiritual, as well as its pacifist, dynamic. By the end of the work eternal peace is perceived and the liturgy, with its prayer for rest, is at one with the Owen poem which is woven into the *In paradisum*: both liturgy and poems have, during the course of the *War Requiem*, given us glimpses of the terror of human war, and of death and judgement, but both elements are finally submerged in the vision of peace.

An essential musical factor in the resolution of tension and conflict in the *War Requiem* is neutralisation of the tritone (see page 184, above). The strong presence of the interval, both in its melodic and its harmonic guises, makes itself felt throughout the work. An initial

hint of the ultimate resolution - and that its terms are heavenly, rather than earthly - is presented in the first entry of the distant boys' choir. The tritone 'mourning' motif, which is such a strong feature of the Introit, is transformed into a perfect fourth, offering the hope of resolution, though that resolution is not imminent: the tritone is not banished, for it frames the music of the boys, but for the moment it is not in conflict with its surroundings (Example 41c).

Ex 41c

③ Quick crotchets, ♩ 102
(*Allegro*)
f *smooth*

Te-de-cel-hy-mnus,

③ Quick crotchets, ♩ 102
(*Allegro*)
f *smooth*

hy-mnus, De-us in-Si-on

Te-de-cel-hy-mnus, hy-mnus,

④ *f*

Et-ti-bi-red-de-tur-va-lum, va-lum

De-us in-Si-on,

④ *f*

in-Je-su-se-lem

Et-ti-bi-red-de-tur-va-lum, va-lum in-Je-

③ Quick crotchets, ♩ 102
(*Allegro*)
div *pp*

At the end of the boys' 'Te decet hymnus' the tritone reasserts itself, not in the melodic line, but as the interval between the two voice parts. Resolution is not yet to be, and the living, represented by the chorus and main orchestra, continue the laboured trudge of the Introit, leading into the first of the Owen poems 'What passing bells'. Here Owen's poem personalizes the passing of those people for whom, in far more general terms, the Requiem aeternam offers intercession. The cruelty of death is made immediate in this brutal poem, but it has a brief glimpse of more gentle pathos in the lines 'Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes/ Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes', and by his incorporation of the perfect fourths of the boys' preceding 'Te decet' section Britten makes the connection between earth and heaven which, ultimately, is the only hope of peace.

At the end of this first poem the 'passing-bells' sound the tritone, and the chorus sings an unaccompanied setting of the Kyrie eleison which must rank as the most brief in any non-liturgical setting of the Mass (Example 41d). The prayer for forgiveness is totally simple and direct, and is the more powerful for that. Its third petition closes with the inexpressibly lovely resolution onto the F major chord. This resolution is used three times - at the end of the Kyrie, the Dies irae, and at the close of the work - and it is quite remarkable that it should retain, and even increase, its potency as the essential release from the emotional demands of the work.

Ex 41d

The musical score for Ex 41d is divided into two systems. The first system features a Chorus (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and Percussion (Bells). The Chorus parts are marked with 'ppp sustained' and the lyrics 'Ky - ri - e - le - i - son, Chri - ste'. The Percussion part (Bells) is marked with 'pp'. The second system continues the Chorus and Percussion parts, with the Chorus marked 'ppp dim.' and the Percussion marked 'rall.' and 'ppp'. The lyrics for the second system are 'Ky - rie e - le - i - son'.

Britten's setting of the Dies irae eschews the magisterial vision of a judgemental God which Verdi and Berlioz portray in their requiem settings. In their works the theme of terrible death and the threat of damnation are much more significant than it is in Britten's requiem. In this work Hell is the work of Man's hand and the only vision of peace which it offers must be seen in terms of the expectation of God's mercy. In this scheme of things the Dies irae is symbolic rather than prophetic: its theology is post-Reformation.

The Dies irae uses the brass instruments of majesty and awe, but their motifs are the simple melodic shapes of the military bugles. This

setting of the Dies irae is set on the battlefield of war and its mood is of anger against monstrous folly, rather than a projection of the vision of divine judgement. Within the long liturgical movement Britten interpolates four of Owen's poems - 'Bugles sang', 'Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death', 'Be slowly lifted up, thou long black arm' and 'Move him into the sun' - and these are among the most biting irony in the whole work. The combination of irony and anger has an immediacy which outstrips the liturgy in strength. Only at the end does the liturgy have real power, when the imagery of Hell is displaced by the simple prayer 'Dona eis Requiem', a prayer for peace which is echoed at the end of the Agnus Dei and at the conclusion of the last movement. Here, as in the Kyrie, and the final phrase of the work, the vision of peace is illuminated by the marvellous resolution onto the F major chord (Example 41e).

Ex 41e

60 Very slow (Molto lento)

Perc. Bells

SOPRANOS *pp sustained*

ALTOS *pp sustained*

TENORS *pp sustained*

BASSES *pp sustained*

CHORUS

Pi - e Je - su Do - mi - ne, Do - na e - is

Pi - e Je - su Do - mi - ne, Do - na e - is

Pi - e Do - mi - ne, Do - na e - is

Pi - e Do - mi - ne, Do - na e - is

Pi - e Do - mi - ne, Do - na e - is

Perc. Bells

S *ppp*

A *ppp*

T *ppp*

B *ppp*

CHORUS

Re - qui - em A - men, A - men

Re - qui - em A - men, A - men

- is Re - qui - em. A - men, A - men

- is Re - qui - em. A - men, A - men

- is Re - qui - em. A - men, A - men

After this long movement the 'innocent' sounds of the boys' voices at the beginning of the Offertorium offer a release from tension in plainsong-like lines. The accompaniment of cluster chords on the organ owes a debt to the *gamelan* influence, and it anticipates the similar treatment of the organ in the later Church Parables (Example 41f).

Ex 41f

The musical score for Example 41f consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Boys (distant) and the bottom staff is for the Organ (or Harmonium). The Boys part is marked 'Broadly, d=44 (Largamente)' and the Organ part is marked '(with 4 ft.)'. The lyrics are 'Do-mi-ne Je-su, - Je-su, Je-su'. The Boys part is written in a simple, plainsong-like style with a few notes per measure. The Organ part features complex, overlapping cluster chords, creating a dense, gamelan-like texture. The tempo is marked 'Broadly, d=44 (Largamente)' and the organ part is marked '(with 4 ft.)'.

At 'Quam olim Abrahae' the jaunty tune is a direct quotation from Britten's *Canticle II : Abraham and Isaac*. The liturgical text reminds us of the story of the obedient Abraham whose faith was rewarded by God's mercy (see Chapter 8, pages 116-122, above). The Canticle leaves no doubt about the spiritual *dénouement*, and the quotation from that work makes even more terrible the twist which Owen gives to the story in the interpolated poem - 'The Parable of the Old Men and the Young'. The gong and the harp evoke the heavenly intervention (see Chapter 8, page 118 and Example 31b), but the horn's insinuation of the bugle motif of the Dies irae prepares us for the savage twist of the biblical story when Owen's Abraham refuses to accept God's mercy -

'But the old man would not so, but slew his son, -
And half the seed of Europe, one by one ...'

Here is one of the strongest revelations of the spiritual heart of the *War Requiem* 'parable' : God offers salvation, but Man has free will to reject His salvation and to bring about all the evil consequences of such rejection. While the soloists continue to repeat the last line of the Owen poem, the boys' choir takes up the prayer 'Hostias et preces'. The rhythm of this distant prayer is totally free from that of the more immediate world of the solo voices; at this moment the world and heaven are more definitely separated by the sinfulness personified in Owen's poem, and this is translated into musical terms by the apparent distancing of earth and heaven in the musical planes which represent these different dimensions. The technique of non-alignment was a manifestation of the Far Eastern influences of the *gamelan* tradition (see Chapter 9, above) and it assists in illustrating the consequences of Man's rejection of God's mercy. God's promise is not to prevent war, but (in the words of the liturgy) to permit us 'de morte transire ad vitam' - 'to pass from death into life'. Suffering will always be part of Man's pilgrimage, and God's promise is that Christ "will be in agony until the end of the world", ⁽⁶⁾ to share and relieve the pain which can never be absent in a fallen world.

The conflict which is so strong an element in the *War Requiem* is less overtly present in the Sanctus and Benedictus. The tritone which symbolises that conflict is still present, and it helps to impart an underlying sense of unease in movements which ostensibly release us from preoccupation with war and judgement. The liturgical Sanctus bell is clearly present and is evoked by a variety of percussion instruments, and the pealing phrases of the soprano soloist at the start of the movement. The words 'Pleni sunt coeli' are characterised by the free alignment of voices in a great crescendo of activity which resolves with the 'Hosanna' in the brilliant ceremonial colours of D major. The succeeding Benedictus is another halting procession, with more than a passing likeness to the

same movement in the *Missa Brevis*. Lest the true purpose of the work be forgotten in the euphoria of the Hosanna, Britten uses Owen's poem 'After the blast' as a bitter coda. It reminds us that in the quiet after the battle life does not return to normal: neither should the liturgical exultations which we have just heard lead us to suppose that anything in the message of this work has fundamentally changed. Indeed, the poem's questioning of the promise of resurrection is the most severe challenge which the work poses to the Christian liturgy.

The Agnus Dei is the heart of the War Requiem. The Owen poem 'One ever hangs where shelled roads part' attains a remarkable synthesis with the liturgical words, and the musical material is here more closely integrated than in any other movement. The tritone is here responsible for the evolution of a marvellously hypnotic melodic line which Peter Evans has noted as springing "from scale segments that span fifths from the poles F sharp and C, in opposite directions but by the identical succession of tones and semitone."⁽⁷⁾ This melodic line is used as an ostinato throughout the movement by the stringed instruments and the main chorus, while the tenor soloist floats the words of Owen's poem as a descant above the phrases (Example 41g). Only in the final extra-liturgical phrase does the tenor soloist have the inverted form of the melody (see Example 41b).

Lest the peace of the Agnus Dei has dispelled the horrors of the Dies Irae, the Libera Me serves to bring all the horror of what has been experienced before us again. It is a march with a gradual *accelerando* which is, in Britten's words, "a kind of recapitulation of the whole Mass, with the chorus, up to the climax of 'Dies irae' overtaken, as it were, by a steadily accelerating orchestra".⁽⁸⁾ The climax comes at the outburst 'Libera me Domine' at Figure 116. From that point the music

Ex 41g

Slow $\text{♩} = 80$
(Lento)

Oboe *pp espress*

Clonnet in A *pp* *espress*

Bassoon *pp*

TENOR SOLO *p*
One e - ver hangs where shelled roads part

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Violin I *pp smooth*

Violin II *pp smooth*

Viola *pp smooth*

Violoncello *pp smooth*

Doublebass *pp smooth*

Ob *pp espress*

Cl in A *pp*

Bsn *espress.* *pp*

T Solo
In this war — He too lost a limb, But His di - sci - ples

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

VI I *pp*

VI II *pp*

Via *pp*

Vc *pp*

Db *pp*

returns to the opening tempo, and the chorus repeats the phrase 'Libera me Domine' in a long *diminuendo* which leads to Owen's unfinished poem 'Strange Meeting'. This moving poem is set mainly in recitative fashion which combines with the sustained string chords, marked 'cold', to create a de-personalised feeling which throws the poignant words into sharp relief. Such starkness focuses attention on the poem which embodies the pathos of war, but also enshrines the message of forgiveness and reconciliation which is the only means of achieving true peace. The trance-like repetitions of the final words of the poem - 'Let us sleep now' - continue until almost the end of the work, while the distant boys float their own words of hope and consolation in the antiphon 'In Paradisum'. The plainsong-like melody of the antiphon is a sanctification of the pagan rhythms and melody of the earlier 'Quam olim Abrahae' : now it is much closer to the mood of the second Canticle (see Chapter 6, page 55, above). But Britten does not simply allow this lovely music to waft us to eternity in a comfortable happy ending. At Figure 135 everything is stopped and the bells again toll their 'mourning' motif, and to the tritone notes F sharp - C the boys chant 'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine'. The movement begins again, only to be again stopped by the bells. Once again the music restarts; now the soprano soloist makes her own 'parable' - 'et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem'. Here again, Britten makes a non-liturgical interpolation, and it reminds us of the Beatitude 'Blessed are the poor in spirit : for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' - a sentiment close to the heart of *Cantata Misericordium* (see Chapter 8, above).

For a third time the bells halt the music, and now the chorus sings for the third time the unaccompanied phrase resolving onto the
 (9)
 "utterly peaceful chord of F major". Now the enemies are reconciled
 (10)
 and they are at rest and sleep "the sleep of peace in Christ".

The *War Requiem* is laid out out on a vast scale, and it is one of Britten's most public and unequivocal statements of personal philosophy. Its pacifist stance is unambiguous: the Owen quotation at the head of the score makes this quite clear.

"My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The Poetry is in the pity ...
All a poet can do today is warn."

The work is primarily about "the pity of War" and it is entirely consistent with Britten's purpose, as a creative artist, to be "of use to people", even though, like Owen, he can only warn. Warning is certainly a strong element in the *War Requiem*, but there is also a vision of peace and reconciliation, and the association of reconciliation is linked to the words of the liturgy in a way which makes quite clear that the spiritual dimension in this work is of the highest significance.

References :

- 1 *The Britten Companion* - ed. Christopher Palmer; p. 339
- 2 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 450
- 3 *Britten and Auden in the Thirties* - Donald Mitchell; p. 166
- 4 The Preface in the booklet accompanying the 1963 Decca recording of the *War Requiem*.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Words of Pascal quoted in *Requiem* - Alec Robertson; p. 279
- 7 *The Music of Benjamin Britten* - Peter Evans; p. 452
- 8 *Britten's War Requiem* - Alec Robertson; (*Musical Times*; May 1962, p. 310)
- 9 *Requiem* - Alec Robertson; p. 285
- 10 *Ibid.*

Chapter 12

CONCLUSION

"Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church; namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and an ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored; and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed ... And am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? ... Christ is literally in 'no man's land'. There men often hear His voice. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend. Is it spoken in English only and French? I do not believe so. Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism." (1)

This quotation could quite easily have been written by Benjamin Britten: it was, in fact, written by Wifred Owen. Owen expressed his brand of Christian pacifism through words: Britten expressed his own form of pacifism through his remarkable gift for selecting and setting words in a way which enabled those words to speak to the listener with an added potency, a piercing clarity. The imagery of Owen's most poignant poems of the First World War is often drawn from the story of Christ's Passion: this dissertation seeks to show the extent to which Britten drew on the traditions of Christianity for the 'themes' with which he was concerned throughout his career.

Britten's awareness of the Christian tradition was founded on his childhood experience of regular church attendance, and it must have remained with him as a part of that idealised view of his childhood from which he drew strength in his adult life. It is a known fact that Britten ceased to be a regular church-goer when he reached adulthood, but this does not imply that he ceased to be an essentially Christian person, though

his sense of Christianity may have lacked the process of growing which
should be provided by a commitment to a living Church fellowship. Such
a view of Britten's attitude to Christianity is substantiated by the views
of Sir Peter Pears (see Chapter 1, page 1, above).

If the Church failed to hold Britten as a committed member - and
the evidence confirms this - there are many examples to show that he continued,
throughout his life, to draw on the traditions of Christianity for his
subjects, and that his moral stance was strongly allied to the teachings
of Christ. Alec Robertson says of Wilfred Owen : "Pure Christianity was
what [he] could not find in any church, but did find in suffering humanity". (2)
He goes on to quote part of a letter from Owen which was written from the
Front in July 1918 -

"For 14 hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift
his cross by numbers and how to adjust his crown: and not to
imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his
Supper to see that there were not complaints: and inspected
his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it
that he is dumb, and stands at attention before his accusers.
With a piece of silver I buy him every day, and with maps
I make him familiar with the geography of Golgotha." (3)

Owen, like Britten, had a strong religious upbringing. In his youth Owen
had planned to enter the Anglican priesthood, but he later rejected this
in the light of his own convictions about the essentially pacifist
nature of true Christianity. The knowledge that "pulpit professionals"
on both sides were capable of blessing the machines of war as they went
into battle, turned Owen's call to the priesthood into a deep sense of
anti-clericalism, nowhere more potently conveyed than in the poem which
Britten linked, in the *War Requiem*, with the *Agnus Dei* -

'Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,
And in their faces there is pride
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.

The scribes on all the people shove
And bawl allegiance to the state,
But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life: they do not hate.

But if the antics of some of the clergymen of his day changed Owen's mind about the possibility of entering the priesthood, his continuing sense of identity with Christ is demonstrated in this poem. It is my thesis that Britten felt a similar sense of disillusionment with the Church during the 1930s - that period which Peter Pears has called Britten's 'puberty' (see Chapter 4, page 27, above). Britten may have had little experience of the kind of "pulpit professionals" whom Owen castigated, but his life in the quiet parochial backwaters of East Anglia will have ensured that he had more than a little experience of the sort of socially upright vicars of *Peter Grimes* and *Albert Herring*. That he looked for a Church which accorded more with the truth of Owen's 'gentle Christ' is made clear in the comments which he makes in a letter to Walter Hussey regarding the pacifist nature of the early Christian Church (see Chapter 3, page 16, above).

Britten's inclination to look back to the Church of earlier days is clearly part of his nostalgia for lost innocence, and the unawakened nature of childhood; his moral attitudes had much of that sense of lack of compromise which characterise the child (and sometimes the saint!). His 'parables' have the simple black-and-white clarity of their biblical precedents, and he has chosen (in the Church Parables, *Saint Nicolas* and *Noye's Fludde*) to cast them in the same mould as the medieval mystery plays, in which simplicity and directness of expression provide a powerful vehicle for the expression of eternal truths. The Church's rich heritage of plainsong melody has been seen to hold an important place in Britten's musical language; the Chester Miracle Plays provided the themes for *Canticle II* and *Noye's Fludde*, and for the Christmas trilogy on which he was working at the end of his life; the music and the language - their direct, unsophisticated appeal - form

a link with those earlier Christians to whom, with the benefit of the passing centuries, twentieth-century man has ascribed a purity and innocence of unsophisticated belief.

The simplicity of ancient forms lies at the heart of the Church Parables. Here Britten has adapted the extreme sparseness of the traditional ritual of the Japanese Nō-play and converted it into a form which has all the elements of the English miracle play tradition. In the second and third Parables he uses biblical stories; in the first he creates a 'parable' of his own, but there can be no doubt that its *dénouement* is Christian.

That there is a strong spiritual dimension to Britten's work cannot be in doubt. It has been said that Britten's constant preoccupation was with his pacifism and his sense of being an outsider, in large part attributable to his homosexuality. This thesis has sought to establish that Britten's spiritual concerns were at least as potent as any of the other forces in his life. His Opus 3 is the set of choral variations *A Boy was Born*, and was the first of his choral works to be given an opus number. It is a 'first' in a number of ways: for the present study it is significant as a work which, drawing largely on early verse, illuminates the Christian message with a sincerity and certainty unblemished by the sentimentality which so often pervades Christmas music. It has been described as having been "written by one to whom the Christian faith
(4)
had real meaning".

The Christmas story has an overriding sense of joy, but it is also strongly tinged by the shadow of the Cross and it is closely linked to the Massacre of the Innocents which was Herod's response to the news of the birth of the Messiah. Britten is aware of this side of the Christmas

story in *A Boy was Born*, and it is a mood which pervades the poem of T.S.Eliot set by Britten as *Canticle IV : Journey of the Magi*. The theme was to be continued in the Christmas work on which Britten was engaged at the time of his death, and for which, once again, he turned to the Chester Miracle Plays for his libretto. The 'direct' nature of the dialogue in the Miracle Plays allows the Christian message to be conveyed without sentimentality, and with an 'innocence' which was totally in keeping with all that is known about Britten's own attitudes to life and to music. In his writing, and in his performing, he strove for clarity of texture devoid of anything which was superfluous or opaque: it is entirely consistent with this attitude that he should have found an important textural source in the Chester Miracle Plays.

Britten's copy of the Chester Miracle Play texts ⁽⁵⁾ is heavily marked in preparation for compiling the libretto of the Christmas trilogy. The work was to begin with the sixth play, 'The Nativity', and it begins with the Annunciation -

'Hail be thou, Mary maiden free,
full of grace! god is with thee.'

It may be presumed that this work, which Britten was planning at the end of his life, was to begin with music which would form a link with his boyhood piece, *A Hymn to the Virgin*. The annotation of the text of the Miracle Plays shows Britten's intention of setting five sections of the work - *Pagina sexta de salutatione et nativitate Salvatoris Ihesu Christi; Pagina septima de pastoribus greges pascentibus; Pagina octava de Tribis Regibus Orientalibus; Pagina nona de oblatione Trium Regnum*, and the final section *Pagina decima de occisione innocentum ex Herodis tiranica persuasione*.

There is no doubt that Britten's decision to complete his Christmas work with the story of Herod's massacre of all the children, from two years

old and under, was an indication of his deep understanding of the Christian significance of the Christmas story. The 'pretty' side of the birth of Christ has been portrayed through words and music in a vast number of works, but it is less frequently portrayed as a birth which was to involve sacrifice and death. For the Christian the Incarnation has implications which go far beyond the Christmas card image of Christ's birth, and in his formulation of the subject Britten showed a clear grasp which suggests that whatever the areas of his agnosticism might have been, there was little doubt that he fully understood the meaning of the Incarnation. The dark side of the Christmas story is to be found in *A Boy was Born*; it forms a strong link of understanding between T.S.Eliot and Britten in the fourth Canticle; it was to be at the heart of this Christmas trilogy. In so far as the suffering of Christ was the supreme example of innocence betrayed, it may be said that Britten's preoccupation with the theme of the destruction of innocence had a deeply Christian significance.

This study of the "things spiritual" in Britten's music was prompted by a desire to balance the current fashion for attributing to the twin forces of his homosexuality and his pacifism, much of the subject matter of the composer's music. It has been suggested that Britten felt himself to be an 'outsider', and that the operas *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd* and *Death in Venice* are all allegories of the homosexual condition in each of which the principal character has autobiographical significance. I have already argued in Chapter 10, and in other parts of this dissertation, that it is equally possible to read a more universal and more spiritual significance into these works. Homosexuality and pacifism were undoubtedly strongly influential factors in Britten's personality, but I would contend that it is an over-simplification of a deeply complex personality to suggest that they were the primary motivations in his life and work.

It has been suggested by some who were close to Britten that in religious matters he was an agnostic. It is all too easy for this comment to be taken to imply that Britten had rejected the Christian upbringing of his childhood. The term 'agnostic' has undoubted atheistic connotations, but in Britten's case this is clearly not the correct interpretation. If we accept Sir Peter Pears's definition of the agnostic as one who 'doesn't know' (see Chapter 4, page 23, above), we may perceive that Britten was a man who had to battle, like all Christians, with that leap of faith which is required in order to have any grasp of the promise of the Christian message. The range of Christian imagery in his music leaves no doubt that he was able to accept the historical aspects of the Christian story.

Britten drew on biblical subjects through most of his career, and his concern with these things at a personal level has been suggested by the note about his belief in the pacifist nature of the early church, in his correspondence with Walter Hussey (see Chapter 3, page 16, above). It may be assumed that when the full range of Britten's letters and diaries become available for study, further evidence of his spiritual concerns will become apparent. The recent publication of a second volume of the letters of E.M.Forster makes available some further evidence of Britten's spiritual concerns at the time when Forster and Britten were working together on *Billy Budd*. Forster's anti-Christian stance is well known, and epitomised by his report of his denunciation of T.S.Eliot's *Little Gidding* - "It takes a human animal of Christian perversity to announce that the rose and fire are one."⁽⁶⁾ In view of this attitude it is interesting to read that Forster and Britten had discussed Christianity. In his letter to Britten, dated 30 September 1948, Forster refers to their conversation -

"I have thought a good deal of our conversation about Christianity and some time we must talk again. I love the tenderness and pity and love, but they have a tendency to become interfering and weepy, which repels me and is I think bad ... What with this [his distaste for some confessional literature which he had read in St Matthew's, Northampton] and what with the historical difficulties, I have to find my emotional explanation of the Universe, for of course I must find one, elsewhere." (7)

Such a reference to the exchange between the two men can provide no conclusive evidence that Britten took a Christian stance in their conversation, but in view of Lord Harewood's recollection that Forster regarded Britten as almost a religious fanatic, (8) it may be assumed that he did take such a position. Further evidence of Britten's spiritual concerns can be gleaned from a letter written to him by Forster during the planning stages for *Billy Budd*. On 20 December 1948, Forster wrote -

"Our original realism certainly wouldn't have worked. My idea was to start realistically, and then alter the ship and crew until they were what we wanted, and good and evil and eternal matters could shine through them." (9)

For Forster, with his inability to accept the Christian creed, there may well have been some dichotomy in his work on the libretto of *Billy Budd*, but it is obvious from this comment (and from the reference, in a letter to Lionel Trilling, to "old Dansker bringing in not too obtrusively the eucharist of grog and biscuits ...") (10) that there is mounting evidence for the view of the opera as a Christian allegory. *Billy Budd* was first performed five years after *The Rape of Lucretia*, but discussions between the joint librettists, Forster and Eric Crozier, had begun in 1948, only two years after the first performance of the earlier opera. That opera had been criticised for the specifically Christian comments made by the two narrators. Imogen Holst has said that many members of the audience were perplexed by what they saw as the 'dragging in' of Christianity. She points out that "in Britten's mind there was no question of 'dragging in' Christianity: it had been there all the time." (11) It was there, too, in

Billy Budd, just as the spiritual ramifications of the Christian ethic are to be seen through so much of his work.

Taken simply at face value the list of Britten's works would suggest that he was a composer who produced a significant number of religious works in a career which was, nevertheless, dominated by the towering achievement of his operas. It might even be suggested that, like Elgar and Vaughan Williams, he wrote religious music while having something less than total commitment to its spiritual intent. Whatever the nature of Britten's public attitude to religious practice, I believe that the works were motivated by a deep spiritual consciousness and that, furthermore, this same spiritual dimension spread far beyond the ostensibly 'religious' works. In expressing his strongly-held belief that he should write music for people, and for now, Britten said -

"Music does not exist in a vacuum, it does not exist until it is performed, and performance imposes conditions ... Where does one stop, then, in answering people's demands? It seems that there is no clearly defined Halt sign on this road. The only brake which one can apply is that of one's own private and personal conscience; when that speaks clearly, one must halt; and it can speak for musical or non-musical reasons." (12)

Britten was a man of undoubted personal integrity and we may be sure that his own "private and personal conscience" would have prevented him from writing anything which he was unable to believe in whole-heartedly. For him the Church had revealed its weaknesses - as it had done for Wilfred Owen - and it is possible that he was never able fully to return to that Church, even though he received the Sacrament as one of his last acts. But the strength of his spiritual life is made evident through the subjects and the texts which he chose to set, and through his own treatment of them. Imogen Holst has said -

"He would never have set a cruel subject to music without linking the cruelty to the hope of redemption." (13)

References :

- 1 *Requiem* - Alec Robertson; p. 267
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Britten* - Michael Kennedy; p. 133
- 5 *The Chester Miracle Plays* - ed. Hermann Deimling, reprinted 1959 (O.U.P.)
The copy is preserved at the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh.
- 6 *Selected Letters of E.M.Forster (Volume II 1921-1970)* - ed. Mary Lago
and P.N.Furbank; p. 283
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 233
- 8 Interview with Lord Harewood, 22 February 1983
- 9 *Selected Letters of E.M.Forster (Volume II 1921-1970)* - ed. Mary Lago
and P.N.Furbank; p. 235
- 10 *Ibid.* p. 237
- 11 *Britten* - Imogen Holst; p. 40
- 12 *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* - Benjamin Britten; p. 13
- 13 *Britten* - Imogen Holst; p. 40

QUESTIONNAIRE!

(Five minutes only - I hope - are necessary for this paper.
Candidates should attempt all the questions.)

1. On page 8 of the Cantata it should be "which cloatheth the naked"? *Yes.*
2. On p. 8 it should be ~~Tak~~ Jakim, not Takin? *Jakin*
(This is according to book and Ol Testament!)
3. On p. 28 the first two rhimes of the Shawm should be "Lawn fawn"?
"sound bound" belong to the trumpet.
(Note. The Shawm is ~~is~~ the predecessor of the oboe!)
4. I wish the punctuation and use of Capitals to be printed ^{as} ~~as~~ *as* in the book, and ~~not as~~ in the music copies.
5. { ~~I return MS with alterations and additions.~~
~~I do not return copy of MS but will pass one.~~
~~I think the whole suggested MS is fearful.~~ } Please delete as necessary.
6. Do you wish any reference to Mr. Sackville-West in the MS, on p. 1. so what?
MS necessary - actually I didn't use much of his suggested script.
7. { ~~I enclose~~
~~I should not think of enclosing~~ } note of content and explanation to be printed with the MS.
8. I have to visit Northampton next on *Sunday*.....
intend to arrive at *late afternoon*..... I should like to be there at night(s) of *.....Sunday, please.....* *is there a convenient train.*

9. What a confounded nuisance you, and the choir, are! *Here! Here!*
(not at all really)
Signed *E.B. Britten (minor)*....
#(School Certificate to - 5 credits)

In addition to this shocking qualification, it might interest you to know I was also a valuable member of all the elevens, Victor Ludorum, held record for several years for Throwing The Cricket Ball (until broken by a beauly little boy in a pale), apart from my highly distinguished career in the Junior Tennis world. So now you know the station of the composer you're dealing with - !

P.T.O.



LITANY AND ANTHEM FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY

BY W. H.
AUDEN

WRITTEN FOR THE CHURCH OF
S. MATTHEW, NORTHAMPTON, FOR
THE DEDICATION AND PATRONAL
FESTIVAL, 21 SEPTEMBER 1946

ANTHEM FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY ANTHEM FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY

PRAISE YE THE LORD.

Let the whole creation give out another sweetness,
Nicer in our nostrils, a novel fragrance
From cleansed occasions in accord together
As one feeling fabric, all flushed and intact
Phenomēna and numbers announcing in one
Multitudinous oecumenical song
Their grand givenness of gratitude and joy,
Peaceable and plural, their positive truth
An authoritative This, an unthreatened Now
When in love and in laughter, each lives himself,
For united by His word cognition and power
System and order are a single glory
And the pattern is complex, their places safe.

BLESS YE THE LORD.

We elude Him, lie to Him, yet His love observes
His appalling promise. His predeliction
As we wander and weep is with us always
Though our bodies too blind or too bored to examine
What sorts excite them are slain interjecting
Their childish ows, and in choosing how many
And how much they will love our minds insist on
Their own disorder as their own punishment,
His Question disqualifies our quick senses,
His Truth makes our theories historical sins
And when we are wounded that is when he speaks our
Disconsolate tongue, concluding his children
In their mad unbelief to have mercy on them all.

LITANY FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY LITANY FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY

Jesus went forth and saw a publican, named Levi sitting at the receipt of custom. Let us pray especially, therefore, at this time for all who, like our patron saint, the blessed Apostle and Evangelist, Matthew, occupy positions of petty and unpopular authority through whose persons we suffer the impersonal discipline of the state, for all who must inspect and cross-question, for all who issue permits and enforce restrictions. Deliver them from their peculiar temptations, that they may not come to regard the written word and the statistical figure as more real than flesh and blood, nor extend an itching palm, nor compensate for some domestic unhappiness by harshness and indifference in their official dealings. And deliver us, as private citizens, from confusing the office with the man so that we hate those who through no choice of their own cause us some inconvenience, from believing that we are the exceptional case who has a right to special treatment, and from forgetting that it is our own impatience and indolence, our own abuse and terror of freedom, our own injustice that creates the state to be a punishment and a remedy for sin.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

Jesus said unto him, Follow me. And Matthew left all, rose up, and followed him. So, we may be sure, the sudden instant of absolute demand comes sooner or later to each of us who of ourselves can initiate nothing but a prayer that, when it comes, we may not exemplify one of the innumerable modes of refusal. Let us pray especially, therefore, at this time that we may be delivered from the childish conceit which, romantically anticipates some important and heroic task and, on being called to become, say, a faithful husband or mother, or simply to go on with our job for the greater glory of God, is offended because that is not our idea of a proper cross : from the mock humility which is really cowardice and which,

on being called to some extraordinary destiny, dare not believe it ; above all, from the magic mirror of self reflection which enmeshes us in infinite possibilities so that doubting whether the voice we hear is the true one, or fearing that, though we know we could obey it now, we might at some later date be unfaithful, we hesitate and are lost.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples saying : Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners. Let us remember especially, therefore, at this time that God created the material world and saw that it was very good, that the Word was made flesh and suffered in the flesh to redeem the flesh, that it is no platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul which our creed affirms but the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come, and that in the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament, it is the body of a robber, the fleshly selfishness which it shares with the whole of the natural creation, that each of us, male or female, white or black, rich or poor, gifted or ungifted, offers as a channel for the Divine Grace.

May the Holy Spirit ever guide us safely up the narrow way between the two pitfalls, between the stoic pride that denies the Incarnation, and the epicurean prudence that rejects the Crucifixion. Deliver us, we pray thee, in our pleasure and in our pain, in our hour of elation and our hour of wan hope, from insolence and envy, from pride in our own virtue, from fear of public opinion, from the craving to be amusing at all costs, and from the temptation, stronger perhaps in our present age than in earlier times, to pray, if we pray at all : " I thank thee, Lord, that I am an interesting sinner and not as this Pharisee."

LITANY FOR S. MATTHEW'S DAY

on being called to some extraordinary destiny, dare not believe it ; above all, from the magic mirror of self reflection which enames us in infinite possibilities so that doubting whether the voice we hear is the true one, or fearing that, though we know we could obey it now, we might at some later date be unfaithful, we hesitate and are lost.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

And Levi made him a great feast in his house and there was a great company of publicans and of others that sat down with them. But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples saying : Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners. Let us remember especially, therefore, at this time that God created the material world and saw that it was very good, that the Word was made flesh and suffered in the flesh to redeem the flesh, that it is no platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul which our creed affirms but the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come, and that in the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament, it is the body of a robber, the fleshly selfishness which it shares with the whole of the natural creation, that each of us, male or female, white or black, rich or poor, gifted or ungifted, offers as a channel for the Divine Grace.

May the Holy Spirit ever guide us safely up the narrow way between the two pitfalls, between the stoic pride that denies the Incarnation, and the epicurean prudence that rejects the Crucifixion. Deliver us, we pray thee, in our pleasure and in our pain, in our hour of elation and our hour of wan hope, from insolence and envy, from pride in our own virtue, from fear of public opinion, from the craving to be amusing at all costs, and from the temptation, stronger perhaps in our present age than in earlier times, to pray, if we pray at all : " I thank thee, Lord, that I am an interesting sinner and not as this Pharisee."

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

It is the particular glory of Matthew that he recognises in Jesus the Messiah foretold by the Prophets, that his witness emphasises the Christ who gives to history its meaning, and warns us most clearly against the idolatrous fancies of the gentiles who would either, like the pagan Greeks regard time as the Evil One or, like the romantic apostates, bow down before the historical process. Let us pray especially therefore at this time to be delivered from all such heresies and follies ; from making our society or our age the final revelation of the truth, from justifying present sin as a historical necessity that future good may come. May we worship neither the flux of chance, nor the wheel of fortune, nor the spiral of the zeit-geist, but, following the commandment of Christ, take up our cross of the moment on which alone the past is redeemed and the future is set free.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

In Ezekiel's vision of the four evangelistic beasts, it is St. Matthew who has the face of a man, the weakest of all the creatures, and it is of his example that we should especially think in the hour of dizziness and levelling when imagination and reason are darkened, affection and power are taken away, and we are reduced to the bare and minimal fact of our fallen humanity, that we may not despair but believe that even in this state of deprivation we are within reach of God's mercy. Let us pray especially therefore, at this time for those multitudes who are nobody in particular, for all who sin by imitation or suffer in struggles which they do not understand, for all who are uncertain why or how they are unhappy and do not know to whom and for what to pray.

We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.

Appendix iii

a 7c xum

slow & majestic

Handwritten musical score for a piece titled "slow & majestic". The score is written on ten staves, organized into five systems of two staves each. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The first system is labeled "S A" and "T R." on the left. The second system is labeled "O g n" on the left. The third system is labeled "S m" on the left. The fourth system is labeled "T R." on the left. The fifth system is labeled "O g n" on the left. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Bennet, Daphne : *King Without A Crown*, London 1977
Blyth, Alan (ed) : *Remembering Britten*, London 1981
Blythe, Ronald (ed) : *Aldeburgh Anthology*, London 1972
Brett, Philip (ed) : *Benjamin Britten : Peter Grimes*, Cambridge Opera Handbook, Cambridge/New York 1983
Britten, Benjamin : *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*, 2nd impression, London 1978
Britten, Benjamin : *A Complete Catalogue of his Published Works*, London 1973
Duncan, Ronald : *Working with Britten*, London 1981
Evans, Peter : *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, London 1979
Gordon, Lyndall : *Eliot's Early Years*, London 1977
Headington, Christopher : *Britten*, London 1981
Herbert, David (ed) : *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, London 1979
Holst, Imogen : *Britten*, Great Composers Series, 3rd edition, London 1980
John, Nicholas (ed) : *Peter Grimes; Gloriana*, Opera Guide 24, London/New York 1983
Keller, Hans : *1975 (1984 minus 9)*, London 1977
Kennedy, Michael : *Britten*, Master Musicians Series, London 1981
Lago, Mary and Furbank, P.N. (eds) : *Selected Letters of E.M.Forster (Volume II, 1921-1970)*, London 1985
Mitchell, Donald : *Britten and Auden in the Thirties : The Year 1936*, London 1981
Mitchell, Donald, and John Evans : *Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976 : Pictures from a Life*, London 1978
Mitchell, Donald, and Hans Keller (ed) : *Benjamin Britten : A Commentary on his works from a group of specialists*, London 1952
Robertson, Alec : *Requiem*, London 1967
Stallworthy, Jon : *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, London 1985
White, Eric Walter : *Benjamin Britten : His Life and Operas*, 3rd edition, London 1983
Whittall, Arnold : *The Music of Britten and Tippett : Studies in Themes and Techniques*, Cambridge/New York 1982

Other Sources

- Brett, Philip : 'Britten and Grimes', *Musical Times*, December 1977, pp 955-1000
Dawney, Michael : 'Some Notes on Britten's Church Music', *Tempo* (Autumn 1967) pp 13-21
Evans, John : *Benjamin Britten : Death in Venice*, PhD thesis, University of Wales, 1983
Halsey, Louis : 'Britten's Church Music', *Musical Times*, October 1962, pp 686-689
Holst, Imogen : 'Working for Benjamin Britten', *Musical Times*, March 1977, pp 202-206
Robertson, Alec : 'Britten's War Requiem', *Musical Times*, May 1962, pp 308-310
S.S. : Obituary, Lord Britten, *Musical Times*, February 1977
Warrack, John : 'Benjamin Britten', *Musical America*, December 1964