A PORTFOLIO OF FOUR WORKS

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

by
Zachary Wadsworth
January 2012
The four works included in this portfolio employ various instrumental forces, surface styles, and formal designs, all of them examining the interaction between ‘text’ (in all its meanings) and music. But each work approaches this broad topic in slightly different ways.

Sleeping at Last is a straightforward setting of Christina Rossetti’s poem of the same title. The text’s air of silent repose is represented by gently undulating chromatically-inflected chords in the lower voices built over an unchanging bass note. A soprano melody, wide-ranging and expressive, floats above, eerily disconnected from the harmony below.

In Pictures of the Floating World, several independent poems by Amy Lowell are formed into a cycle that examines aging, powerlessness, and loss. Thematic connections reach across the disparate texts, providing cross-movement relationships and large-scale narratives absent in the original texts.

The ‘texts’ explored in The Muses are those of philosophical and musical history. Each movement, written as an oblation to one of the nine classical Muses, elaborates on the given Muse’s domain. The musical surface of these wordless movements both embraces and confronts the ‘texts’ of Baroque compositional style and (modern) historically-informed performance practice.

A Symphony of Glances also engages musical and poetic ‘texts,’ this time by
layering a web of referential fragments (“glances”) onto the traditionally ‘absolute’ four-
movement symphonic form. The movement titles are taken from poetic fragments by T. E. Hulme, whose life was tragically shortened by the First World War. These brief but elegant fragments provide a uniquely subjective frame of reference through which traditional symphonic structure can be explored. The piece also includes fragments of older symphonic works by Beethoven, Bruckner, Debussy, Respighi, Sibelius, and Lutoslawski. Far from pastiche, the work incorporates these fragments into its musical fabric, utilizing them to express nostalgia for a musical form that had already begun its decline as T. E. Hulme lay dying in Flanders.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Compositions by Zachary Wadsworth have been broadcast on NPR’s *Performance Today* and BBC Radio’s *The Choir*, and performed in North and South America, Europe, and Japan by such ensembles as the choir of Westminster Abbey, the Washington National Opera Chorus, the Buffalo and Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestras, Long Leaf Opera, Boston Metro Opera, and the Yale Schola Cantorum. Select works are published by Novello, E.C. Schirmer, PRB Productions, and Alliance Music Publications. He has received several composition awards, including a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2007), three ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Awards (2008, 2007, 2002), and first prizes in the King James Bible Composition Awards (2011), the ASCAP Lotte Lehmann Foundation Art Song Competition (2007), the first Long Leaf Opera One Act Opera Competition (2007), the Chamber Music Rochester Young Composer Competition (2008), the Boston Choral Ensemble Commission Competition (2007), and the Pacific Chorale Young Composer Competition (2007). Recordings of his works *O Saving Victim* and *Beati Quorum Remissae* are available on the Gothic record label. Wadsworth is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music (BM, 2005) and Yale University (MM, 2007).
dedicated to my parents
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an immense debt of gratitude to Steven Stucky, Roberto Sierra, and Kevin Ernste, who have not only encouraged me to strive for musical excellence through composition, but have also challenged me to be a curious and open-minded musical citizen. My student colleagues in the composition department have also been a great inspiration, and I thank them all sincerely.

I also would like to thank Xak Bjerken and Miri Yampolsky, for generously commissioning my Diptych for Mayfest 2009; Cynthia Johnston Turner, for commissioning and recording my Symphony of Glances; David Yearsley and Annette Richards, for commissioning my Recitativo and Aria for the dedication of Cornell’s new Baroque organ; and John Rowehl, for commissioning War-Dreams for the Cornell Chamber Singers.

My time at Cornell has included thrilling collaborations with many members of the faculty, none of whom more than Judith Kellock, who I thank for her energetic support, compositional insights, and elegant musicianship. Thanks also to Chris Kim, Joseph Lin, and Timothy Feeney. I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge my sincere thanks to Annette Richards and David Yearsley, whose friendship, musical and academic insight, and collaborative spirit have inspired me greatly.

Additional thanks go to Christa Lyons and her colleagues at E.C. Schirmer, for generously allowing me to reproduce Pictures of the Floating World.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their never-ending love and support (and for forcing a reluctant teenager to sign up for piano lessons), and Tim Pyper, whose contributions to my musical life have been immeasurable.
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SLEEPING AT LAST

for a cappella chorus, SSATB

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)               Zachary Wadsworth
                                          (2008)
SLEEPING AT LAST

Completed 6 February, 2008.

INSTRUMENTATION:
Unaccompanied Chorus, SSATB
Piano (for rehearsal only)

PERFORMANCE NOTES:
The three women’s parts should be split evenly throughout.

TEXT:

Sleeping at last, the trouble and the tumult over,
    Sleeping at last, the struggle and the horror past,
Cold and white, out of sight of friend and of lover,
    Sleeping at last.

No more a tired heart downcast or overcast,
    No more pangs that wring or shifting fears that hover,
Sleeping at last in a dreamless sleep locked fast.

Fast asleep. Singing birds in their leafy cover
    Cannot wake her, nor shake her the gusty blast.
Under the purple thyme and the purple clover
    Sleeping at last.¹

Christina Rossetti  
(1830-1894)  

Sleeping at Last  
Zachary Wadsworth  
(b. 1983)  

for the Young New Yorkers' Chorus, Michael Kerschner, director  

Adagio con rubato $j = \text{ca. } 63$  
$p$ in rilievo  

S.  

\[ \text{Sleeping at last, sleeping at} \]  

S.  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

A.  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

T.  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

B.  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Adagio con rubato } j = \text{ca. } 63 \]  
\[ p \text{ in rilievo} \]  

6  

\[ \text{last, the trouble and tumult over, sleeping at} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

\[ \text{Sleeping, sleeping.} \]  

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last, sleeping at last,  

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.

- ing, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, sleeping.
horror past. Cold and white, out of sight of friend and of

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

lover. Sleeping at last, sleeping at

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠. 睡眠.

sleeping. sleeping. sleeping. sleeping.
Faster $\approx$ ca. 72

last, No more a tired heart,

sleeping at last. No more a tired heart,

down-cast or over-cast, No, no more

down-cast or over-cast, No, no more

more a tired heart down-cast or over-cast,
Faster \( \dot{\text{j}} = \text{ca. 72} \)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{S.} & \quad \text{fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep,} \\
\text{S.} & \quad \text{fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep,} \\
\text{A.} & \quad \text{fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep,} \\
\text{T.} & \quad \text{Sing-ing birds in their leaf-y} \\
\text{B.} & \quad \text{Faster \( \dot{\text{j}} = \text{ca. 72} \) fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep, fast a-sleep,}
\end{align*}
\]
Under the purple thyme
and the purple clover

thyme and the purple clover

thyme and the purple clover

thyme and the purple clover

sleeping at last

sleeping at last

sleeping at last

sleeping at last

Sleeping at last
PICTURES OF THE FLOATING WORLD

for soprano and piano

Amy Lowell (1874–1925)  Zachary Wadsworth

Commissioned by the Lotte Lehmann Foundation,
Linn Maxwell, President, 2008

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PICTURES OF THE FLOATING WORLD


INSTRUMENTATION:
Soprano
Piano

TEXT:

I. The Garden by Moonlight

A black cat among roses,
lilac-misted under a first-quarter moon,
The sweet smells of heliotrope and night-scented stock.
The garden is very still,
It is dazed with moonlight,
Contented with perfume,
Dreaming the opium dreams of its folded poppies.
Only the cat, padding between the roses,
Shakes a branch and breaks the chequered pattern
As water is broken by the falling of a leaf.
Then you come,
And you are quiet like the garden,
And white like the alyssum flowers,
And beautiful as the silent sparks of the fireflies.
Ah, Beloved, do you see those orange lilies?
They knew my mother,
But who belonging to me will they know
When I am gone.

II. Opal

You are ice and fire,
The touch of you burns my hands like snow.
You are cold and flame.
You are the crimson of amaryllis,
The silver of moon-touched magnolias.
When I am with you,
My heart is a frozen pond
Gleaming with agitated torches.
III. September, 1918

This afternoon was the colour of water falling through sunlight;
The trees glittered with the tumbling of leaves;
The sidewalks shone like alleys of dropped maple leaves,
And the houses ran along them laughing out of square, open windows.
Under a tree in the park,
Two little boys, lying flat on their faces,
Were carefully gathering red berries
To put in a pasteboard box.

Some day there will be no war,
Then I shall take out this afternoon
And turn it in my fingers,
And remark the sweet taste of it upon my palate,
And note the crisp variety of its flights of leaves.
To-day I can only gather it
And put it into my lunch-box,
For I have time for nothing
But the endeavour to balance myself
Upon a broken world.

IV. Storm-Racked

How should I sing when buffeting salt waves
   And stung with bitter surges, in whose might
   I toss, a cockleshell? The dreadful night
Marshals its undefeated dark and raves
In brutal madness, reeling over graves
   Of vanquished men, long-sunken out of sight,
   Sent wailing down to glut the ghoulish sprite
Who haunts foul seaweed forests and their caves.
   No parting cloud reveals a watery star,
My cries are washed away upon the wind,
   My cramped and blistering hands can find no spar,
My eyes with hope o'erstrained, are growing blind.
   But painted on the sky great visions burn,
My voice, oblation from a shattered urn!
V. Aubade

As I would free the white almond from the green husk
So would I strip your trappings off,
Beloved.
And fingering the smooth and polished kernel
I should see that in my hands glittered a gem beyond counting.

VI. A Dream in Wartime

I dug a grave under an oak-tree.
With infinite care, I stamped my spade
Into the heavy grass.
The sod sucked it,
And I drew it out with effort,
Watching the steel run liquid in the moonlight
As it became clear.
I stooped, and dug, and never turned,
For behind me,
On the dried leaves,
My own face lay like a white pebble,
Waiting.1

---

Pictures of the Floating World

I. The Garden by Moonlight

Amy Lowell
(1874-1925)

Zachary Wadsworth
(b. 1983)

Adagio sognando \( \frac{\text{mp}}{= \text{ca. 76}} \)

Soprano

A black cat among

Piano

roses,

li-lac-mis-ted under a

first quar-ter moon,

The

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sweet smells of heliotrope and night-scented stock.
The garden is very still, It is dazed with moonlight, Contented with per fume.
Dreaming the opium dreams of its folded

poppies.

On mp semplice

poco rit. a tempo

poco rit. a tempo

Only the

cat, padding between the roses. Shakes a branch and
breaks the checkered pattern
As water is broken

by the falling of a leaf.

\( \text{rit.} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{p} \)

\( \text{cantabile} \)

\( \text{pp} \)

\( \text{Ros} \)
Then you come, And you are quiet like the garden,

And white like the alyssum flowers,

And beautiful as the silent sparks of the fireflies,

Ah, beloved, do you see those orange lilies?
They knew my mother,

But who belonging to

me will they know

When I am gone?

rit. poco a poco al fine

When I am gone?

They knew my mother,

But who belonging to
Presto con fuoco \( j \approx \text{ca. 184} \)

II. Opal

You are

ice and fire.

The touch of you burns my hands
like snow.

You are cold and flame.

You are the crimson of am - a -

ryl - lis, The silver of
poco rit.  
Misterioso  \( \approx \) ca. 176

When I am with you, My heart is a

frozen pond
Tempo I \( q = \text{ca. 184} \)

\( \text{Gleaming with agitated poco rit.} \)

\( \text{Gleaming with agitated poco rit.} \)

\( \text{mp & t} \)

\( \text{mp & t} \)

\( \text{Tempo I \( q = \text{ca. 184} \)} \)

\( \text{torches.} \)

\( \text{f} \)

\( \text{f} \)

\( \text{mp} \)

\( \text{mp} \)
This afternoon was the colour of water;

falling through sunlight; The trees

glittered, with the tumbling of leaves;
The side-walks shone like alleys of dropped maple leaves, and the house ran along them laughing out of square, open windows.

Under a tree in the park, two little boys.
ly-ing flat on their fa-ces, Were care-ful-ly ga-ther-ing red ber-ries

To put in a paste-board box.

Some day there will be no war. Then I shall take out
poco accel.
Tempo I  = ca. 66

this afternoon And turn it in my fingers, And remark the sweet

poco accel.
Tempo I  = ca. 66
taste of it upon my palate, And note the crisp variety of its flights of leaves.

poco accel.  Tempo I  = ca. 66

To-day I can only gather it And

poco accel.  Tempo I  = ca. 66

put it into my lunch box, For I have time for nothing But
the endeavour to balance myself upon a broken world.

IV. Storm-Racked

Allegro comodo, ma sempre rubato \( \approx \text{ca. 80} \)

How should I
Marshals its undefeated dark and raves.

In brutal madness,

reeling over graves Of vanquished men,

long sunk out of sight,
(both staves)

Sent waking

down to glut the ghoulish sprite
Who haunts foul seaweed forests
and their caves.

No parting cloud reveals a watery star.

Lontano \( \sim \) ca. 58
\( mp \) semplice
\( \text{senza Ped.} \)
Tempo I

My cries are

molti Ped.

washed away upon the wind,

My cramped and blistering hands can find no

spar,

My eyes with hope o'er strained

35
are growing blind. But painted on the sky great visions

burn, My voice, oblation (both staves)

sentenza Ped.

from a shattered urn!
V. Aubade

Teneramente, sempre rubato \( \text{\textit{j = ca. 69}} \)

\( \text{mp \ sempre \ cantabile} \)

con Ped.

poco a poco cresc.

\( \text{f \ dim. \ poco \ a \ poco} \)

\( \text{mp} \)

\( \text{mf \ cantabile} \)

As I would free the white almond

from the green husk

So would I
strip your trappings off, Be-loved.

And finger ing the smooth and polished kernel I should see in my hands.

a gem beyond counting.

Tempo I = ca. 69

mf

Poco movendo

f

ma delicato

31

Poco movendo

36

Poco movendo

38
VI. A Dream in Wartime

Quasi recitativo

I dug a grave under an oak-tree. With infinite care, I

Quasi recitativo

stamped my spade into the heavy grass. The sod sucked it, and I

drew it out with effort, watching the steel run liquid in the

moonlight as it became clear.
Funebre \( \dot{=} \) ca. 66

31  \( \text{mf} \)

I stooped, and dug and never turned, For behind me,

38  \( \text{rit.} \)  Quasi recitative

On the dried leaves My own face lay like a white pebble,

45  \( \text{mp} \)

Wait
THE MUSES
a suite for baroque instruments
in nine movements

Zachary Wadsworth
(2007)
THE MUSES


INSTRUMENTATION:
Baroque Violin
Bass Viola da Gamba
Harpsichord

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

INSTRUMENT CHOICE:
This work was originally composed for a 7-string bass viola da gamba (with a low A string). If one is not available, it may be performed on a 6-string instrument; several ossia lines throughout the score accommodate this option.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE:
Though the piece need not be performed in equal temperament, the most severe tunings should be avoided.

Performers should feel free to ornament upon musical repeats.

Movement IV, which contains very few expressive markings, may be interpreted freely (in the manner of Renaissance polyphony).

Throughout, the harpsichord player should choose manuals and octave couplers according to the indicated dynamics in all movements besides Movement VI, which should be played on a lute stop.
The Muses
I. to Calliope, muse of epic poetry

Zachary Wadsworth
(b. 1983)

for Flying Forms
Marc Levine, Marie Dally, and Tami Morse

Baroque Violin
Viola da Gamba
Harpsichord

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44
II. to Erato, muse of erotic poetry

Duet
Rocking, expansive $q = 88$

Vln.

Gmb.

7

14

21

27

$\text{G.P.}$
III. to Thalia, muse of comedy

Allegro giocoso  \( \frac{d}{\text{line}} = 50 \)

(Alternating between manuals)

poco rall... a tempo
IV. to Polyhymnia, muse of sacred song

Vln. 

Gmb. 

Hpsd. 

Vln. 

Gmb. 

Hpsd. 

Vln. 

Gmb. 

Hpsd. 

Vln. 

Gmb. 

Hpsd.
V. to Terpsichore, muse of dance

Allegro $\frac{d}{4} = 152$

Vln.

Gmb.

Hpsd.
VI. to Euterpe, muse of music

Recitative
Adagio

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

Recitative
Adagio
slow roll (ad lib.)

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

Arietta

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

Arietta

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

10

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

10 Arietta \( \frac{d}{=50} \)

Vln.
Gmb.
Hpsd.

10 Arietta \( \frac{d}{=50} \)
VII. to Melpomene, muse of tragedy

Grave

Hpsd.

pp sempre, legato espressivo

hute stop

lute stop

Hpsd.

5

Hpsd.

9

Hpsd.

13

ad lib.

morendo
VIII. to Clio, muse of history

Allegro \( \text{\textit{q}} = 152 \)

Vln.

Gmb.

\( f \) pomposo

\( f \) pomposo

\( \text{OSSIA:} \)

\( \text{OSSIA:} \)

\( \text{OSSIA:} \)

\( \text{lamentoso} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)

\( \text{mf} \)
IX. to Urania, muse of astronomy

Misterioso \( \frac{d}{=54} \)

Vln.

Gmb.

Hpsd.

8

15
\textit{con gravità} \( q = 60 \)

\textit{con nostalgia} \( q = 72 \)
A SYMPHONY OF GLANCES

for wind ensemble

in four movements

Zachary Wadsworth
(2010)
A SYMPHONY OF GLANCES

Completed 7 March, 2010.

INSTRUMENTATION:
Piccolo
3 Flutes
3 Oboes
4 Clarinets in B-flat
2 Bass Clarinets in B-flat
2 Alto Saxophones
Tenor Saxophone
Baritone Saxophone
Bassoon
Contrabassoon

4 Horns in F
4 Trumpets in B-flat
2 Trombones
Bass Trombone
Euphonium
Tuba

Percussion (four players):
I. Tubular Bells, 3 Tom-Toms, Marimba, Triangle
II. Cymbal (crash and suspended), Vibraphone, Tam-Tam (shared with III)
III. Tam-Tam (shared with II), Crotales, Bass Drum (shared with IV)
IV. Bass Drum (shared with III), Glockenspiel, Snare Drum

PERFORMANCE NOTES:
In percussion parts, the symbol \( \Phi \) indicates that the resonating instrument should be muffled on the indicated beat.

The third movement features two aleatoric sections (m. 19 and m. 37). Within these sections, the performers play their repeating figures at the start-signal of the conductor, stopping as designated in the score. The suggested durations for these sections are marked in seconds above the top staff.

Movements III and IV are performed without pause.

1. Title by the composer. Movement titles from T. E. Hulme, “Fragments (From the note-book of T. E. Hulme, who was killed in the war.),” The New Age No. 1517, XXIX:23 (Thursday, October 6, 1921). Public domain.
| Score Title | A Symphony of Glances
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| Composer   | Zachary Wadsworth
| Date       | (2010)
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Three birds

A Symphony of Glances

score fragment by Z.W. Ulmen

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BRITTEN’S FIXED TRIADS:

TONAL STASIS AND ARPEGGIATION IN THREE OF HIS OPERAS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

by

Zachary Wadsworth

January 2012
This dissertation approaches the music of Benjamin Britten through a new analytical framework, describing and attempting to relate heretofore neglected instances of tonal, harmonic, and contrapuntal stasis in his works. Surveying instances of “fixed triads” in his stage works allows for an evaluation of extra-musical connotations with this very specific compositional technique. These descriptions also allow for some speculation about similar techniques in his instrumental compositions.

Using Arvo Pärt’s Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten (1980) as a point of entry into Britten’s employment of stasis, the analysis then identifies instances of stasis in three of his early operas: Peter Grimes (1945), Albert Herring (1947), and Gloriana (1953). These moments of stasis are discussed within the dramatic circumstances of each individual opera, in which they function both locally and formally, and more generally across the composer’s output. After identifying and relating them, their relationship to Britten’s personal and political life is also discussed. Finally, I show that fixed triads are related to ideas of control, order, and power in these dramatic works.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Compositions by Zachary Wadsworth have been broadcast on NPR’s *Performance Today* and BBC Radio’s *The Choir*, and performed in North and South America, Europe, and Japan by such ensembles as the choir of Westminster Abbey, the Washington National Opera Chorus, the Buffalo and Atlanta Philharmonic Orchestras, Long Leaf Opera, Boston Metro Opera, and the Yale Schola Cantorum. Select works are published by Novello, E.C. Schirmer, PRB Productions, and Alliance Music Publications. He has received several composition awards, including a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2007), three ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composers Awards (2008, 2007, 2002), and first prizes in the King James Bible Composition Awards (2011), the ASCAP Lotte Lehmann Foundation Art Song Competition (2007), the first Long Leaf Opera One Act Opera Competition (2007), the Chamber Music Rochester Young Composer Competition (2008), the Boston Choral Ensemble Commission Competition (2007), and the Pacific Chorale Young Composer Competition (2007). Recordings of his works *O Saving Victim* and *Beati Quorum Remissae* are available on the Gothic record label. Wadsworth is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music (BM, 2005) and Yale University (MM, 2007).
dedicated to Tim Pyper
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this project would not have been possible without generous input from my three committee members: Steven Stucky, Roberto Sierra, and Annette Richards. Their creative and eloquent approaches to music scholarship inspired me at every stage of the writing process, and I sincerely thank them for their patience, guidance, and support.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the many Cornell faculty members who challenged me to look more closely at the music I love. Courses with James Webster, David Yearsley, Steven Stucky, Kevin Ernste, and Kristin Taavola were exhilarating, each deepening and broadening my appreciation for a wide variety of topics. I also must thank Bonna Boettcher, who taught me the research skills without which I could never have tackled a dissertation. I also must thank the faculty who supervised my graduate instructorships: James Webster, Scott Tucker, Steve Pond, Roger Moseley, and Tom Schneller. Their excellent teaching and patient communication of pedagogical techniques affected me both as a teacher and as a person.

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Finally, I must thank Tim Pyper for leading by example.
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INTRODUCTION

ARVO PÄRT’S TINTINNABULATION AND BRITTEN’S FIXED TRIADS

When Benjamin Britten died in December 1976, the world of new music was undergoing dramatic change. While the avant-garde was producing substantial works in Western Europe (the year had seen premieres of Lutosławski’s Mi-parti and Berio’s Coro), a younger group of American composers came into their own with grand, memorable, and iconoclastic statements of their process-oriented philosophies; Steve Reich’s Music for 18 Musicians was premiered on April 24 in New York’s Town Hall, and Philip Glass’s Einstein on the Beach followed on July 25 in Avignon, France (and was famously repeated at the Metropolitan Opera the following November).

Though geographically and politically remote from these celebrated premieres in the West, new music behind the Iron Curtain also changed dramatically in 1976. Perhaps due to the political realities of Soviet influence, however, these changes only became apparent over time. In December of that year, Polish composer Henryk Górecki finished his Third Symphony, a starkly minimalist work which only became widely known after a record-breaking CD release in 1991. Earlier that same year, the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt made a now-famous stylistic shift. Though in his earlier works he had experimented with serial and collage techniques, Pärt reemerged after a much-discussed crisis of musical confidence with a dramatically reduced, tonally inflected compositional voice.1 One of his first works in this new style, written only months after Britten’s death, was a single-movement lament for string orchestra and

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1 See Chapter 4 of Paul Hillier, Arvo Pärt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
tubular bell entitled *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*.

Between the continued success of the European avant-garde and the burgeoning influence of the minimalist school in the United States and Eastern Europe, Benjamin Britten seemed far from the compositional forefront, especially outside the United Kingdom.² Why, then, did Pärt memorialize Britten so publicly, especially in one of the first and most successful works in his new, minimalist style? What about Britten’s music inspired the dedication, especially from a composer first proudly aligned with the avant-garde, then with minimalism? In order to answer these questions, we must first examine the details of Pärt’s compositional system.

**Arvo Pärt and the Origins of “Tintinnabulation”**

The earliest and most structurally pure work to arise after Pärt’s stylistic transformation was the piano miniature *Für Alina*, composed in 1976. Written in an unchanging B aeolian mode, this work consists of two voices over a tonic drone in the lowest register. The contour of the highest voice is freely composed and consists of steps and leaps, whereas the lower voice exclusively arpeggiates a B minor triad (see Figure 1.1).³

Compared to the avant-garde works of the time (and of Pärt’s own past), *Für Alina* represents a subversive reclamation of simplicity, both in its embrace of

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the diatonic pitch collection and its straightforward rhythms. It does not, however, represent the complete break with modernity that some have suggested; in fact, Pärt applies serialized generative processes to both pitched and rhythmic parameters.

The most thorough, best-known analysis of Pärt’s music to date is conductor Paul Hillier’s 1997 book Arvo Pärt, part of the Oxford Studies of Composers series. Hillier highlights the strict pitch-generating processes common in Pärt’s works from the late 1970s, a process the composer calls “tintinnabulation” (English) or “tintinnabuli” (Latin). Translated literally, this word (the genitive form of “tintinnabulum”) means “like/of a bell.” Pärt, with characteristic directness, explains that this music is

4 Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. “tintinnabulum.”
characterized by the ever-presence of the tonic triad: “the three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.” Hillier points out that the process of tintinnabulation is in fact much more complicated than the composer indicates.

In the simplest form of tintinnabulation, one stepwise-moving voice (called the “M[elodic]-voice” by Hillier) generates a second, arpeggiating voice (the “T[intinnabuli]-voice”). The two voices move homophonically and in similar motion, and the T-voice occupies a triad pitch consistent in relationship to the M-voice.

Revisiting Für Alina (1976), it now becomes apparent that the piece is quite a bit more rigorously composed than it may initially appear. The top staff is occupied by the freely composed M-voice, and the T-voice on the second staff occupies the 1st position superior, for example, places the T-voice on the closest triad pitch above the M-voice. Figure 1.2 shows Hillier’s illustration of the simplest examples over a natural minor scale.

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6 Hillier, Arvo Pärt, 92.
7 Ibid., 94. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.
position, inferior, in Hillier’s terminology\(^8\) (see again Figure 1.1). But pitch isn’t the only controlled element; like its pitched parameters, the piece’s metrical design is also formalized. Starting in the first bar and growing until measure 7, each bar contains one additional black note head (“beat”) than the one preceding it. Then the process reverses, with each bar contracting by one “beat” until a final cadential expansion in m. 15 (see Table 1.1).\(^9\) Thus, with the exception of the freely composed top line and a very few dynamic and pedal markings, the entire work is generated by the pitched and metrical processes at play.

The musical processes at play in \textit{Für Alina} have caused the work to be widely viewed as a turning-point in Pärt’s compositional life, and they have informed nearly all of the works that have followed it. And though Pärt’s recent music is far more complex (and not nearly so analytically pure), elements of tintinnabuli persist. This extensive, faithful, but ever-changing employment of tintinnabulation is largely what has led to Pärt’s great popularity and commercial success, and it has also put him at the forefront (Richard Taruskin refers to him as a “pioneer figure”\(^{10}\)) of the so-called

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Table 1.1. Additive/subtractive metrical design in \textit{Für Alina}

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\(^8\) One notable exception arrives in the eleventh bar of the piece, in which the T-voice breaks the mould and lands on a non-triadic C-sharp. At the same moment, the pedal (and the corresponding bass drone) is released, and the tintinnabular spell is momentarily and dramatically broken. At this moment in the original manuscript, Pärt drew a flower over the offending pitch.

\(^9\) Pärt, \textit{Für Alina}.

“Holy” minimalist school. But when theorists and biographers examine the influences behind Pärt’s turn toward tintinnabulation, they encounter difficulty, stemming in no small part from Pärt’s obfuscation of the matter. His discussion of tintinnabulation tends to focus on the spiritual and emotional elements of his music, rather than the technical or historical. One example of this opaque rhetoric is: “Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers—in my life, my music, my work.”11 And though he has used questions of influence to distance himself from his peers (“my work ... has not been influenced by the same things as Western composers”12), he has offered little else.

Scholars have cast a wide net across music history in attempts to identify possible influences on Pärt’s tintinnabular style. Paul Hillier focuses on Pärt’s education in early Western music, comparing structural elements in his works to those in music written before 1600, from “plainsong ... to the earlier developments in polyphony, to the Notre Dame school, Machaut, and the ars nova, and thence on into the Renaissance.”13 American musicologist Carol Matthews Whiteman focuses instead on Pärt’s Eastern Orthodox religion, pointing out that much of the music in that tradition “is triadic with step motion melodies gracing the top line, while other voices outline the triad.”14 British musicologist Wilfrid Mellers mentions plainsong and other

11 Hillier, Arvo Pärt, 87.
12 Kirsten Louise Yri, “Medieval Uncloistered: Uses of Medieval Music in Late Twentieth Century Culture” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2004), 220.
13 Hillier, Arvo Pärt, 78-79.
14 Carol L. Matthews Whiteman, “Passio: The Iconography of Arvo Pärt” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1997), 19.
early music styles but focuses instead on Pärt’s position in the twentieth century, highlighting the possible influence of “the liturgical music of Stravinsky, Satie’s Socrate, and occasionally the ceremonial music of Janácek.”\textsuperscript{15} Finally, Canadian musicologist Kirsten Yri avoids early music altogether and focuses on Pärt’s deep personal knowledge of the avant-garde, writing that the theoretical rigors of tintinnabulation “can be linked to integral serialist works such as Boulez’ Structures or Stockhausen’s Kreuzspiel, where the form, content, and rhythm of the work are predetermined by the series.”\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the breadth and variety of these proposed influences, most analysts have unquestioningly accepted Hillier’s proposed influences, and Pärt’s exclusive connection to early music has been embraced as fact not only in the scholarship surrounding his music, but also even more dramatically in the branding and reception of his music. But if we are to learn anything from the breadth and variety of the influences offered above, it should certainly be that Pärt’s music is conversant with and informed by many traditions across music history, while not stemming exclusively from any particular one. Yet one composer noticeably absent from almost all discussions of Pärt’s influences is the recipient of the only titular dedication in Pärt’s output: Benjamin Britten.\textsuperscript{17} Just months after Britten’s death in 1976 (and just

\textsuperscript{15} Wilfrid Mellers, liner note for Hilliard Ensemble, Brass Ensemble, Staatsorchester Stuttgart, Dennis Russell Davies (conductor), Arvo Pärt Arbos, ECM 1325, 2000, compact disc.
\textsuperscript{16} Yri, “Medieval Uncloistered…”, 233-34.
\textsuperscript{17} The connection between the two composers is mentioned by Deborah Garwood, though she inaccurately writes, “Britten was an early supporter of Pärt, Tavener, and other composers who looked back to early liturgical music as a source of inspiration.” There is no evidence that Britten ever met, or even knew, Pärt, and Pärt’s music never appeared at the Aldeburgh Festival during Britten’s life. Ivan Jiminez also mentions the connection, attributing it to the “accessibility” of Britten’s music. Deborah Garwood, “A Liturgy of Division: Sacred Music,”
months after Pärt’s stylistic transformation), Pärt composed the touching memorial
*Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* (1977) for string orchestra and tubular bell.

While dedications and memorial compositions do not necessarily indicate that one
composer was influenced by another, they certainly raise the question.

**Benjamin Britten and Arvo Pärt**

In most ways, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* is like any other tintinnabuli
work by Pärt, though it certainly employs musical gestures rich with mournful
associations. As in *Für Alina*, the M-voice (first appearing in the top half of the divided
first Violins) is generated through an additive process: it starts with one note and adds
additional descending pitches one at a time, eventually forming a falling A minor scale.
The accompanying T-voice, again like that of *Alina*, occupies the 1st position, inferior
(see Figure 1.3). Unlike in the earlier piece, however, Pärt layers five versions of this
two-voice complex at different proportional rates of change, creating a mensuration
canon (see Table 1.2). Once each voice reaches its end, it simply sustains a triad pitch
of A minor until the final voice, in the cellos and contrabasses, reaches its final low
tonic. The only additional material in the piece consists of a single tubular bell, rich in
funereal and sacred symbolism, repeating a single short–short–long rhythmic pattern
on the tonic pitch until it is disrupted in the last measures.

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Structural Depth, Expressive Depth: Ladders from Line to Sonority in Arvo Pärt and Henryk
Mikołaj Górecki” (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 1.

18 Arvo Pärt, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* (Wien: Philharmonia Partituren in der

19 Ibid.
The descending A minor scales and the sadly tolling church bell certainly combine to create a solemn, respectful memorial for Britten, but there are also deeper musical connections to the dedicatee. The surface details of Cantus, for example, are similar to the famous “Now the Great Bear and Pleiades” aria from Britten’s Peter.

The effectiveness of this memorial has resulted in its use (to powerful effect) in several films, including Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), Keith Gordon’s Mother Night (1996), and Koreyoshi Kurahara and Roger Spottiswoode’s Hiroshima (1995).
Grimes; both pieces prominently feature overlapping descending scales played by strings (see Figure 1.4). But such superficial similarities still don’t prove influence. For that, thankfully, we can rely on the composer’s own words. With uncharacteristic honesty, Pärt makes it very clear that his Cantus is not only a memorial for a famous composer, but that it also stems from a deep personal appreciation for and connection with Britten’s music:

Why did the date of Benjamin Britten’s death—December 4, 1976—touch such a chord in me? During this time I was obviously at the point where I could recognize the magnitude of such a loss. Inexplicable feelings of guilt, more than that even, arose in me. I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music—I had had the impression of the same kind of purity in the ballads of Guillaume de Machaut. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally—and now it would not come to that.

Pärt pinpoints the “unusual purity” of Britten’s music, a trait echoed in Britten’s own stated compositional aims; in an interview with R. Murray Schafer, he said, “my technique is to tear all the waste away; to achieve perfect clarity of expression, that is my aim.” Simplicity and purity are also recurring refrains in Pärt’s descriptions of his tintinnabular style, and he tends to align these descriptors with a tangible element in his music: the ever-present, unchanging triad (or, in Hillier’s terminology, the T-voice). Close examination of Britten’s music reveals the regular employment of unchanging triads that, though they do not follow the strict rules of Pärt’s tintinnabular style, could presage it.

The point of this dissertation is not, however, to prove that the origins of

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21 Benjamin Britten, Peter Grimes (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1963), 198.
22 Hillier, Arvo Pärt, 103.
23 R. Murray Schafer, British Composers in Interview (London: Faber, 1963), 118.
tranquillo

Who, who, who, who, who_

T. can turn skies back and begin again?

Figure 1.4. Peter Grimes, Act I, reh. 76

Peter Grimes, Op. 33 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Montagu Slater
© Copyright 1945 by Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers, Ltd. Reprinted by Permission.
Pärt’s tintinnabulation lie in Britten’s compositional language (if such a thing can ever be proven!). And despite any theoretical similarities, the two composers employ these techniques to very different ends. What this discussion of Pärt has provided, however, is a kind of forensic clue; by allying himself with Britten in such an important early work, Pärt encourages the attentive analyst to look more closely at Britten’s compositional style. In following Pärt’s lead, I intend to reveal a heretofore unexplored, but nevertheless salient, aspect of Britten’s music: his use of what I call “fixed” triads.

**Britten’s Fixed Triads**

Among Britten’s many clever formalized compositional devices, hardly any have attracted more attention than his passacaglias. Darrell Handel marvels at Britten’s wide variety of expressive uses of this ancient form, which sometimes become “point[s] of stability,” while other times serving “tension-building” functions. Indeed, Britten’s ability to adapt such devices to highly disparate dramatic circumstances is well documented, and the variety of compositional devices is notable: from fugues, ostinati, and canon structures to drones and reciting tones. Noticeably absent from theoretical and musicological literature, however, is a more subtle manifestation of stasis in Britten’s music: the regular employment in his works of unchanging triads in one voice or section (hereafter referred to as “fixed” triads), often in counterpoint with non-triadic contrasting material. This technique appears often throughout Britten’s

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catalogue, especially in compositions written before 1955.²⁵

In the final movement of Britten’s String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25 (1941), for example, the transition into the D major coda prominently features fixed triads. Above an upwardly arpeggiating F major triad in the cello, the viola drones the pitch F and the two violins descend in thirds through the F Lydian scale (see Figure 1.5).²⁶ The dramatic arrival at the downbeat of bar 651 is at once the culmination of the music that came before it (which features ever higher accented chords) and the start of a cascading registral contraction (and a composed accelerando) of the ensemble’s four voices, which finally meet at the unison F in bar 657. They then explode outward into a wide-ranging, boisterous coda. Thus, these seven bars provide both a sense of arrival

²⁵ Thankfully, few attempts have been made to divide Britten’s catalogue into compositional periods. But, generally speaking, his later works (especially those of the 60’s and 70’s) are less likely to embrace triadic harmony than those from previous decades, and therefore contain less extensive use of fixed triads.

²⁶ Benjamin Britten, *String Quartet No. 1, Opus 25* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1942), 36.
and of propulsion into the final D major section of the piece. They focus and direct the material that preceded them and channel it neatly into the piece’s conclusion.

This is not an isolated instance. Indeed, Britten regularly employs fixed triads to emphasize moments of clarity, control, and focus in his music. As we will see, however, Britten adapts this expression of control to suit a wide variety of dramatic circumstances, often quite different than those found here in the First String Quartet. In the following chapters, I will highlight several instances of fixed triads, focusing on the relationship between their compositional construction and dramatic context. In order to illustrate this, I will limit my analysis to three of Britten’s early operas: Peter Grimes (1945), Albert Herring (1947), and Gloriana (1953). Close examination of the dramatic circumstances in which fixed triads are found will provide some tangibility to the otherwise abstract ideas of control and focus.
CHAPTER 1
MUSIC OF LOST CONTROL: FIXED TRIADS IN PETER GRIMES

At the end of Act II of Britten’s Peter Grimes, Op. 33, the title character’s
apprentice, John, falls down a cliff to his early death, and Peter’s last chance to
re recuperate his tarnished image in the town dies with the poor boy. This is a moment
of abject horror, musically dramatized with a deafening orchestral climax, followed by
a haunting scream and a cold, disturbing evocation of silence in the shivering celesta
and unsettled solo viola. But out of this emptiness, with all seemingly lost for Peter, it
is a surprise (and perhaps a relief to some) that, at the opening of the next Act, Britten
supplies the fifth orchestral Interlude (“Moonlight”). Far from the hopelessness of the
previous Act’s finale, this Interlude is beautiful, lush, and serene, scored mainly for
strings, horns, and low winds, punctuated by momentary glints of light from flutes
and the harp.

Set in an unambiguous E-flat major, the Interlude unfolds straightforwardly
through its first several phrases and could be seen at first as consisting of a melody
(in the cellos) with accompaniment (in the remaining instruments). Viewed more
carefully however, the eight bars fall neatly into three contrapuntal layers: a melodic
line moving almost entirely by step, an arpeggiating line initially locked on the tonic
triad, and an unmoving tonic drone (see Figure 2.1).\(^\text{27}\) The meditative spell of the fixed

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\(^{27}\) Britten, Peter Grimes, 396. The technical similarity to Pärt’s Für Alina, which also consists
of these three layers, is noteworthy, especially in light of the Introduction’s discussion of the
two composers. In another similarity to Pärt’s later style, the two moving layers in Britten’s
Interlude move in an identical contour – as the stepwise voice rises, so does the arpeggiating
voice.
E-flat triad is soon broken, however, when the music veers into other harmonic areas in bar 8. But Britten regularly returns to E-flat major throughout the Interlude, and he employs a similar fixed E-flat section (complete with melodic, arpeggiating, and drone layers) for a full twelve bars in the Interlude's ringing climax at rehearsal 3 (see Figure 2.2).\textsuperscript{28}

These examples are clear instances of fixed triads as defined in this dissertation’s introduction, and their explicit delineation in the score (Britten assigns them exclusively to certain instruments rather than hiding them, fragmented, across several) reveals unmistakable compositional intent. The goal of this intent is, however, far less clear than the technique itself; indeed, compositional goals can generally be quite difficult to isolate in music without text. In this instance, we can state that the fixed triads confuse simple designations of melody and accompaniment, as both moving voices contribute equally to the melodic character of the music (and neither

\footnote{Britten, \textit{Peter Grimes}, 401-3.}
Figure 2.2. Reduction, Peter Grimes, Act III, reh. 3

Peter Grimes, Op. 33 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Montagu Slater
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moving voice is above the other – the E-flat drone occupies the treble, even at the climax). And while the three lines combine to create three-note chords, no single voice or group provides harmony underneath any other. This contrapuntal complex, a surprisingly regular feature in Britten’s music, subverts and confuses the triad’s traditional dominance in tonal harmony. However, this subversion seems to be more a side effect than the primary function of fixed triads in this instance.

In order to better understand the reasons behind Britten’s employment of fixed triads here, it helps to examine the context, both dramatic and musical, of the Interlude. While Britten wrote that the Moonlight Interlude would simply evoke “the play of moonlight on the waves of the sea,” and “summer night, seascape quiet,” it is insufficient to view the section as a simple sea-portrait, functioning outside the dramatic sweep of the opera. While the Sea Interludes were indeed composed as responses to formal problems with the design of the libretto, it takes very little imagination to see that the five other Interludes function as active participants in the drama.

But the Moonlight Interlude, warm in sentiment yet austere in construction, presents problems for analysts. Stephen Arthur Allen acknowledges this problem,}

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31 Though this has been the prevailing analysis of the Moonlight Interlude, Eric Walter White echoes prevailing sentiment when he writes that the Interlude is “not so developed from the musical point of view,” calling it a “descriptive piece.” Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, 2nd Edition (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983): 133.
32 White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, 128.
writing that the fifth Interlude “is the interlude that seems to stand most independently of the opera, as if outside it.”

But thankfully, he goes on to offer tangible connections between the Interlude and other music in the opera:

Edward Sackville-West noted that it had greater depth of feeling than the other five Interludes, and it may be felt that the preponderance of ‘feminine’ thirds in a stable rhythmic structure is of the same equilibrium as much of Ellen’s music elsewhere in the opera. On a subjective level the music seems to have a feminine quality, and seems to evoke metaphysical sighing and crying.

Unfortunately, he stops there, calling his words “oblique.” The supposition that thirds carry a “feminine” connotation throughout the opera (or even in general) is indeed an overstatement, but when one focuses instead on fixed triads, which are replete with thirds, the theory yields tangible results; throughout Peter Grimes, fixed triads are associated with female characters, especially the main female character and Grimes’s love interest, Ellen Orford.

Taking this connection between Ellen and fixed triads into account, Britten’s placement of the Moonlight Interlude immediately after the apprentice’s death gains new meaning. Ellen has attempted throughout the opera’s first two Acts to provide comfort and safety both to Grimes and his apprentice, and John’s death underscores Ellen’s powerlessness; despite her best efforts to reform Peter and shelter John, she has failed at both. So when, after the tragedy of John’s death, Britten brings back musical materials associated with Ellen, it serves as an introspective, consolatory meditation.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 86.
on her powerlessness, and an expression of remorse that Grimes himself could never provide.

Throughout *Peter Grimes*, female characters serve both as civilizing and as nurturing presences, whether they be virtuous (as, most agree, is Ellen) or less so (Auntie, the local pub owner, and her “nieces,” the town prostitutes). Almost universally, though, their intentions are thwarted by the men around them. Throughout the opera, these moments of attempted control (and resulting powerlessness) are connected with fixed triads. The rest of this chapter will further examine this musical coupling.

**Ellen and Peter’s “Love Duet”**  

The first instance of Ellen’s exerting control over Peter takes place even before the start of the first scene. In the Prologue, Peter has been found largely blameless in the death of his previous apprentice, but he is still irate at the continuing gossip of the townspeople, challenging the lawyer Swallow to “Let me speak, let me stand trial, / ... Let me thrust into their mouths, / The truth itself, the simple truth.”  

Denied the opportunity to explain himself to the community, Peter is left alone in the Moot Hall with Ellen. Starting at rehearsal 9, they embark on an unaccompanied duet in which

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36 While analysts tend to avoid describing Peter and Ellen’s relationship as a loving one, and indeed the libretto only refers to friendship, Britten himself called this section the “love duet,” and Peter Pears went on record to say that, at the very least, “Ellen Orford ... loves [Grimes].” Peter Pears, “On Playing Peter Grimes,” in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 105; and Allen, “He Descended Into Hell: Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford, and Salvation Denied,” 83.

Britten underscores the distance between them by placing them in two different keys: Peter in F minor and Ellen in E major (though this difference is undercut slightly by the two keys' shared third scale degree).

After Peter has his chance to condemn the town's “Peeping Toms” and “Borough Hate,” he finally calms down and acquiesces to Ellen's soothing placations, joining her not only in sentiment but also in key signature; he shifts down to E major, and they sing a wide-ranging unison melody expressing their mutual appreciation for one another. This is the first of many instances in *Grimes* of Ellen's exerting subtle control over Peter, and while his being “won over” by her key signature is well documented in the literature, there is another important musical element at play: a fixed E major triad.

In fact, of Ellen's 58 pitches before Peter's key-signature acquiescence, all but 15 of them belong to the E major triad (see Figure 2.3). This subtle but persistent repetition of triad pitches provides Ellen with important characterization: it reveals her to be tenacious and forthright, yet gentle and patient (perhaps in the way that only a schoolteacher can be). And her persistence pays off; she soothes Peter's temper and saves him from an embarrassing confrontation with the townspeople.

In so doing, Ellen becomes both a strong influence on Peter and a place of refuge for him, a role represented symbolically at the end of the first Act. As the town

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38 Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 92.
41 It is important to note that, though Grimes defends his point of view, his F minor music is quite scalar and not nearly so forcefully arpeggiating as hers. Britten never allows Grimes any substantial fixed triad sections, reserving that technique for Ellen and the opera's other female characters.
prepares for a coming storm, Peter is left alone on the street to muse on his impending struggles, asking the rhetorical question, “What harbour shelters peace? / Away from tidal waves, away from storm...” (see Figure 2.4a). His rhetorical questions, left without answer by both the libretto and the music, lead directly into the second
Interlude, a turbulent evocation of the storm.

In the middle section of this Interlude, at rehearsal 60, the orchestra returns to the musical material of Grimes’s preceding aria, providing possible answers to his questions; at rehearsal 60, the wide-ranging melody, with its characteristic leap of a major ninth (motive ‘X’), returns in the winds and strings. At the moment in the melody where Grimes initially sang the word “peace,” however, Britten alters the accompanying material. Where before this word was accompanied in the orchestra with overlapping rising A minor scales, Britten now alters this harmonic point of arrival, layering two meaningful references: Ellen’s arpeggiating fixed triads on A major and the musical motive from Grimes’s line, “Away from tidal waves” (motive ‘Y’). The latter is presented at two rhythmic levels: eighth notes in the high winds and in quarter notes the brass (see Figure 2.4b). The fixed triads are also layered to achieve maximal exposure of A major triad pitches; in the strings, for example, upward-rising triads are staggered by one eighth note. By layering this A major saturation with the ‘Y’ motive, Britten subtly reveals that Ellen, represented by fixed triads, is Peter’s “harbour,” and she can help to keep him “away from tidal waves, away from storm.” Thus, in this quiet central section (another “harbour,” perhaps?) of the violent Storm Interlude, Britten offers Ellen as the answer to Grimes’s rhetorical questions. In so doing, he reveals the great power she holds as Grimes’s only refuge. But, ironically, Peter doesn’t realize this – only the orchestra does. And soon, Ellen and Peter’s relationship begins to crumble.

43 Britten, Peter Grimes, 156-57.
Figure 2.4b. ‘X’ and ‘Y’ motives in reduction of Peter Grimes, Act I, reh. 60

Peter Grimes, Op. 33 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Montagu Slater
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In Act II, scene 1, Ellen discovers that Peter has mistreated his apprentice, when she notices a bruise on the young boy’s neck. This disturbing discovery yields two sad realizations for Ellen; first, she has been complicit in the child’s abuse by helping Peter to secure him against the townspeople’s better judgement. Second, and more relevant to this discussion, her attempts to control and reform Peter have been fruitless. Her initial reaction, however, communicates a lack of surprise: she sings, “A bruise. Well ... It’s begun.”\(^4^4\) For this line, Britten once again returns to an arpeggiated triad, B major (see Figure 2.5).\(^4^5\)

Why Britten would return to Ellen’s cajoling material from the initial duet for this wrenching moment is not obvious. But, looking at the whole of *Peter Grimes*, it becomes clearer: this line represents a turning point in his employment of fixed triads (and arpeggiation in general). Where before they represented Ellen’s attempts to control and improve Peter, for the rest of the opera these techniques appear when Ellen muses on her failure to control the sad circumstances unfolding around her.

One such moment arrives at the end of this same scene in the famous women’s quartet. When Grimes angrily strikes down Ellen Orford after she asks about the boy’s

\(^4^4\) Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 104.
\(^4^5\) Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 260.
Table 2.1. Structural and harmonic analysis, *Peter Grimes*, Act II, reh. 39-43

Dashed boxes indicate the employment of fixed triads.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>39</th>
<th>Flute duet</th>
<th>‘Verse’ 1</th>
<th>Flute duet</th>
<th>‘Verse’ 2</th>
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<td></td>
<td>2 Nieces</td>
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<td>Auntie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>B♭ major</td>
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<td>B♭ major</td>
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<th>‘Verse’ 3</th>
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<td></td>
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<th>‘Refrain’ 3</th>
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<th>43</th>
<th>Flute duet</th>
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bruise, the townspeople march away to his hut to confront him over his mistreatment of both her and the young apprentice. Only four women are left on stage: Ellen, Auntie (the town innkeeper), and her two Nieces. As they sing a quartet about their struggles with men, Britten derives almost all of their musical material from bi- or tritonal combinations of fixed arpeggiating triads. The quartet can be broken into three different musical ideas: modulatory flute duets, fixed arpeggiation with recitative-style singing, and a full ensemble refrain on the words: “Do we smile or do we weep / Or wait quietly till they sleep?”

Table 2.1 provides a structural and harmonic analysis of the quartet.

After the initial two-flute introduction, the two nieces arpeggiate a B-flat major triad, singing, “From the gutter, why should we / Trouble at their ribaldries?” above rocking C minor arpeggios in the strings (Figure 2.6a). After another brief flute interjection, Auntie sings within an identical harmonic framework (Figure 2.6b). At cadences of both of these phrases, this B-flat/C bitonal haze resolves to D-flat major, though this cadence is also destabilized, both through inversion and by the regular return of downward-falling, modulating seconds in the flute (accompanied by low horns and double basses). After the first refrain, the four voices then return in freer, recitative-like overlapping statements, all exclusively using the pitches of an A major triad, accompanied by B minor arpeggios in the strings. Once again, this extended

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49 Britten, Peter Grimes, 341.
50 Ibid., 341-42.
And shall we be ashamed because we comfort men from their gutters?

From the gutter, why should we trouble at their discomfort?

First Niece

Second Niece

Orch.

B-flat major

C minor

Figure 2.6a. Reduction, Peter Grimes, Act II, reh. 39

Peter Grimes, Op. 33 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Montagu Slater
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Figure 2.6b. Reduction, Peter Grimes, Act II, before reh. 40

Peter Grimes, Op. 33 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Montagu Slater
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bitonal section resolves by a minor third from the vocal lines to C major (Figure 2.6c).\footnote{Britten, Peter Grimes, 343.}

After another refrain, Ellen is left alone to arpeggiate an F minor triad over an E-flat minor accompaniment in the strings, resolving now by a fifth to B-flat major (Figure...
These four sections are remarkable in their simplicity of design, faithfulness of execution, and fidelity to simple arpeggiation; only at phrase beginnings and cadences are extra-triadic pitches permitted, and all of them feature bitonal fixed triads at the distance of a major second.

This focus on arpeggiation even extends, albeit less strictly, into the quartet's three refrains. In each of these, fixed triads (sometime one triad, sometimes two) are maintained in the violins, oboe, and two Nieces, who simply arpeggiate upward until the climax of the phrase. Layered around these arpeggios are several stepwise-moving

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voices. Ellen and the Auntie, doubled by two trumpets, climb in parallel sixths (except where disallowed by register in the second refrain). The bass accompaniment also climbs stepwise, though at a slower rate (once per bar), in three-note trombone chords and broken arpeggios in the violas and cellos (see Figure 2.7a, b, and c for reductions.
of the three refrains). Thus, all of the sung sections of the quartet employ fixed arpeggiation in at least one musical layer. Even the recurring figure in the flutes evokes arpeggios; though perceived by the ear as consisting of descending seconds, the figure is written as staggered falling thirds (Figure 2.8).

53 Britten, Peter Grimes, 342, 344, 346.
54 Ibid., 344.
What is the compositional purpose of such extensive employment of fixed triads? Eric Walter White unhelpfully supposes that the musical material of the women’s lines (especially the obsessive dwelling on small pitch collections, and the fatigued pangs of the string accompaniment) are meant to “betray a sluttish weariness.” This literal approach focuses too much on the local musical affect, however, missing the large-scale relationships between the women’s music in the opera. Stephen Arthur Allen’s previously mentioned correlation of the interval of a third with Ellen, however, helps us to better understand Britten’s intentions.

This is the first moment in the opera when so many female characters are together on stage with no men present, and the maximal saturation of fixed triads is tied to this sudden freedom. Returning to the earlier discussion of the Moonlight Interlude, fixed triads were there employed to provide introspection, consolation, and calm. The regular intoning of an E-flat triad provided the baseline of stability and calm from which the music could depart for dramatic purposes, and to which it returned for its quiet end. Thus, the triad provides stability and emotional control. In the women’s quartet, however, stability takes a very different form. Throughout, the women sing of being left behind when their men go off to sea, and of providing selflessly for them when they return:

Auntie: When in storm they shelter here
And we soothe their fears away

Nieces: We know they’ll whistle their good-byes
Next fine day and put to sea. ...

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56 Allen, “He Descended into Hell . . .,” 85.
All:  
Do we smile or do we weep  
Or wait quietly till they sleep?  

Thus here, the obsessively intoning triads symbolize a stability that is not restful, but is rather drenched with anxiety. These women are expected to provide stability and comfort (both domestic and sexual) for their men, but they are often left adrift and discontented, clinging to whatever stability they can manufacture for themselves. They cling, in other words, to the notes of the triads they sing.

_The Embroidery Aria_

It is fitting, then, that fixed triads also permeate the musical surface when Ellen is allowed her own personal meditation in the Embroidery Aria of Act III, scene 1. The boy’s bruise in the previous Act was only the beginning of his troubles, as he falls (or is pushed, depending on the production) to his death at the end of the Act. Before the townspeople know his fate, however, Ellen finds the boy’s jersey, which has washed ashore, and she realizes what has likely happened. With the torn jersey (an embodiment of Grimes’s violence) in her hands, Ellen sings an aria reflecting on the act of sewing, which has changed from an idle act in her youth to an ominous one now:

Ellen:  
Embroidery in childhood was  
A luxury of idleness.  
A coil of silken thread giving  
Dreams of a silk and satin life.  
Now my broidery affords  
The clue whose meaning we avoid.  

My hand remembered its old skill –  
These stitches tell a curious tale.  
I remember I was brooding

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On the fantasies of children
And dreamt that only by wishing I
Could bring some silk into their lives ...

By now, Ellen fully realizes that her attempts to provide comfort to the boy
were all in vain, and that she failed both in trying to protect the boy and in trying to
civilize Peter. Unsurprisingly, fixed triads permeate the music of her lamentation.
Throughout the first several bars, the violins repeatedly chime a closed B minor triad
while the violas and cellos descend diatonically by step (Figure 2.9a). After a fair deal
of modulation in the orchestra, the aria reaches a D major climax at “bring some silk
into their lives.” Similarly to several previous (and forthcoming) examples, the violins
repeat a D major triad in various inversions as triads in the lower strings descend

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58 Montagu Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 111.
59 Britten, Peter Grimes, 439.
diatonically (Figure 2.9b). At this moment and throughout the aria, the safety and comfort of the repeated triad is broken by the moment's tragedy, as the harmony veers away for the line, “Now my broidery affords / The clue whose meaning we avoid.”

Not even the calm and stability of sewing (with its corresponding triadic comfort) can provide any safety for the young apprentice. Thus, while fixed triads provided stability earlier in the opera, their subversion underscores Ellen’s tragic loss of control in the women's quartet and the Embroidery Aria.

**The Mad Scene, and Grimes’s Death**

In Act III, scene 2, a dazed and disoriented Grimes returns to the stage to perform his famous, fragmented mad scene, accompanied only by a fog-horn tuba and a distant chorus singing his name. Throughout this scene, musical references to

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60 Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 442.
61 Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 111.
the opera’s earlier events reappear mosaic-like in Grimes’s frantic memory. Though he spends much of the scene singing and emphasizing his own name along with the offstage chorus, at one point after rehearsal 49, he thinks of Ellen. Previously, the women of the offstage chorus have always sung a D dominant seventh chord on the word “Grimes” after the men settle on B open fifths. But when the sopranos and altos unexpectedly land on an E-flat major triad, Peter’s thoughts suddenly turn to Ellen, and he sings, “Ellen. Give me your hand.” His vocal line resembles Ellen’s earlier arpeggiating melodies, and all of his pitches except one belong to the E-flat major triad (see Figure 2.10).

Though this is indeed a brief moment in the score, it is a touching one, as it reveals that Ellen’s nurturing of Grimes, though ineffective, was not

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63 Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 112.

64 Britten, Peter Grimes, 490.
unappreciated.

At the end of the mad scene, Ellen enters with another of Grimes’s sympathizers, Balstrode. Ellen approaches Peter first, singing, “Peter, we’ve come to take you home. / O come home out of this dreadful night.”\(^{65}\) For this line, she once again employs her arpeggiating style from the opening love duet, now outlining an F minor triad (see Figure 2.11).\(^{66}\) Here, just as before, she is trying to control Peter one last time, encouraging him to come home with her to be nurtured (presumably, back to health and sanity). Though Peter “does not notice her,”\(^{67}\) he goes on to recapitulate his “what harbour shelters peace” aria, a subconscious nod of appreciation to Ellen and his final statement in the opera.

**Summary**

In her survey of female characters in Britten’s operas, Ellen McDonald concludes that, with very few exceptions, the composer relies on two opposing archetypes for his female characters: “oppressors (powerful but destructive) or

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\(^{65}\) Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 113.

\(^{66}\) Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 492.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 493.
oppressed (sympathetic but powerless).” She calls Ellen Orford a “hidden oppressor,”

who

undeniably has some genuine sympathy for Grimes, but does she actually want to improve his situation, or does she want to perpetuate it so that she can keep playing the role of rescuer? By bringing Grimes’s new apprentice to him, she only gives Grimes further opportunities for brutality.

This characterization is not only unfair, but it is also inaccurate. Throughout the second half of the opera, Ellen expresses deep sadness and fear that she and Peter have “failed,” a sentiment that would be out of place in someone as conniving and monstrous as McDonald describes. And that Ellen would be so personally interested in violence against the young apprentice implies a malevolent sadism that is completely absent in both the libretto and the music.

While there are certainly problems with representations of women in Britten’s operas (especially in his next opera, The Rape of Lucretia), Ellen Orford stands out as one of the most fully fleshed characters of either gender in his dramatic output. This depth of characterization relies heavily, however, on musical analysis and motivic relationships. Preexisting scholarship points to key relationships and pitch motives to establish Ellen’s subtle civilizing power over Peter. This chapter’s reading, employing fixed triads, shows an even more subtle process of musical characterization: Ellen’s transformation from a nurturer (in control) to a victim (having lost control), returning in the final scene to her original state after Grimes, her victimizer, has suffered total personal collapse.

69 Ibid., 87.
70 Slater, “Peter Grimes,” 105.
Fixed triads reappear often in several of Britten’s later operas, and though they also tend to be connected to themes of control and stability, their employment is altered to suit quite different dramatic contexts.
CHAPTER 2
FUTILE PAGEANTRY: FIXED TRIADS IN ALBERT HERRING

Peter Grimes was followed in short succession by two chamber operas: The Rape of Lucretia (1946) and Albert Herring (1947). Lucretia seemed a polar opposite to the lush, grand operatic world of Grimes; here, Britten employed not a typical opera orchestra, but rather a chamber orchestra of twelve players (which, we now know, was not an entirely aesthetic decision\textsuperscript{71}). Also, in stark contrast to Grimes’s gritty verismo, Lucretia is more stylized, set in classical antiquity complete with Greek chorus. The only real similarity between the two, besides the unmistakable touches of Britten’s musical style, is their serious subject matter.

Albert Herring, on the other hand, shares much with Grimes (despite its modest instrumentation, identical to that of Lucretia). Both operas are set in small, fictional English coastal towns (the Borough in Grimes, Loxford in Herring), and both are told directly, without the frame of narration. Most importantly, both feature male title characters who have a troubled relationship with society. Unlike Grimes, however, Herring is a comedy, and so the outcome of this troubled relationship, as Philip Brett points out, is quite different:

In Peter Grimes (1945) a society bound together by its common battle against the sea ostracizes one of its own members because he doesn’t fit in. Tragedy results, however, only when the victim, internalizing

\textsuperscript{71} In his extremely thorough Selling Britten: Music and the Market Place, Paul Kildea describes Britten’s post-Grimes frustration with the “traditional and conservative management he had encountered at Sadler’s Wells.” Funding large operatic projects in Britain’s difficult post-War economic climate was surely an additional concern. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76.
society’s condemnation at the climax in Act II, scene I (“So be it, and God have mercy upon me!”), succumbs to the shame and self-hatred that eventually lead to his suicide ... *Albert Herring* (1947) mirrors *Grimes* ... but reinterprets the predicament of the individual against the crowd through comedy: the young Albert turns the tables on his oppressors.\(^{72}\)

Albert’s “predicament” stems from being selected as Loxford’s May King after none of the town’s young women are deemed virtuous enough for the more traditional role of Queen. The first scene of the opera’s second Act (sometimes jokingly called the “Coronation” scene) features the town’s overblown celebration of Albert’s virtue. Taken as a whole, the scene features one primary conflict: the tension between the townspeople’s desire for an orderly, memorable celebration (inspired especially by the prudish sentiments of Lady Billows, the town’s “elderly autocrat”\(^ {73}\)) and the subversive influence of Sid and Nancy, who spike Albert’s lemonade with rum to “loosen him up.”\(^ {74}\)

Britten employs highly varied musical materials to represent the scene’s many different threads of action, both local and large-scale. For this primary conflict, Britten uses fixed triads to represent the townspeople’s futile attempts to maintain control. This echoes the usage in *Peter Grimes*; in both, fixed triads are associated with characters whose attempts at controlling the world around them are undercut by outside forces (the male presence in *Grimes*, and Sid and Nancy’s mischief in *Herring*). But whereas the women’s low position in Borough society in *Grimes* provides a sense of tragedy to their powerlessness, the townspeople’s haughty and overblown attempts at order and

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74 Ibid., 256.
propriety in Herring imbue their powerlessness with great comedy. Thus, throughout the scene, Britten uses fixed triads to represent the overblown pageantry of Albert’s “Coronation,” while more chromatic music underscores the many entertaining missteps in the proceedings.

**The Preparation**

At the very opening of Act II, scene 1, a solo horn intones a “May Day fanfare” and is immediately followed by scurrying gestures in the winds (see Figure 3.1).

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76 Britten, *Albert Herring*, 223.
two utterances, one triadic and the other chromatic, modulatory, and timbrally fuzzy (due especially to the rolled suspended cymbal), repeat in alternation to form the Act’s orchestral introduction. Despite the scurrying material’s rapid motion through disparate keys (often related by thirds), the prevailing tonality of this section remains the fanfare’s F major. Even the harmonically unsettled scurrying material comes into line (albeit with a devious A-flat) at the climax of the introduction, as the curtain rises at rehearsal 2. While hardly an instance of fixed triads as defined in the previous chapter, the horn’s triadic fanfare gesture becomes an important structural marker throughout the scene, and it is developed and varied in many sections featuring fixed triads.

One such section occurs just minutes after the introduction. The scheming butcher’s assistant Sid arrives late to help set up for the afternoon’s events, and after being chastised by Florence Pike, Lady Billows’s housekeeper, for his tardiness, he and his girlfriend Nancy discuss the coming celebration (see Figure 3.2). Their generally positive attitude toward the afternoon’s event is accompanied by an unchanging F major chord in the strings, until Nancy asks Sid about the pre-celebration goings-on in the town. At this point, the F major horn call returns. Sid then describes the town’s Sunday morning church service, and he mocks the vicar’s prudish moralizing during his sermon. Britten underscores this jesting sacrilege with stately, bell-like fixed E-flat triads that alternate between the minor and major modes (see Figure

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77 Evocations of horn calls and bugling, featuring major triads with flattened sevenths, are prevalent throughout Britten’s output. This will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

78 Britten, Albert Herring, 236.
Figure 3.2. Reduction, *Albert Herring*, Act II, before reh. 6

Albert Herring, Op. 39 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Eric Crozier Text
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Throughout this section, the bass line exclusively rocks back and forth between E-flat and B-flat. Once Sid mentions Albert, however, the music (still locked over an unchanging E-flat drone) turns more modulatory, building to a climax as Sid reveals that he would like to liberate Albert from this emasculating humiliation: “I’d like to see him go for good.”

For this line, Britten recalls the opening May Day fanfare, except Sid now arpeggiates a D major triad. Overlapping with the end of Sid’s phrase, the horn enters at its original F major pitch level for yet another repeat of the opening

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80 Ibid., 240-41.
material (see Figure 3.4).  

At this point, the local schoolmistress, Miss Wordsworth, enters with her three pupils, and they rehearse a song they’ve written in celebration of Albert. Their entrance is accompanied by a virtuoso staccato flute line and pizzicato strings, alternating their fixed arpeggiation of E major and F-sharp minor seven. Almost immediately, though, the students become distracted by the wealth of delicious foods prepared for the event, and the music veers off course, held down only by an unchanging E drone in the bass while the harmonies above stray farther and farther

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81 Britten, *Albert Herring*, 240-41.
away, much like the students’ attention (see Figure 3.5). Only once the rehearsal is satisfactorily completed does the stable arpeggianting E major return in the plucked strings at rehearsal 18.

Throughout all of these events, fixed triads seem to underscore the orderly preparation for the day’s proceedings. Sid and Nancy’s F major section (Figure 3.2), for example, marks their impressed discussion of the setup for the May Day feast.

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And the E-flat section that follows (Figure 3.3) corresponds with Sid’s description of orderly, proper goings-on at church. Also, the fast-moving E major and C-sharp minor arpeggiation of Miss Wordsworth’s rehearsal (Figure 3.5) marks her (mostly futile) attempts at disciplined preparation of the feast’s musical entertainment. Conversely, the day’s unplanned events (Sid and Nancy’s scheming, the schoolchildren’s distraction, etc.) are painted with less fixed harmony.

Why, then, would Britten choose to mark Sid’s statement, “I’d like to see him go for good” (Figure 3.4) with triadic arpeggiation? After all, the statement is at best disruptive, and at worst mutinous. His musical line evokes the horn’s fanfare, which serves throughout the scene as both a structural marker and a heralding call. As it announces the many shifts of focus throughout the scene, the fanfare gesture exerts great control over its dramatic unfolding. By placing the motive in Sid’s voice, Britten subtly identifies him as the real impetus for the onstage action, rather than the naïve town busybodies. Thus, Britten uses the arpeggiating motive to reveal that, by wishing to liberate Albert from allegations of chastity, Sid takes control over the scene.83

This seizure of control occurs immediately following Miss Wordsworth’s rehearsal. With Nancy looking on, Sid pours rum in Albert’s lemonade, saying it will “just loosen him up and make him feel bright.”84 This action, the most destabilizing element in the scene, is synchronized with a musical joke from Britten; at the moment

83 Arnold Whittall goes further, discussing the fanfare motive in terms of its results on Albert’s life. Thus, beyond expressing momentary control within Act II scene I, the fanfare also “[promises] a new world of sensuality and self-assertion,” made available to Albert only through Sid and Nancy’s mischievousness. Arnold Whittall, “The Chamber Operas,” in The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 103.

84 Britten, Albert Herring, 256.
of pouring, the piano plays Wagner’s “Tristan chord” (though with its spelling corrected!), as a solo viola plays a rising chromatic scale, evoking the “love potion” leitmotif from Tristan und Isolde (see Figure 3.6). Here, at the moment of maximal disruption by Sid, the music becomes maximally chromatic, also winking at the well-informed opera listeners in the audience. This chromaticism, imbued with special symbolism through its ties to Wagner, serves as the foil to the scene’s cheery, orderly fixed triads. Much as in Tristan, this “potion” will irrevocably change the expected course of events.

Table 3.1 charts all of the subsections within this opening portion of the scene, including local and large scale key areas.

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85 Britten, Albert Herring, 256. See Eric Walter White, Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas, 156.
86 Britten’s relationship with Wagner was complicated; though he idolized him as a boy (he purchased a score of the “Prelude and Transfiguration” from Tristan at the tender age of 14), he would eventually come to criticize the Romantic excesses of his music. Christopher Mark, “Juvenilia (1922-1932),” in The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 21-22.
Table 3.1. Structural and harmonic analysis, *Albert Herring*, Act II, reh. 1-18

Dashed boxes indicate the employment of fixed triads.

<table>
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<td>“Churchyard” Aria</td>
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<td>Horn</td>
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<tr>
<td>End of Rehearsal</td>
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<td>Winds, Str Ms. W’wth</td>
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Table 3.1. Structural and harmonic analysis, *Albert Herring*, Act II, reh. 1-18

Dashed boxes indicate the employment of fixed triads.
The Procession & Introductions

Moments after Nancy tops off Albert’s rum-laced lemonade, dignitaries and guests begin arriving from church. Suitably, the May Day horn call has been transplanted to the tubular bells, where it will stay for the remainder of the scene, marking entrances and changes in onstage action. As townspeople arrive, for example, there are a series of two-person conversations about the event, punctuated by the bell’s arpeggiation. This pervasive repetition marks a change of key from the opening section’s F major to B-flat major. This dominant-to-tonic relationship mimics the shape of the scene: the preparation for Albert’s Coronation (F major / dominant) precedes the event itself (B-flat major / tonic).

At the end of the procession is Albert, dressed in a white suit and bedecked with flowers. After the chimes announce his presence (and Miss Wordsworth cautiously counts “One and two and...”87), the children sing their welcoming ode, “Glory to our new May King.” Set firmly in B-flat major, the double basses and cellos never leave their B-flat/F dyad as the children sing their hymn-like tune above.88 Despite any lack of attention or talent in their rehearsal, the three children (at least, according to the score) perform admirably. At their final, triumphant “Hail!,” the full orchestra features bombastic descending B-flat major arpeggios in the treble instruments, while the bass instruments descend diatonically through the B-flat

87 Britten, Albert Herring, 263.
major scale (see Figure 3.7, and note the similarity of construction to Britten’s First String Quartet, shown in Figure 1.5). The fixed B-flat grounding of the hymn and the vigorous fixed triads of the hymn’s downward-cascading final bars indicate that all, for now, is going according to plan.

Once again, though, the children almost put a wrench in the works. After a B-flat-oriented section of “chatter-recitative,” each child sings a short song in turn, and each is introduced by two elements: first, a B-flat major chord in the orchestra, then a different chord, vocally arpeggiated by Ms. Wordsworth as she sings the child’s name (see Figure 3.8). The recurring B-flat major chords throughout this section, thickly scored with harp, staccato winds, and tremolo strings, serve a similar function.

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89 Britten, Albert Herring, 367.
90 This effect, a Lutoslawski-like aleatoric fabric of several characters all singing at once, appears in operatic crowd scenes in both Albert Herring and Britten’s last opera, Death in Venice. Mervyn Cooke, Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 224.
91 Britten, Albert Herring, 269, 271, 272.
to the earlier fanfare calls: even as the key areas of each child’s song widely stray from the section’s B-flat tonality, these punctuating chords provide continuity and imply forward motion to the afternoon’s proceedings, despite the comically poor performance of each child.

The final child, Cis, performs so poorly that she breaks out in tears, accompanied by a Wagner-like, stinging chord in the sforzando winds. It takes platitudes from Mum (“Well done, dearie! Very nice I’m sure!”92) and Lady Billows

92 Britten, Albert Herring, 273.
(“Thank you children! And thank you Miss Wordsworth!”\textsuperscript{93}) to restore order and clear the air after the child’s emotional disruption. The ceremony’s dignity restored, Lady Billows invites the guests to take their seats, and the descending B-flat fixed triads from Figure 3.7 return at rehearsal 27. Once again, despite dramatic (and chromatic) disruptions, the ceremony moves forward, helped along by B-flat fixed triads.

Table 3.2 illustrates the substantial structural importance of these fixed triads in this section of the scene.

\textbf{The Ceremony}

The guests having now taken their seats, the ceremony itself begins with a series of speeches, each introduced by the vicar. The first, of course, comes from the event’s patroness, Lady Billows. At the end of the vicar’s introduction, the accompanying piano reaches a dominant-seventh chord on B-flat, implying a tonic of E-flat. Confirmed from the outset of Lady Billows’s speech, E-flat serves as the overarching tonic for the entire series of speeches. Thus, once again, large-scale dominant-tonic relationships help to illustrate the ceremony’s progression of events, from preparation (F major: V/V/E-flat) to entrance (B-flat major: V/E-flat) to the ceremony itself (I: E-flat).

Lady Billows’s speech begins with a pompous introduction, focusing on her ceremonial role:

\begin{verse}
I’m full of happiness
To be here in your midst
On such a day as this,
\end{verse}

\textsuperscript{93} Britten, \textit{Albert Herring}, 273.
Table 3.2. Structural and harmonic analysis, *Albert Herring*, Act II, reh. 19-27

Dashed boxes indicate the employment of fixed triads.
As honoured guest and patroness
Of the Loxford Urban District May Day Feast.

The first four lines of this speech are accompanied by an unmoving E-flat drone in the bass with stepwise-rising chords above. When the rising chords once again reach the tonic E-flat for the final line, Lady Billows arpeggiates an E-flat triad from the lowest to the highest registers. As if that weren’t enough, a four-bar orchestral interlude follows, continuing the arpeggiation in the winds and strings (see Figure 3.9).

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This pompous, ceremonial arpeggiation is reminiscent of the Act I, scene 1 pub scene in *Peter Grimes*, in which Auntie sings, “The ‘Boar’ is at its patron’s service,” as she arpeggiates a wide-ranging A major arpeggio. Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 58.

The assembled crowd, thinking the speech is finished, begins applauding. But Lady Billows has hardly started, and she launches into a stern lecture on the town’s slipping morals. This departure from the cheerful and ceremonial nature of the event is also marked by a departure from E-flat, once again employing less static music to emphasize disorderly behavior (though arpeggiation continues throughout). At the end of this diatribe, she accidentally drops her notes and launches into a series of rambling patriotic and moralistic platitudes:

King and Country! Cleanliness is next to...
God for England and Saint – Keep
Your powder dry and leave the rest to
Nature...! – Britons! Rule the deep!97

For each clichéd line, Britten employs fixed arpeggiation on a different triad: F major, D major, C-flat major, and E-flat major, respectively. At the tonic arrival in the last line, the crowd joins in, exclusively arpeggiating E-flat major with their shouts of “Hooray!” (see Figure 3.10).98 Even in this stale heap of “hooray”s, Britten was sure to include careful characterization. First to begin the “hooray”s are Florence (Lady Billows’s employee) and the Mayor, both of whom have a vested interest in both the afternoon’s orderly unfolding and the maintenance of Lady Billows’s public face. They are followed by the rest of the cast (excluding, of course, Albert). Whereas most of them sing “hooray” at least five times, Sid and Nancy, suspicious of (if not antagonistic toward) the event, only sing it twice.

Finally, after asking Albert to stand, Lady Billows ends her lengthy speech with

97 Crozier, “Albert Herring,” 141.
98 Britten, Albert Herring, 288-89.
Figure 3.10. *Albert Herring*, Act II, reh. 31 (transposed score)

Albert Herring, Op. 39 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by Eric Crozier

Text

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yet another massive arpeggiation of E-flat major (see Figure 3.11). This bombastic gesture is once again followed with an orchestral response outlining the same triad. Throughout Lady Billows’s speech, Britten’s thorough, even excessive, employment of the regal E-flat major triad serves several functions. While it paints Lady Billows as insufferably committed to tradition and morality, it also points to the inherent banality of her speech and, by extension, the event itself. It also, however, represents the pinnacle of the event’s orderly unfolding; after this bombastic speech, control is gradually taken away from the town council.

The series of speeches by influential townspeople that follow begin this process: the mayor self-promotes, the teacher gives Albert an inappropriate gift, and the superintendent has very little to say (and takes a long time to say it). When Albert himself is invited to speak, the music turns back to B-flat major (perhaps a kind of regression from Lady Billows’s pinnacle aria), and the arpeggiating tubular bells return. Whereas the earlier instances were unaccompanied, the bell is now laid on top of the orchestral response outlining the same triad.

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69 Britten, *Albert Herring*, 292-93.
of chromatic, imitative string music. Three times, these imitative lines reach a half-cadence on the momentary dominant of B-flat major. At the first two such arrivals, the townspeople desperately enjoin Albert to “say a word or two.”\textsuperscript{100} At the second arrival, the other characters exclusively arpeggiate the pitches of an F major dominant-seventh chord, a clear plea for Albert to keep from making a scene. On the third arrival at an F major dominant, he finally summons the will to speak, but can indeed only muster a “word or two,” as he fills the silence by singing “Er... er... Thank you very much”\textsuperscript{101} on the pitches B-flat and F (see Figure 3.12).\textsuperscript{102}

Throughout this section, two distinct elements interact: the arpeggiating tubular bell and vocal lines, and the freer, chromatic string music. While the latter illustrates the tension caused by Albert’s hesitancy to speak (and its corresponding chilling effect on the day’s otherwise happy events), the former once again emphasizes order and control. Whereas the fanfare motive has previously been used once for each entrance or shift in focus, its repetition here amplifies the townspeople’s nervous anticipation; no other character needed to be reminded about their duties, but the tubular bells’ fourfold ringing of the fanfare motive exerts a kind of bullying control over Albert, pushing him to conform again and again until he finally relents. So when Albert is eventually able to speak, his fidelity to the fanfare motive’s pitch content is an acquiescence to order and good etiquette, meager as his six-word response (counting the ‘Er’s) may be.

After this uncomfortable moment, the vicar saves the day, clearing the

\textsuperscript{100} Crozier, “Albert Herring,” 147.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Britten, \textit{Albert Herring}, 309-10.
palpable tension by leading the townspeople in another faux-hymn, “Albert the Good.” While fixed triads aren't present in this coronation anthem parody, it is firmly (if sarcastically) set in B-flat major, affirming the authority of the previous section’s fanfare motive. After Albert solicits “three cheers for Her Ladyship,” the resulting...

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103 Crozier, “Albert Herring,” 149.
round of “Hooray”s\textsuperscript{104} destabilizes the prevailing key, first emphasizing B-flat major, then C major, and finally A-flat minor. At this last “hooray,” any previous tonal or triadic authority is irrevocably undermined; Britten once again returns to the Tristan chord and the chromatically rising love potion leitmotif as Albert finally drinks his spiked glass of lemonade (see Figure 3.13).\textsuperscript{105} This action represents a turning point both in the scene and in the opera itself, as Albert’s “abdication” in the final Act is a direct result of this exposure to alcohol. Thus, the extreme chromaticism of the Tristan quotation not only represents the dizziness of intoxication, but it also represents a

\textsuperscript{104} Perhaps forebears to the “Cheers” chords from the end of the first Act of John Adams’ Nixon in China?

\textsuperscript{105} Britten, Albert Herring, 320.
Their authority firmly revoked by Wagner’s interference, fixed triads make only fleeting appearances throughout the remainder of the opera, and they tend only to refer back to the Coronation scene. What were originally celebratory and pompous gestures in traditionally ceremonial instruments (the horn and tubular bells) are now memories of their former selves, transplanted into the darker timbres of low winds and piano. In Act II, scene 2, for example, the fanfares return in the alto flute and bass clarinet (first in F major, the horn’s fanfare key, then in A major, and finally returning to F) as an inebriated Albert’s abdominal discomfort reminds him of the afternoon’s lavish spread of food, to which he can only reply, “Phew!” (see Figure 3.14). And later

And the music that immediately follows, a whirling and increasingly chromatic orchestral fugue on the faux-hymn “Albert the Good,” further dismantles the control held by the townspeople and their triads.

Belts too tight for tum. Loo-sen it out a notch. Re-lieve my poor old


Figure 3.14. (cont.)
in that same scene, the bell's B-flat May Day fanfare returns at pitch in the solo piano as Nancy condemns the event's perverse pageantry (see Figure 3.15). Thus, after only a few hours, the afternoon's events are but a distant memory, and their corresponding fixed triads are left behind as Albert explores a new (and darker) side of society.

Table 3.3 charts Britten's employment of fixed triads from Lady Billows's speech to Albert's intoxication.

**Summary**

Arnold Whittall writes that, in the Coronation scene, Britten's “main concern is to build the relatively short segments of characterization into large formal units, giving the scene as a whole an exhilarating sweep and momentum.” One of the ways he achieves this large-scale cohesion is through the use of recurring compositional devices, principal among which are fixed triads. Especially rich in symbolism due to

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Table 3.3. Structural and harmonic analysis, *Albert Herring*, Act II, reh. 27-46

Dashed boxes indicate the employment of fixed triads.
their association with horn calls, these fixed triads imply order, control, and ceremony, and they bind the Coronation scene’s many short and disparate sections together.

The countercultural (and more than anti-Victorian) thrust of *Albert Herring*, however, pushes away from traditional order in polite society; indeed, the semi-socialist implications of the opera’s ending (Albert gives free peaches to the town’s poor children), certainly ruffled quite a few traditionalist feathers at the opera’s premiere.¹¹⁰ So whereas the fixed triads of the women’s music in *Peter Grimes* were a tool employed to evoke sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, in *Albert Herring* they become a tool of the upper class, wielded to force a younger generation into uncomfortable and outdated societal roles. Once the older generation is subverted (first by Sid’s spiking of Albert’s drink, then in the third Act by Albert’s general defiance), their musical power diminishes, and fixed triads fall away.

¹¹⁰ One such displeased traditionalist was John Christie, the founder of Glyndebourne Opera, who is reported by Eric Crozier to have warned opening-night patrons, “This isn’t our kind of thing, you know.” Eric Crozier, “Staging First Productions I,” in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos: Illustrated with Designs of the First Productions*, ed. David Herbert (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 29.
CHAPTER 3

THE QUEEN’S ENTRANCE MUSIC: FIXED TRIADS IN GLORIANA

When Britten was commissioned in 1952 to write an opera celebrating Queen Elizabeth II’s recent coronation, he (perhaps unwittingly) submitted himself and his music to a level of political scrutiny to which none of his previous operas had been subjected. The resulting work, Gloriana (1953), stirred controversy and disagreement after its premiere during the coronation gala. The opera certainly stood out among all coronation commissions as one of the least mawkish; though it features a lengthy pageant scene praising the first Queen Elizabeth, it avoids hagiographic adulation by focusing on her humanity and emotional turmoil.\(^{111}\) Partly due to this complex and sometimes unflattering characterization of the Queen (and also due to the conservative musical tastes held by the opening night’s audience), the work’s reception was largely negative. One review, published in Maclean’s Magazine, expressed common sentiment in its title: “The One Sour Note of the Coronation.”\(^{112}\)

Despite the widely held view that Britten’s opera was inappropriate for such

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\(^{111}\) Most of the coronation commissions followed the party line. Healey Willan’s O Lord Our Governour, commissioned for the coronation itself, fits easily into the long tradition of coronation anthems. Typical of the post-coronation commissions was A Garland for the Queen (1953), featuring ten movements written by ten different composers (Bliss, Bax, Tippett, Vaughan Williams, Berkeley, Ireland, Howells, Finzi, Rawsthorne, and Rubbra). These short works employed politely patriotic references to Elizabethan music and were hardly more than “occasional” works. Arthur Bousfield and Garry Toffoli, Fifty Years the Queen: A Tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on Her Golden Jubilee (Toronto; Dundurn Press, 2002) 78. “Garland for the Queen, A,” in The Oxford Dictionary of Music, 2nd ed. rev., edited by Michael Kennedy, Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e4141 (accessed June 14, 2011).

\(^{112}\) Beverly Baxter, “The One Sour Note of the Coronation,” Maclean’s Magazine (1 Sept., 1953), 4.
an important political occasion, the composer seems to have intended *Gloriana* to be a celebratory and grand work. Britten and his librettist, William Plomer, used Lytton Strachey’s semi-fictional biography *Elizabeth and Essex* as a point of departure for their story about the Queen’s complex relationship with her favorite earl. In order to emphasize the grandeur of the monarch, they inserted a lengthy masque and a set of “Courtly Dances” into the second Act, featuring choral singing, complex dancing, and onstage musicians. In addition, Britten employed a substantial orchestra, larger than that of *Peter Grimes* and grander in conception than (though roughly equal in size to) that of *Billy Budd*.

One dramatic feature of this large instrumentation is the three (or “multiples of three”) trumpets that follow the Queen throughout Act I, scene 1. Starting offstage and processing in with the Queen, they announce her arrival with *forte* flourishes in E-flat mixolydian. Each trumpet outburst throughout this procession builds on the last: the first contains only two chords, the second and third contain three, and the fourth contains five (see Figure 4.1a). All of the trumpets move in identical contour, and they only play pitches selected from an altered harmonic series on E-flat, from the fourth to the twelfth partial (with the eleventh partial tempered to a diatonic fourth scale degree – see Figure 4.1b). This gesture, reminiscent of horn and bugle calls throughout Western musical history, is one of several examples of such a device in Britten’s output.

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113 This also marked the last time that Britten would use an orchestra of this size for one of his operatic works.
115 Ibid., 35.
Figure 4.1a. Gloriana, Act I, before reh. 16

Gloriana, Op. 53 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by William Plomer
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Figure 4.1b. Pitches used in trumpet fanfares, Gloriana, Act I, before reh. 16

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**Britten’s Bugle Calls**

Britten’s interest in natural brass playing (and, by extension, the open or harmonic series) is obvious from early in his output, and these moments tend to be associated with dramatic entries or departures. In his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* (1943), for example, the microtonal inflections of natural tuning are pervasive throughout the horn solos of the first and last movements.\(^{116}\) In the Prologue, the horn’s colorful emphasis on the microtonally inflected eleventh and thirteenth partials brings the listener into the pastoral space of the cycle, whereas the music’s return in the offstage horn of the Epilogue provides a quiet exit from it.

Though Britten shied away from natural tunings in his later works, the bugle-call motif would make regular and significant appearances. The May Day fanfares in *Albert Herring*, discussed in the last chapter, are one such instance; the pitches of the horn solo outline a dominant-seventh chord which, though not literally related to the harmonic series, hint at it (see again Figure 3.1). And much like the horn solos’s function in the *Serenade*, Britten again employs the motive to underscore entrances, this time by the opera’s important characters.

In Britten’s 1958 setting of the Chester miracle play *Noye’s Fludde*, a more exuberant bugle call (this time played on actual bugles) once again provides entrance and exit music, though this time for someone far less serious than night music, a May Day procession, or Queen Elizabeth. It is first played as the many different groups of animals approach Noah’s ark to be saved from the coming flood. The bugles’ B-flat arpeggiation stays between the third and sixth partials of the harmonic series (see

Once the devastating flood is over and the animals begin leaving the ark, the bugle calls return, growing in range and power until they encompass the third through seventh partials (though with the seventh partial “corrected” to a proper A-flat – see Figure 4.2b). Though these raucous calls share little in common with the mellow and introspective horn solos of the Serenade, they still provide music for important structural entrances and exits in the work.

Bugle calls are even present in Britten’s later work, serving an important (and much more serious) role in his well-known War Requiem, Op. 66 (1962). After

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118 Ibid., 162-63.
the opening “Requiem aeternam” in the full orchestra and chorus, the tenor soloist, accompanied by chamber orchestra, sings Britten’s setting of Wilfred Owen’s poem, “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” a lamentation for the unremembered, unburied dead:

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells; Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, – The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells; And bugles calling for them from sad shires.\(^{119}\)

At the mention of bugles ringing across the distance, Britten provides a solo horn, which outlines the fourth through seventh partials of the harmonic series on B-flat with a jaunty, rhythmic, yet sad call (see Figure 4.3).\(^{120}\) Here, Britten uses his typical entrance and exit motive to underscore the poem’s tragedy; the horn’s call,


encouraging soldiers to return to safety to the trenches, now falls on dead, unhearing ears. When bugling calls return prominently throughout the following movement, a setting for orchestra and chorus of the Latin hymn “Dies Irae,” Britten aligns them especially with the “Tuba mirum” section, which presents an entrance and exit scenario of biblical proportions as trumpets announce the end of the world:

The trumpet scattering its wondrous sound
Through the graves of every land
Will drive all before the throne.\textsuperscript{121}

These instances of horn and bugle calls should not be called fixed triads, though the two have much in common: they both fixate on the triad, and both seem to have strongly identified musical meaning for Britten. But they are different in most other ways. The bugle calls tend to be surface elements, melodic in nature and high in register, whereas fixed triads tend to occupy a more subtle, harmonic role. And while fixed triads imply order and stability, the bugle calls tend to emphasize motion, entrances, and exits. But while they are different, they are both still important, recurring element in Britten’s output. And occasionally, they appear together when the dramatic circumstances demand it. In\textit{Albert Herring}, their combination underscored both the constant hustle and bustle of the event and the townspeople’s obsession with the event’s orderly unfolding. In\textit{Gloriana}, the two elements are combined in a similar way to suit very different dramatic circumstances.

The “Final March”

Immediately following the Queen’s grandiose entrance, she notices Lord Mountjoy and the Earl of Essex fighting, which has resulted in Essex’s slight injury. As she examines the scene, the regal E-flat major triad, ringing throughout her entrance’s bugling calls, continues in her vocal line while the bugling material is transplanted to the winds. Much like Ellen's arpeggiation in Peter Grimes, the Queen sings embellished triads with occasional neighbor tones; in the “Entrance of the Queen” section, 33 of the Queen’s 39 notes belong to the E-flat major triad. As she sings, the choir (representing the crowd) comments that her favor is really what the two men are fighting over, and they also mainly arpeggiate E-flat major. Throughout this section, the strings mimic the Queen’s material, playing a repetitive, ornamented E-flat major triad (see Figure 4.4).122 The prevalence of the E-flat triad here is telling. While the grandiose entrance music establishes the Queen’s authority and power, this section of fixed arpeggiation exhibits the Queen’s calm and control. Thus, fixed triads in Gloriana become a symbol not only for the sovereign’s personal, but also her political power.

After these first, authoritative statements from the Queen, the music becomes more chromatic as the two men plead their case. The Queen orders them to reconcile, and to serve her together at court, and they both promise to do so in an “Ensemble of Reconciliation,” followed by a rhapsodic chorus in praise of the Queen, “Green leaves.” Satisfied that conflict has been avoided, the Queen then orders the procession to begin again, singing, “Let trumpets blow,”123 which is echoed by the two men and Raleigh,

122 Britten, Gloriana, 36-37.
123 Ibid., 65.
Figure 4.4. Reduction, *Gloriana*, Act I, reh. 16

Gloriana, Op. 53 by Benjamin Britten, libretto by William Plomer
© Copyright 1953 by Hawkes & Son (London), Ltd. Reprinted by Permission.
the captain of her guard. After both statements, each consisting only of B-flat and E-flat pitches in the voices, the onstage trumpets repeat their E-flat bugle calls from the Queen’s entrance as they lead the procession off stage. As they process at rehearsal 28, the trumpets continue, joined in their music by the high strings and winds. Underneath this heraldry, Britten layers an angular bass line played in low strings, winds, brass, and timpani, consisting entirely of pitches from the E-flat major triad (see Figure 4.5). ¹²⁴ This maximal presentation of the fixed E-flat major triad, lasting 14 measures, heightens the earlier music at the Queen’s entrance; having successfully soothed the tensions between the two men, her complete control as a monarch is secured once again. And the simultaneous appearance of her festive brass fanfares and these stately fixed triads confirms that she is both a powerful monarch and a controlled politician.

¹²⁴ Britten, Gloriana, 66-69.
Composer/musicologist Kevin Salfen points out that each scene in *Gloriana* alternates between “public” and “private.” While the private scenes to come are characterized by softer instruments such as lute and celeste, the public ones rely heavily on brass. Thus brass fanfares and, correspondingly, fixed triads are allied with the Queen’s public persona, and the maximal presentation of E-flat in the Queen’s procession represent her greatest moment of control in the opera. As the work continues, however, her private struggles with Essex begin to threaten her secure hold over her people. Corresponding to this decrease in her political control, fixed triads appear less and less throughout the opera. They do, however, reappear when her authority is praised or re-exerted.

**The Queen’s Masque**

The most substantial offering in praise of the Queen occurs at the opening of the second Act, when she visits Norwich and is greeted with a masque in her honor. This consists of several short, varied *a cappella* choral sections, each introduced by a tenor soloist, the “Spirit of the Masque.” The texts of each short movement combine to tell the story of Time and Concord, represented by two dancers, whose harmonious union is described and celebrated in several stages. Throughout the masque, fixed triads figure prominently, though always differently.

The first choral section, the only one accompanied by orchestra, introduces the masque with a dedicatory invocation:

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The elements, at Gloriana's chair,
Mingle in tuneful choir.

Melt earth to sea, sea flow to air,
And air fly into fire!
The elements, at Gloriana's chair,
Mingle in tuneful choir.\textsuperscript{126}

The first two lines are appropriately set in jagged, ruggedly elemental vocal lines that outline minor seconds and tritones. In the last two lines, which evoke order, control, and perfection, Britten follows suit and has the choir exclusively arpeggiate a G major triad, then settling in a non-arpeggiating cadence (though the altos stay within the triad, rocking between G and D – see Figure 4.6a).\textsuperscript{127} This establishes yet again that fixed triads represent order and control in Britten's output; and once again this musical

\textsuperscript{126} Britten, \textit{Gloriana}, 128-29.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 129-30.
evocation of harmony and union is aligned with both the Queen’s character and her power. Throughout the choral sections that follow, these “elements” are presented and praised individually.

Fixed triads are less apparent, though still present, in the next choral section, which introduces the Time character. Here, Britten pairs the sopranos and tenors together, and each voice alternates between an ‘x’ motive and a ‘y’ motive (the retrograde of the ‘x’ motive). Though there are echoes of triads in these lines, none are explicitly present. The bass line, however, couldn’t be simpler, alternating only between the pitches C and G (see Figure 4.6b).\(^{128}\) Far from a traditional alternation between tonic and dominant, the combination of the bass line with the repeatedly sounding E’s and G’s of the tenors and sopranos results in something approaching a

\(^{128}\) Britten, Gloriana, 131.
fixed arpeggiation of C major.

Fixed triads are also slightly obscured, though still present, in the next section, which introduces the Concord character. When the Spirit of the Masque introduces “Concord, his loving wife”\(^{129}\) on a repeating F, the orchestra arpeggiates F major in pizzicato strings and harp. The chorus then enters and arpeggiates an F major\(^7\) chord for two measures, followed by three bars outlining an E-flat major\(^7\) chord. After reaching a low point on F minor\(^6\) in bar 6, Britten then reverses the progression, returning first to E-flat major\(^7\), then settling on the original F major (see Figure 4.6c).\(^{130}\)

\(^{129}\) Britten, *Gloriana*, 133.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 133-34.
Though the middle section of this short ode strays from this fixed arpeggiation, F major appears at most phrase beginnings and endings, and the seventh-chord arpeggiation returns in the final phrase.

The next two choral sections feature even less clear, though still unmistakably present, fixed arpeggiation. In the first, “Time and Concord,” the female and male singers follow one another in close canon, switching leading and following positions. Each one-measure phrase begins with a dyad taken from the F major triad, sounding in the leading voice on every downbeat throughout the opening and closing sections of the piece (see Figure 4.6d). This repeated intonation of portions of the F major triad in a rhythmically important position implies a distinct constancy to the tonic triad.

The next choral section, “Country Girls,” takes a similar approach. Now in D major and scored only for female voices, almost every energetic phrase once again begins with

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131 One hesitates to use the term “fixed triads” when four notes are present.
and the accompanying orchestra (see Figure 4.6e).\textsuperscript{133}

Britten returns to G major for the penultimate choral ode, “Rustics and Fishermen,” scored for four-part men’s voices. Once again, each phrase for the first 12

\textsuperscript{133} Britten, \textit{Gloriana}, 137.
bars of the section begins with the tonic triad. Additionally, though the other voices imply a wide range of tonalities, the second tenor line simply arpeggiates a descending G major triad until a slight deviation at the phrase-ending half cadence (see Figure 4.6f).\textsuperscript{134}

The wide variety of applications of triadic (and seventh-chord) emphasis in these short movements reveal Britten’s skill at subtly manipulating fixed triads as circumstances require. The diversity of topic, gesture, and key perfectly suit the episodic nature of this play-within-a-play, while the discrete musical connectivity provided by the ever-present triad connects the event’s dedicatory sentiment. Thus, the many subtle variations of fixed triads throughout the masque scene reinforce and confirm the Queen’s political composure; at this point in the opera, she is still largely in control and respected by the public, a respect that will erode when some of them rise up against her (in support of Essex) in the third Act.

\textbf{The Queen’s Anti-Fanfare and Loss of Control}

One of the strongest instigators of the Queen’s decline is a creation of Britten

\textsuperscript{134} Britten, \textit{Gloriana}, 139.
and Plomer’s, absent from the original book by Strachey. In Act II, scene 3, the characters have come together in the Queen’s palace for a set of “Courtly Dances” played by the onstage orchestra. Essex’s wife, Lady Essex, is dressed lavishly and wonders whether the Queen will approve. Upon the Queen’s entrance (announced with a recapitulation in the strings of the people’s adulatory “Green leaves” melody), she immediately notices Essex’s inappropriate dress and orders the assembly to dance a volta. Tired and sweating, the ladies are then encouraged to “change their linen.”¹³⁵ While Lady Essex is changing, the Queen steals her dress and wears it back into the ball, causing considerable shame and embarrassment for Essex and his wife.

At the moment of the Queen’s reappearance, the score notes that “she looks grotesque,”¹³⁶ and the orchestra plays a heavy, awkward fanfare featuring a prominent tuba solo. While this solo and the Queen’s melody are freely chromatic, the bass accompaniment, played in the low winds, strings, and timpani, alternates exclusively between D and A (see Figure 4.7).¹³⁷ Unlike the alternating fifth dyad in the masque

¹³⁶ Britten, Gloriana, 198.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 199.
scene’s “Time” movement (Fig. 4.6b), however, the non-fixed voices avoid the third scale degree. This hollow, stagnant fixed bass dyad continues for a full 28 measures, then reappearing for 14 bars as the Queen, having accosted Lady Essex, retires to change once again.

Through both awkward orchestration and the instruction to play “Slowly and heavily,” this anti-fanfare casts the Queen in a ridiculous, almost pathetic light, her having stooped so low as to embarrass herself with such unflattering dress and unbecoming manners. Her behavior in this scene greatly reduces her stature in the minds of those in attendance, who sympathize effusively with the shocked Lady Essex, and Britten seems more than willing to encourage similar attitudes from the audience. Whereas the Queen’s fanfares in the first scene featured raucous, joyful brass figures with fixed major triads, this musical sympathy has eroded in her anti-fanfare; the tempo has slowed, trumpet leadership has moved to the tuba, and, most importantly, the fixed triad has been hollowed out into a bare, fixed open fifth. This erosion of a musical device associated with the Queen’s strength and authority is a meaningful (if slightly comic) expression of her reduced stature in the minds of her people. The grandeur and majesty expressed in her opening fanfares and dedicatory choral masque are noticeably absent after her shameful “Burlesque.”

After the Queen sends Essex to Ireland in hopes that he will “conquer the rebel Tyrone,” he returns unsuccessful, bringing with him the “danger of rebellion.” He soon attempts to gain a following to overthrow the Queen, forcing her to condemn

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138 Britten, Gloriana, 199.
him, the man she held in high personal (and romantic) esteem, to death. In Act III, scene 3, she once again is given entry music, though in these dire circumstances, the fanfare is a distant memory; when she enters her palace at rehearsal 156 to consult her advisors as to whether she should sign the death warrant, the winds and brass build a widely spread G major chord over the string drone of B-flat. Throughout the recitative that follows, in which she discusses the matter with Raleigh and Cecil, she almost exclusively sings the pitches G and D. Once again, the fixed triad (and dyad) return to emphasize the Queen’s power, though again they are robbed of their ceremonial flavor, left barren and joyless.

Perhaps seeing an opening for sympathy, Essex’s wife and friends arrive at the palace to beg for the Queen’s pardon. As they enter, the troubled B-flat drone from rehearsal 156 returns underneath a wide-ranging string arpeggiation of A minor above. This arpeggiation continues unabated as they plead: “Great Queen, your champion in a prison cell / Lies languishing” (see Figure 4.8). By appealing to the Queen’s greatness, and employing her (formerly “great”) musical device of fixed arpeggiation, the three characters try their hardest to appeal on behalf of Essex. Though the Queen is generally resistant and, at the rude insolence of Essex’s sister, signs the warrant, she does relent in one way. When, at rehearsal 163, Lady Essex entreats, “If he must die / I plead for my children, his!,” the Queen becomes more sympathetic. The A minor arpeggiation suddenly reappears, now to accompany the Queen, as she sings:

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140 Britten, Gloriana, 324-27.
141 Ibid., 335.
Frances, a woman speaks.
Whatever I decide I have yet to name the day,
To sign his breath away,
His that betrayed the Queen –
Whatever I decide,
Your children, Frances, will be safe. 142

Her melody stays true to the A minor scale, a notable departure from her earlier and later tonal resistance. This sudden display of sympathy, aligned with the return of fixed triads in the strings, marks a final vindication for the Queen. In order to retain her political control, she is forced to kill Essex, but this final musical and personal sympathy proves her to be a fair, forgiving ruler.

Summary

While in *Albert Herring* fixed triads represented a total collapse of control and order in polite society, in *Gloriana* their use is far more subtle. Eric Walter White makes specific mention of the triad’s place in the opera, calling it “a motif associated with the Queen’s favour.”\(^\text{1}\) Indeed, in Act I, scene 1, the magnificent E-flat fixed triads correspond to a moment of restored favor between the Queen and Essex. But as the Queen loses control over Essex and their favor degrades in the “Burlesque” scene, so do the fixed triads, which are hollowed and made grotesque. Filling the void left by Essex is the Queen’s growing commitment to her subjects, which is painted by the elegant fixed triads of the Act II masque scene, and which return in her sympathetic protection of Lady Essex’s children in Act III.

These fixed triads do not, however, form the majority of the Queen’s musical material, and some have criticized the wide variations of style found therein; Ellen McDonald writes, “The Queen’s musical style encompasses such a variety of seemingly unconnected extremes that it is nearly schizophrenic.”\(^\text{2}\) But Britten, not known for casual or lazy musical characterization, almost certainly recognized that the opera’s drama stems from the Queen’s two conflicting spheres of experience: one as a person, the other as a monarch. Indeed, the story becomes a parable of a leader’s transformation from a fully emotional human being into a wise yet removed leader.

Writing about his libretto for *Gloriana*, William Plomer confirmed this, writing that “the Queen had to subdue her inclinations as a woman to her magnificent

\(^{1}\) White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas*, 198-99.
\(^{2}\) Ellen McDonald, “Women in Benjamin Britten’s Operas,” 95.
conception of her position and her duty as a monarch.” Indeed, often throughout the work, she refers to herself as a “Prince” in order to exert authority. So when, as she pardons Lady Essex’s children, she sings “A woman speaks,” she sheds light on this internal struggle between her emotional (‘feminine’) and political (‘masculine’) sides.

This struggle is finally resolved in the final Epilogue, in which, Andrew Porter writes, “we realize the full extent to which the Queen has subordinated her life to the good of her people.” In this last scene, Britten and Plomer compress the remainder of the Queen’s life into a series of short utterances, interspersed with recollections of musical materials from earlier in the opera. As “time and place are becoming less and less important to her,” the Queen comments on her emotional transformation as a leader, speaking directly to the audience:

I have now obtained the victory over two things which the greatest princes cannot at their will subdue: the one is over fame, the other is over a great mind. Surely the world is now, I hope, reasonably satisfied.

The Queen’s feelings toward Essex cause her considerable personal pain and, eventually, political turmoil. The dramatic thrust of the opera is not one of reconciliation with Essex (the obvious if ahistorical ‘happy ending’), but rather, in the end, to replace her affections for him with her duties to her country. But this selfless renunciation of one’s personal and emotional life in the name of national leadership is not necessarily tragic. In the end, the Queen takes pride in this very decision: “I count it the glory of my crown that I have reigned with your love, and there is no jewel

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147 Britten, *Gloriana*, 352.
148 Ibid., 354.
that I prefer before that jewel.” Thus, the opera is a vindication of both her skill as a monarch and the selfless sacrifice of her personal emotional life in the name of stable governance and to the love of her country. Her transformation is echoed in Britten’s dynamic and dramatic use of fixed triads.

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149 Britten, Gloriana, 361. This portion of the libretto is directly based on Queen Elizabeth’s “Golden” speech before members of the House of Commons in 1601.
CONCLUSION

Though the triad figures less prominently in Britten’s later compositions, especially in the last ten years of his life, fixed triads continue to appear. Even in his last major work, the third String Quartet (1975), an entire movement is dedicated to them; movement 3, marked “Solo,” features an expansive melody for the first violin, accompanied by several slowly unfolding fixed triads in each accompanying instrument. The movement ends with all four instruments arpeggiating C major as they reach quiet repose, a touching moment that David Matthews calls “a last, quiet celebration of the key that Britten had especially made his own.”

In another very late work, his cantata for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra Phaedra (1975), Britten again returns to fixed triads to express control and order. In the tortured story of Phaedra, similar to that of his much earlier Rape of Lucretia, the title character, thinking her husband Theseus has died in battle, tries to seduce his son Hippolytus but is rejected. When her husband comes home very much alive, she accuses Hippolytus of trying to seduce her, and Theseus kills him. Horrified, Phaedra confesses her guilt and commits suicide with poison. From the moment at rehearsal 27 when she takes the poison, Phaedra’s vocal line, hitherto wide-ranging and chromatic, begins a lengthy, embellished arpeggiation of a C major triad as imitative string lines ascend by step from their lowest C (see Figure 5.1). As she climbs gradually upward

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151 These embellishments mimic the famous “Lucretia” motive from Britten’s earlier opera, revealing Britten’s knowing connection between the two characters.
Orch.

Phaedra

27

pp, dearly

chills already dart a-long my boil-ing veins and squeeze, my heart. A cold corn

Orch.

PPP

Ph.

28

mf

po sure I have never known gives me a mo-ment’s poise. I stand a lone and

Orch.

f

Ph.

seem to see my out-rages hus-band fade and wa- ver in to death’s dis-solv-ing shade. My

Orch.

mf

Ph.

3

eyes at last give up their light, and see the day they’ve soiled re sume its

Orch.

f

Ph.

purity

Figure 5.1. Reduction, Phaedra, reh. 27-28

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from middle C, she sings:

A cold composure I have never known
gives me a moment’s poise. I stand alone
and seem to see my outraged husband fade
and waver into death’s dissolving shade
My eyes at last give up their light, and see

Thus, by committing suicide, Phaedra has regained control over her surroundings, now able to purify and heal her family by removing herself from it. And one last time, Britten returns to the fixed triads that have appeared across his dramatic compositions in order to express themes of control and purity.

\textbf{Fixed Triads in Summary}

At the beginning of this paper, I posited that the fixed triads present in Arvo Pärt’s tintinnabular style of composition were likely informed by the composer’s knowledge of and appreciation for the music of Benjamin Britten; while Pärt’s serialized and meditative treatment of fixed triads is highly personal and indeed innovative, it does not represent, as all too many have proposed, a completely original, invented compositional technique. This position does not imply, however, that fixed triads were necessarily invented by Britten, either. Indeed, even a cursory glance through major works of the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century yields examples of this technique from a wide range of composers, especially those who retained tonal and diatonic elements in their music. In the second scene of Igor Stravinsky’s ballet \textit{Apollon Jean Racine, “Phedre,” trans. Robert Lowell, included in the booklet of: Benjamin Britten, \textit{Phaedra}, \textit{A Charm of Lullabies, Lachrymae, Two Portraits, Sinfonietta}, BBC Symphony Orchestra. Edward Gardner. With Sarah Connolly, Maxim Rysanov, et al. Recorded September 2010, Chandos CHAN-10671, 2011, compact disc.}
musagète (1928), for example, thoroughly fixed B-flat major triads in the violas contrast with contrasting material in the other instruments (Figure 5.2).\textsuperscript{154}

The fact that Britten did not invent fixed triads, however, does not lessen the skill with which he employed them, nor does it reduce the impact of his meaningful and personal approach toward them. They should join the list of the many other important elements in Britten’s music that, though he did not invent them, still stand out in their creative, unique, and highly specific employment; these include twelve-

tone rows, pitch-class sets, passacaglias, and aleatoric structures.

Like these elements, which have received much wider scholarly attention, we can propose several generalizations about the usage of fixed triads in Britten’s musical language. The first and foremost among these is the main focus of this paper: when employed in dramatic circumstances, fixed triads are almost universally aligned with moments expressive of control, clarity, or focus. While especially pervasive in the three operas isolated here, these moments can be found throughout Britten’s many compositions for voices. As the examples from the first and third String Quartets showed, fixed triads also appear regularly in instrumental music, though the lack of text in these instances limits interpretive specificity.

A second generalization is that fixed triads tend to be deployed locally and not for long spans of time. Though, as in many of the examples found above, they often reappear throughout works in which they figure prominently, each instance tends to be brief, lasting no longer than about twenty bars. Though Britten was many things, he was not a minimalist, and it would take later composers to embrace similar techniques and cast them across entire works. This is especially similar to Britten’s use of twelve-tone rows; whereas many composers of Britten’s time applied serial techniques to entire works, Britten tended (with the notable exception of his Cantata Academica) to use these rows as short sectional or gestural devices.

Finally, fixed triads tend to be associated in Britten’s dramatic works with female characters. The three primary examples above all show this correlation: Ellen and the other women in Peter Grimes, Lady Billows in Albert Herring, and the Queen in Gloriana. Christopher Palmer writes that “for Britten the triad seems to symbolize
a state of nature,”155 and Ellen McDonald notices a tendency for Britten to present women as either monstrous or as being “idealized, etherealized, and objectified.”156 In certain instances, this lack of depth is a valid concern. But especially in the characters of Ellen Orford and Queen Elizabeth, fixed triads aid in elaborating the profound depth of their respective characters. Though the composer is unfortunately unavailable to comment on this correlation, it could prove a fertile source for further analysis.

**Future Analytical Approaches**

Most of the recent analytical discussions of Britten’s music have relied on the composer’s homosexuality for deeper understanding of his musical style. These analyses have proven fruitful, and indeed the composer’s sexual orientation and political views had a profound effect on his compositions, especially relating to his choices of operatic subjects. Missing from too many of these discussions, though, are traditional theoretical examinations of Britten’s choice of pitches and rhythms; deep understanding of his musical language is still unfortunately lacking, especially when compared to many other composers of his time. To be certain, Britten’s works are not as friendly to analysts as those compositions built on serial or other highly organized structures. And one shouldn’t ignore the details of the composer’s life, or his choices of text. But by analyzing Britten’s employment of specific recurring devices such as fixed triads and those listed above, fruitful and meaningful understanding of his compositional style can be gained.


156 McDonald, “Women in Benjamin Britten’s Operas,” 92.


