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Benjamin Britten's *Winter Words*,
Lyrics and Ballads of Thomas Hardy, Op. 52,
For High Voice and Piano:
An Analytically Informed Interpretation

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Abstract

This critical commentary set out to construct an interpretation of Benjamin Britten's *Winter Words* op.52 through the application of analysis in preparation for a performance. The information gathered from analysis of the music and text was used to assist performers in making artistic decisions that could lead to a musically satisfying interpretation. This commentary examines each of the eight songs individually, analysing elements such as harmony, form, hypermeter and text, and how such elements can inform an interpretation that best portrays the song's structure. It was found that a structural and thematic understanding of the poetry assists in discerning the musical structure as all of the song's musical elements were derived from the text. Therefore many of the analytical details fall into place when attempting to best project the poetry. It is intended that this process can assist in constructing satisfying interpretations of other similar works in Britten's output more intuitively.

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No publications.

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No publications included.

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Chris Cobcroft, tenor, assisted in collaborating with the author in a performance of *Winter Words* as part of the performance component of the MPhil degree.

Statement of parts of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree

None.

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Keywords

music, music analysis, interpretation, britten, hardy, song cycle, winter words

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INTRODUCTION

Though music performance and analysis are distinct fields, they can interact in meaningful and fruitful ways, with the potential to craft artistically engaging and satisfying performances by using analysis to assist in the formation of an interpretation. Studies on the relationship between the two activities have inspired diverse opinions and approaches on how to attempt to achieve a successful intersection (Cook 239; Nolan 112-3). Despite their differences, Leonard Meyer believes the two activities are fundamentally parallel.

Just as analysis is implicit in what the performer does, so every critical analysis is a more or less precise indication of how the work being analyzed (sic) should be performed. By explaining the processive and formal relationships of a composition, analysis suggests how phrases, progressions, rhythms, and higher-level structures should be shaped and articulated by the performer. (29)

The primary aim of this study is to attempt to discern the structure of a composition in order to find its implications in an artistically satisfying interpretation. Benjamin Britten's song cycle for tenor and piano, *Winter Words, Lyrics and Ballads of Thomas Hardy*, Op. 52, For High Voice and Piano is taken as a case study for a discussion of the potential of an analytically informed approach to interpretation.

By the time the cycle was premiered in 1953, Britten's reputation as one of the leading composers for voice was established. His previous works for voice and piano included the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, and *Canticle I: My beloved is mine*. Having also completed the operas *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring* and *Billy Budd*, he possessed a formidable understanding of composing for voice when he set about writing *Winter Words* (Bink n.pag). The cycle is noteworthy for its lean and economic

textures, which makes it an appealing work to analyse as Britten chose to distill his ideas into as few notes as necessary, making the essence of the cycle's structure more readily apparent.

As there are many differing and often conflicting views on the interaction of analysis and performance, it is important that the specific purpose of analysis in the context of this commentary is clearly defined. This case study will focus on the process involved in developing an interpretation prior to a performance. This period of development is where an analysis of the work would be used to inform the artistic decision-making. The process is based on the premise that a work can have more than one interpretation of equal artistic merit. As Edward T. Cone states, "every valid interpretation...represents, not an approximation of some ideal, but a choice: which of the relationships implicit in this piece are to be emphasized, to be made explicit?" (34). The purpose of this commentary does not just lie within a performance of *Winter Words*. The insights uncovered in this study can assist in developing, as John Rink describes it, an "informed intuition" when approaching similar works (39).

One of the key analytical details relevant to constructing an interpretation is form. The formal organisation of musical material can be examined at a macro level followed by an assessment of the performance implications at a micro level. A particular cadence, for example, may receive more or less emphasis according to where it sits in relation to salient structural moments. Or, as Robert Schumann proposed in his *Advice to Young Musicians*, "The spirit will not become clear to you before you understand the Forms of composition" (32). George Fisher and Judy Lochhead point out that a performer's analysis and a theorist's analysis are fundamentally different and that perceptually based relations are most relevant to an interpretation (Fisher 6-7; Folio 1). Fisher and Lochhead suggest:

In keeping this perceptual basis, it will also favor those strategies that take explicit account of the music's temporal unfolding. These may include both drama and narrative, in which the events of a composition are conceived as progressing chronologically from beginning to end. (7)

With this in mind, the analysis in this study will attempt to discover how the music is perceived as it unfolds, or as John Rink suggests, "discover the music's 'shape', as opposed to structure" (39). Elements such as harmony, motivic development, rhythm and hypermeter will be examined to track the gradation of musical intensity as experienced by the listener. This information will then be used to inform an interpretation that could assist in supporting the music's shape as implied in the structure.

The poetry is another key element that informs the music's shape. A sensitive musical setting will attempt to reflect the shape of the drama and narrative implicit in the text, thus structurally linking the two forms. Therefore, an understanding of the poetry is essential in discerning the musical shape. In some instances, this study will focus primarily on how the interpretation can best portray the shape, mood and character of the text. Authors such as Joel Lester¹ and Marion Guck² believe that when the affect is first established, many aspects of the music's style and structure naturally fall into place (Lowe 64-66).

Fisher and Lochhead's claim that a performer's analysis is different to a theorist's implies there are details that are peripheral to preparing an interpretation (Folio 1). For example, Lester uncovers an intriguing voice leading relationship between the melodic line and the accompaniment in the opening four bars of Mozart's familiar Piano Sonata in C major, K. 545 (209). However, Lester goes on to say "I cannot imagine how any performance would either

¹ Lester states, "the image should precede and motivate understanding the details" (qtd. in Lowe, 64).

² Guck states, "a complex and refined image can yield an elegant, detailed, multifaceted analysis, even from relatively inexperienced analysts" (qtd. in Lowe 66).

reflect or deny that statement interpretatively” (213). An example of this in *Winter Words* is the thematic relationship between the opening vocal entry of the first song, “At Day-Close in November” and the piano motif in the third song, “Wagtail and Baby” (see Ex. 1). Such analytical insights can assist in appreciating the structural fabric of the work and may have a bearing on interpretation in an intangible way. However, this commentary will not prioritise such discussion.

The image shows a musical score for the song "At Day-Close in November" from Britten's *Winter Words*. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G minor (one flat) and 4/4 time. It begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and the lyrics "The ten hours' light is a - ba - ting,..... And a". A box highlights the vocal line from the second measure to the end of the phrase. The piano accompaniment starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a similar triplet in the left hand. A box highlights the piano accompaniment from the second measure to the end of the phrase. The score includes dynamic markings (*f* and *p*), articulation marks, and a double bar line with repeat dots. A small asterisk is placed below the piano staff.

Ex. 1a. Britten, *Winter Words* op. 52, “At Day-Close in November,” bars 9-14.

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The image shows a musical score for the song "Wagtail and Baby" from Britten's *Winter Words*. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with a box highlighting the first three measures. The bass clef staff contains a piano accompaniment with a box highlighting the first three measures. The score includes a piano (*p*) dynamic marking and the instruction "(half ped.)".

Ex. 1b. Britten, *Winter Words* op. 52, “Wagtail and Baby,” bars 1-3.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Erwin Stein's 1962 study *Form and Performance* examined how music unfolds at different temporal levels, and how these levels relate to performance is said to be the foundational work in the field of analytically informed interpretation (Lathan 157). Stein's assertion that "structural considerations cannot guarantee a good performance," but they can "help avoid a faulty one" is a fundamental incentive for this study (21). Edward T. Cone's *Musical Form and Musical Performance* of 1968 continued the same form of investigation by placing much emphasis on finding the primary rhythmic impetus of a work.

Wallace Berry's seminal *Musical Structure and Performance* is perhaps the most well known yet controversial book in this field. Though influential, Berry's opinions have been criticised for being prescriptive and authoritarian (Lowe 48). As distinct from Lester, Rink, and others, he emphasises the inadequacy of a performer's intuition by claiming that "the purely spontaneous, unknowing and unquestioned impulse is not enough to inspire convincing performance" and that the only solution is to impose rigorous formal analysis, as "every analytical finding has an implication for performance" (217-18; 44). Nicholas Cook says "Berry's book reads more like the summation than the opening-up of a field. It represents not so much a cross-disciplinary exercise...as an attempt to incorporate performance within the existing intellectual framework of theory" (239). Eugene Narmour echoes a similar dogmatic approach in his article "On the Relationship of Analytical Theory to Performance and Interpretation." He claims that a performer must acquire theoretical and analytical competence otherwise "many negative consequences" will follow "if formal relations are not properly analyzed (sic) by the performer" (340).

In an article from 1985 on the interpretation of two Beethoven Bagatelles, Janet Schmalfeldt took on the personae of a performer and analyst, considering how their dialogue might influence each other. Schmalfeldt advocates a far less “top down” approach compared to Berry and Narmour, suggesting an edifying interpretation can be constructed from more than the results of formal analysis. Like Fisher and Lochhead, she also highlights a fundamental difference between the objectives of the analyst and the performer. The analyst’s “verbal medium” allows for a “final commitment to a presently held view” (28). The performer’s non-verbal “view,” however, must never be taken as final in a live performance. Schmalfeldt explains, “a finger placed too heavily (or too lightly) on the key, an arm motion that misses the target can force the performer to adjust the fine points of his strategy...[thus] a new ‘view’ may be born” (28). Hence, a much more flexible approach must be adopted in relation to performance. Several subsequent authors began to abandon the rigid methodology of Berry and began to develop alternative approaches to performer’s analysis, many of which are useful for this study (Latham 158).

In advocating the concept of “informed intuition”, John Rink places much more confidence in the musicianship of the performer and downplays the need for thorough analysis of entire works (Rink 38). The implications of his philosophy are much further reaching, as the knowledge uncovered in one analysis contributes to a general awareness of style which can be called upon when performing similar works. Jonathan Dunsby also suggests analysis can be used for local problem solving if there are passages of interpretive difficulty (“Performance and analysis” 8). Echoing Schmalfeldt and Rink, Dunsby also believes that, “understanding musical structure is not the same kind of activity as understanding and communicating music. There is a genuine overlap between these two poles of activity, but not a complete overlap” (“Performance and analysis of music” 7).

Marie Rolf and Elizabeth Marvin's "Analytical Issues and Interpretive Decisions in Two Songs by Richard Strauss" offer a study on analytically informed interpretation in the context of song repertoire. Rolf and Marvin construct an interpretation of the selected songs through a holistic approach involving a combination of examining the sentiments of the text, phrase structure and harmony, hypermeter, and what they mean for the performer. Although Strauss and Britten differ stylistically, many of the processes used in the article are transferable to this commentary. Another study in this area is Jonathan Dunsby's *Making Words Sing: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Song*. Dunsby explores a selection of songs covering a range of styles in order to explore the quality of "vocality", by which he means "those qualities of music and text that enable one to identify it as articulating narrative, mood, the times of tenses, associations, grammatical tropes such as the interrogative, visual images, persons and landscapes, the mundane and the divine" (*Making Words Sing* 62). Although he does not relate his analysis directly to performance, his unique discussion of the interactions between text and music are relevant to this study.

Authors such as Joel Lester, William Rothstein, and John Rink suggest that before a particular interpretive decision is applied to a performance, it must be incorporated within an understanding of style appropriate to the composer (Lester 209; Rink 39; Rothstein 219). For this reason, this commentary will refer to literature that covers issues of style and performance practice. A source devoted to the performance practice of Britten's music has not yet been written. Graham Johnson, however, published a series of lectures devoted to Britten's works for piano and voice. Although it was primarily intended to give an overview of the stylistic evolution of Britten's songs, Johnson does touch on issues of performance practice. Having worked closely with Britten during the last eleven years of the composer's life, Johnson was able to discuss with great authority topics such as pedaling, rubato and articulation (50). Johnson's lectures provide evocative descriptions of the stylistic features, emotional tone and imagery of Britten's music.

The most significant analytical source on Britten's music is Peter Evans' *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (1979), which ambitiously aims to analyse the composer's entire published output (Evans ix). Evans focuses on the germinal chords, motifs and pitches of each work rather than how the material unfolds through time (Bach 139). His analysis may be criticised for not exploring enough the expressive purposes of these features, but Evans is aware of the limitations that must be applied in such a large undertaking (Whittall "Review of Evans" 455). Contrastingly, Arnold Whittall, another leading Britten analyst, focuses more on the development of material through time, as perceived by the listener. That is, Whittall comes closer in defining the musical shape, rather than structure. In "Tonality in Britten's Song Cycles with Piano" and *The Music of Britten & Tippett*, Whittall devotes more discussion to the expressive nature of the music, while being no less analytically rigorous. Regarding *Winter Words*, Whittall and Evans only examine the first and last songs in substantial depth, only providing general descriptions of the remaining six songs. No source has been found that structurally examines the complete cycle in detail.

DISCUSSION

No. 1 “At Day-Close in November”

“At Day-Close in November” is in two sections; the first comprises bars 1 to 54 and the second bars 53 to 88. Section One consists of four phrases, developing the piano’s nine introductory bars. The lyrical second section has a rocking, tonic-dominant bass line, which gently draws the song to a close. It is a structure that ensures both unity and a sense of evolution by avoiding strong contrasts and exact repetitions (Whittall “Britten and Tippett” 150-51). As this opening song is short in length, Britten shaped the musical tension using inventive and economic means.

Moritz Lehne claims that musical tension plays an essential role in the emotional aspects of music listening. He states that musical tension is best understood as a process of continuous exchange between tension and relaxation brought about by the fulfillment or violation of expectation (171). Or to use Morwaread Farbood’s qualitative terms, increasing tension can be described as a feeling of rising intensity or impending climax, while decreasing tension can be described as a feeling of resolution (387). Factors that mediate the fluid interchange between tension and relaxation include dynamics, timbre, melodic contour, tonality, repetition, phrase structure, note density and tempo (Farbood 389). One of the most apparent contributors to the shaping of musical tension in “At Day-Close” is the use of harmony.

Referring to Britten’s harmony in his late song cycles, Arnold Whittall states:

In all but the shortest tonal compositions, movement away from and back to the tonic key is an essential dynamic element. But in highly chromatic, tonally centred music it is possible to avoid the clear establishment of alternative tonal centres. The conflict is not between one tonal centre and another but between tonal clarity and tonal ambiguity. (“Tonality in the Song Cycles”, 2)

Britten shaped musical tension in the opening song of *Winter Words* by generating a high level of tension through tonal complexity and low tension through tonal clarity. Rather than pursuing other tonal regions, the song remains in the key of D throughout and achieves harmonic diversity by varying degrees of tonal complexity and simplicity.

Register is also used to enhance the shift between tension and resolution. Britten utilised the natural tendency for descending melodic lines to be perceived as relaxing (Cooper 15-6). In this song, moving from dissonant harmony in the upper register to tonal simplicity in the lower register helps to shape the musical tension. This is the structure of the foundational phrase on which the first section is based. It begins dissonantly in a high register, gradually descending to a soft, unison D (see Ex. 2). That is, as the harmony moves from ambiguity to clarity and from high to low, the energy and tension dissipates. Wilfred Mellers simply observes that “The bitonal arpeggios [are] loud, but the unison Ds [are] always soft,” (28). This technique is not only found at the phrase level, but also in the overarching plan of the piece.



Ex 2. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.1 “At Day-Close in November”, bars 1-9.

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Considering the combination of register and dissonance, Britten created the climax in bar 46 by recapitulating the opening dissonant arpeggio motif one octave higher to create maximum tension (see Ex. 3a). This bar also represents a poetic climax in which the protagonist dwells on his own mortality as the trees he planted in his “June time” have now grown to “obscure

the sky.” Conversely, the search for ultimate tonal simplicity, and therefore musical relaxation, is found in bar 69 which features a pure D-major chord in the lowest register of the movement. It is the only pure triad in the song (see Ex. 3b)³.

The image shows a musical score for the first system of 'At Day-Close in November'. The vocal line is in the upper staff, with lyrics: "I set ev-'ry tree in my June time,.... And". The piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. It begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. The music then transitions to a piano (*dim.*) dynamic. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor).

Ex. 3a Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.1 “At Day-Close in November”, bars 45-50.

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The image shows a musical score for the second system of 'At Day-Close in November'. The vocal line is in the upper staff, with lyrics: "time when no.... trees,.... no". The piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. It features a piano (*sempre pp*) dynamic. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor).

Ex. 3b Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.1 “At Day-Close in November”, bars 67-70.

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In light of this, “At Day-Close in November” should be shaped by the performers to give bar 46 maximum tension and bar 69 maximum resolution. The song’s first section consists of four vocal phrases plus introduction. The introduction (bars 1-9) and first two phrases (bars 10-18 and 19-29) share the same shape with a sudden outburst of energy, beginning with the

³ Graham Johnson praises Britten for using the change to major with the same sensitivity and genius as Schubert, comparing it to “Gute Nacht” from *Winterreise* (228).

interlocking arpeggios before slowly relaxing to unison. Bar 46 will receive maximum impact if these four phrases are played with incremental energy. Therefore it could hinder the sense of structure to start the song with maximum energy, which may be tempting as it is the opening of the cycle. The third and most developed phrase (bars 30-44) however, begins quietly in a low register before ascending to the climax at the beginning of the fourth phrase. Reducing the dynamic to a very delicate *pianissimo* in bar 30 will enhance the climax in bar 46 by providing maximum room for crescendo.⁴

The beginning of the second section can be indicated by slightly delaying the arrival of bar 55. Though calmer than the first section, the tonal complexity is not absent where D major/minor and A major/minor are juxtaposed vertically and horizontally. However, it can be viewed more as modal ambiguity rather than complex contradictions due to the stable pedal point generated by a repetitive bass line (Paetsch, 541). That is, this section is best viewed in D, coloured by Phrygian inflections, conflicting major and minor thirds as well as flattened and sharpened sevenths. Moving from harsh polychords to a more stable modal sonority contributes to the gradual move toward tonal clarity and reduces the severity and instability of the first section. Bar 69 contains the next point of structural significance: the D-major chord (see Ex. 3b). The sweetness of the pure major harmony is such a brief but serene moment that demands to be drawn out through generous *rubato*. The importance of this bar justifies the use of *rubato* in order to emphasise the harmonic culmination of tonal clarity.

“At Day-Close in November” provides an arresting opening with an impetuous character. Britten chose a poem featuring an elderly man reflecting on his ephemerality through the image of children, who are yet uncorrupted by life’s hardships. The themes of innocence and experience are central to *Winter Words* and are explored in the seven texts that follow.

⁴ The dynamic can be further enhanced by slightly delaying the entry in bar 30.

No. 2 “Midnight on the Great Western (or The Journeying Boy)”

An important feature of “Midnight on the Great Western” is Britten’s contrast of musical momentum, which is used to delineate changes in time and perspective. As Hardy’s poem progresses, the perspective of the narrator shifts from observation to internal thought. As Annabelle Paestch explains:

The first two stanzas of the poem relate, in the past tense and from the perspective of a detached adult observer, the scene of a boy travelling alone. In the remaining two stanzas, the narrator steps outside his role as observer and addresses the boy in the form of questions, but at a safe temporal distance: although the questions are framed in the present tense, they are not directed at the boy himself but, rather, at the past image or memory of the boy. The third stanza raises questions about the boy’s past, while the fourth expresses wonderment at the innocence which allows him to transcend the adult world of ‘rude realms.’ (542)

Britten’s setting heightens the shifts between physical and abstract perspectives through changes in musical impetus. The first two stanzas (the only strophic setting in the cycle) are set to a rhythmic accompaniment evoking the sound of the train in which the narrative is set. The onomatopoeic nature of the accompaniment gives tangibility to the reality-bound observations of the narrator. As the text shifts to the inner thoughts of the observer, motoric rhythm is replaced with inactive, upper register triads and the sense of linear motion is suspended.

From bars 6 through to 30, the bass line of the accompaniment descends via a C natural-minor scale (omitting D) treating each scale degree as a temporary tonic. In bars 6 to 15, an ostinato establishes C as the tonic by repeating a six-beat pattern four times. This is the longest sustained tonality in the song, which serves to ground the listener’s ear in C so the cadence at the end of the stanza feels complete, having journeyed significantly from the

initial tonality. The first departure from C comes in bar 15 where the bass descends to B \flat . This cadence is a striking moment as Britten set the word “journeying” melismatically with increasingly compressed rhythmic values (dotted crotchet, quavers, triplets) driving the phrase toward the cadence (see Ex. 4). It is important that the singer is strict in the execution of these rhythms, as any expressive rhythmic modification will disturb the implicit momentum.

Ex. 4 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.2 “Midnight on the Great Western”, bars 12-15.

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The B \flat tonal centre becomes transitional as it acts as the dominant of E \flat , which arrives in bar 17. This tonality also proves to be transitory as the bass and vocal lines descend from scale degrees 5-1 in A \flat minor; A \flat being the next salient structural note. However when the vocal line arrives on A \flat , the accompaniment’s bass line has already bypassed it onto G (the voice eventually agrees with the bass G in bar 21) (see Ex. 5).

Ex. 5 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.2 “Midnight on the Great Western”, bars 17-21.

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Bar 23 presents a harmonic surprise where the bass line steps out of the pattern bypassing the expected F and dropping to E minor. This is harmonically startling, as it jumps to the “other side” of the circle of fifths from where the other tonal regions are drawn (B \flat , E \flat , A \flat). Britten drew attention to this moment by giving the tenor a dramatic octave to the highest note in the song. Although it is an expressive moment, lingering or stretching the tempo at this point would disturb the structure, as this is an antecedent phrase preempting the consequent in bar 24 where the bass moves to the expected F.⁵ The arrival on E \flat minor in bar 27 recalls the opening as it imitates the initial ostinato, and the vocal line cites the melisma motif while

⁵ The rhyming couplet supports this antecedent/consequent phrasing: “Brewrapt past knowing to what he was going” in the first stanza and “That twinkled gleams of the lamp’s sad beams” in the second.

appropriately singing “whence he came.” While this is the most stable tonal region since bar 6, it is not yet the home key. The voice approaches what could be a Picardy third, but the accompaniment drops to C minor, transforming the major third of E \flat to the dominant of the home key.

This analysis reveals that there are no places where the harmonic movement is at rest. When Britten implied a strong cadence, the arrival in the new tonal region was only in preparation for another harmonic shift. The performers should attempt to compliment this tonal scheme by not lingering on moments where forward motion is implicit.

As the perspective shifts from the tangible observations of the onlooker to his inner thoughts, Britten accordingly changed the musical momentum. The train whistle-motif, which opens the work and continues to permeate the song, is now taken in isolation. By using upper register triads without bass notes, the texture becomes spacious and unanchored in contrast to the compact, lower register of the first two stanzas. As opposed to the process-driven harmony of the opening verses, the harmony here is comparatively directionless. The triads, presenting all twelve semitones, do not complement the tonal centers implied in the vocal line, undermining any harmonic momentum. A chromatically saturated series of triads indicates a more “impressionistic” approach to harmony where each chord is appreciated as a solitary unit. According to Phillip Ruprecht, “Britten’s preference for triads in close position voicings minimizes (sic) a sense of constituent parts within the chord, inviting the listener to focus on sounds as object-like entities, to be juxtaposed and compared” (149).⁶

As linear motion has been suspended, generous rubato would give the impression of elastic time in this abstract perspective. The two bar reference to the first section’s ostinato in bars 34-35, for example, could lurch forward into tempo and pull up as it trails off (see Ex. 6).

⁶ Britten used a similar technique for the “Sleep” chords in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Ruprecht 151).

From Britten's marking of 'freely', the singer can treat this section as arioso, as Whittall prescribes ("Britten and Tippett" 151). By pushing the tempo through the crescendos and slowing down through the diminuendos, the singer will achieve the intended flexible speech quality.

Graham Johnson highlights an error on Britten's behalf, owing to Hardy's unusual syntax. In the third stanza, the word "journeying" unusually has a dual function acting as a verb and an adjective, thereby connecting it to the next line (What past can be yours, O journeying boy / Towards a world unknown) (231). Britten's setting instead seems to suggest that these two lines are not connected. The solution is for the singer to minimise the gap between bars 36 and 37 (see Ex.6).

The image shows a musical score for Benjamin Britten's "Midnight on the Great Western", bars 34-38. The score is in B-flat major and 4/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with "jour - - - - - neying boy" and continues with "To-wards a world un-known,". The piano accompaniment includes markings for "freely", "pp", "p", "sf", and "Ad.".

Ex. 6 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.2 "Midnight on the Great Western", bars 34-38.

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While the fourth stanza sees the return of the motoric accompaniment, it does not have the same process driven tonal scheme as the first two stanzas. It meanders through various unrelated keys (C major, B♭ major/minor and E minor) before arriving in C minor, where the melisma motif finally appears in the tonic key. Though the harmony does not share the same inherent momentum of the first stanzas, the return of the active surface rhythm suggests it should be performed with the same sense of direction. Paestch says that the return of the rhythmic accompaniment for the fourth stanza “seems to suggest the narrator’s return to his adult world: even though the focus is still on the boy’s private and unknowable world, the adult observer is now trying to comprehend it on his own terms” (543).

No. 3 “Wagtail and Baby (A Satire)”

On the surface, Hardy’s “Wagtail and Baby” is a wry little satire with a simple rhyming and metric scheme (Mellers 29). However the story of a baby pondering why a wagtail would not flinch at the sight of large, menacing animals yet hurries away from a perfect gentleman carries a more complex and cynical undertone, suggesting man as the enemy of nature (Graham Johnson 233).⁷ Britten’s setting of this text scrupulously captures this paradigm between surface simplicity and veiled complexity. As Wilfrid Mellers describes it, the “waltzy lilt and ‘added note’ tea-shop harmony” reflects apparent naivety, while an intricate harmonic scheme matches the poem’s hidden complexity (29). Whittall explains that “Wagtail and Baby” has the unusual feature of “being unmistakably triadic but, arguably, atonal” (“Tonality in the song cycles” 6). The tonality seems to oscillate between F major and A major, but does not commit to either. The first eleven bars imply an F major tonality moving to the subdominant, although this is made ambiguous through added note chords. However, just as the harmony is seemingly about to continue through the cycle of fifths, the tonality sidesteps to A major. As the song continues, the harmony shifts between the two tonal regions, not staying long enough in either to be anchored as a tonic. Though the song closes in A major, the sequence of improbable chords that precede it render the final cadence as a surprise rather than a resolution.

One can discern Britten’s structure by following the shape of the accompaniment’s bass line. Beginning on a C, the bass descends by step to A, before rising to F, which arrives an octave lower. From this low F, the bass line descends by step to C with a short contrasting episode delaying the appearance of B \flat before the final cadence on A (see Table 1).

⁷ Johnson also comments on the striking resemblance between the accompaniments of this song and Schubert’s *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (233). Considering how both songs conjure images of water and Britten’s intimate knowledge of the lieder repertoire, this is surely no coincidence.

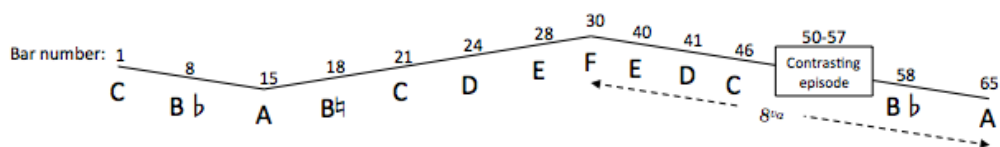


Table 1. Bass line of “Wagtail and Baby.”

Considering this, two salient structural moments indicated by changes of direction in the bass line become apparent— A in bar 15, and F in bar 30. These two points of interest also coincide with the end of the first and second stanzas respectively, and therefore also represent salient structural moments in the text. It is noteworthy that these two moments utilise pure, root-position chords of the two conflicting tonalities, A major and F major.

Each stanza consists of four lines in an ABAB rhyming structure and Britten’s setting of the first stanza reflects this form very closely. The first and third line share the same melodic line, as do the second and fourth. Though the second and fourth line use the same cadential melodic figure, the structure of the bass line suggests that the cadence on B \flat in bar 8 has less significance than the arrival on A in bar 15. Therefore bar 8 can be treated as a more transient cadence. Conversely, a slight crescendo into bar 15 would emphasise its local importance. Though the cadence on F in bar 30 is of structural significance, it seems that Britten wished to downplay this moment. The composer drew attention away from the cadence by dislocating the singer and pianist’s cadences rhythmically (see Ex.7). A weaker cadence here would also suit the text, as “And held his own unblinking” implies a nonchalance that would be reflected by softening the change in harmony with minimal slackening of tempo.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics: "And held his own un - blink - ing." Above the vocal line, there are markings for "Singer's cadence" and "Pianist's cadence". The middle staff is the right-hand piano part, and the bottom staff is the left-hand piano part. The piano part features a prominent bass line with a low C in bar 46. The score includes dynamic markings like *p* and *rit.*

Ex.7. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.3 "Wagtail and Baby", bars 27-30.

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The main climax of the song is withheld until the arrival on the low C in bar 46 where the text "A perfect gentleman then neared" begins to uncover the ironic crux of the poems meaning at the beginning of the fourth stanza. A number of musical features reveal the significance of this moment. The F in the bass reached in bar 30 is sustained for 10 bars, increasing the anticipation of a change in harmony. The second half of this stanza (beginning in bar 37) has a rising vocal line while the bass in the piano descends. This expansion in range builds anticipation for the arrival of the climax in bar 46, which includes the lowest bass note thus far and the highest vocal note of the cycle. There is also a sense of recapitulation, as bar 46 returns to the same chord as the opening bar of the song (see Ex. 8). Although the climax is approached by diminuendo, a generous *rallentando* into bar 46 would provide it with its due importance.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics: "A per-fect gen - tle-man then neared;". Above the vocal line, there are markings for "p" and "rall.". The middle staff is the right-hand piano part, and the bottom staff is the left-hand piano part. The piano part features a prominent bass line with a low C in bar 46. The score includes dynamic markings like *p* and *rall.*

Ex.8. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.3 "Wagtail and Baby", bars 45-48.

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Britten's approach to meter in this song was very fluid. Though it is mostly in 6/8 against 2/4, the sense of downbeat continually shifts. The metric groupings of the song can be viewed with flexibility where the principal 80bpm pulse is grouped according to the stresses in the vocal line and accompaniment, rather than being determined by the bar lines. The need for metric flexibility is established early, as bar 4 has a change in harmony, a bass note and the accented word "ford" on the second beat of the bar. Therefore, bar 3 should be phrased as a 9/8 bar (or 3/4 for the singer) for this to make musical sense. Similar regroupings occur throughout the song. The following are proposed metric groupings for the first phrase, which makes sense of the word stress and the half-bar displacement of the accompaniment's triplet motif (see Ex.9)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the first phrase of 'Wagtail and Baby'. Each system consists of a voice line and a piano accompaniment line. Vertical dashed lines indicate the boundaries of metric groupings, with numbers above the lines indicating the number of beats in each group. The piano accompaniment features a triplet motif in the right hand and a steady bass line in the left hand.

- System 1:** The voice line has a rest in the first two groups (2 beats each) and then sings "A ba - by" in the third group (3 beats). The piano accompaniment has a rest in the first group, then plays "clearly" in the second group (2 beats), and continues in the third group (3 beats). The piano part includes a *p* dynamic marking and a *(half ped.)* instruction.
- System 2:** The voice line sings "watch'd a ford, where - to" in the first group (3 beats), "A wag-tail came for" in the second group (2 beats), and "A wag-tail came for" in the third group (3 beats). The piano accompaniment continues with the triplet motif, marked *(sim.)*.
- System 3:** The voice line sings "drink - ing;" in the first group (2 beats), "A blar - ing bull went wa - ding" in the second group (2 beats), and "A blar - ing bull went wa - ding" in the third group (3 beats). The piano accompaniment continues with the triplet motif, marked *(sim.)*.

Ex.9. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.3 "Wagtail and Baby", bars 1-11. The numbers indicate the number of beats in each metric grouping.

The accompaniment's left hand repeated chords conjure the image of the flowing stream in which the narrative takes place, while the right hand plays a cascade of triplet semiquavers imitating the wagtail— a texture reminiscent of Schubert's *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* (Graham Johnson 233). Britten instructed the pianist to use half pedal when the right hand enters in order to give clarity to the wagtail's motif. However, it is important to ensure that the bass notes receive full resonance, due to their structural importance. The pianist must catch the bass notes with full pedal and a firm tone in order for the resonance to carry. To ensure the repeated chords in the left hand remain a background feature and do not dominate the texture, the pianist can experiment with lifting the chords only to the point of double escapement⁸. Combining this with careful pedaling will give the chords both resonance and rhythmic clarity while remaining soft.

⁸ This is the lowest point a key can be lifted so that it can resound when pressed.

No.4 “The Little Old Table”

Graham Johnson claims that “Much of Hardy’s greatest poetry is about looking back into the past, regretting events that cannot be changed, and minutely re-examining incidents he feels he should have better understood, or better managed, at the time” (234). In this short lyric, Hardy explores this theme through reference to an inanimate object: a table. Hardy did not often use inanimate objects as subjects in his poetry, but when he did, the focus was on their associations rather than objects in themselves (Trevor Johnson 115). In this case, the creaks of the table “speak” to the narrator of a lover from long ago who gifted the table to him. When exploring the matter of past regrets, he often scolds himself for misreading signs of love. In this case, the protagonist dwells on the look the woman gave him when she brought him the table; a look that he still does not understand. The table becomes the article through which the narrator examines the past, present and future. Annabelle Paetsch explains that the poem “begins with the acknowledgement of the table in the present. The next stanza establishes the past by invoking memories of the table’s previous owner. The final verse projects the table into the future and muses upon the ignorance of its future owners about its history, thus joining anticipation to retrospection” (546).

In his formidable analytical survey of the complete works of Britten, Peter Evans only devotes a sentence to this song claiming it is a “[sketch] thrown off in a few practised gestures, yet this is not to say a formula” (359). Though the musical content may not lend itself to extensive analysis, there are details in the harmony and structure that are noteworthy for performers.

Britten heightened the emotional content of the text by juxtaposing the roles and character of the singer and pianist. Schumann employed the same technique in the ninth song of

Dichterliebe, “Das ist ein Flöten und Geigen” where the bitter protagonist watches the wedding dance of the one he loves. The singer mournfully expresses his grief while the pianist plays the rollicking wedding party, as if unaware of the singer’s heartache. Similarly, Schubert’s final song of *Winterreise*, “Der Leiermann”, has the pianist playing the role of the hurdy-gurdy player while the lonely narrator observes from a distance.

These two examples use an accompaniment that is emotionally detached and unsympathetic to the singer’s situation, as if they have been abandoned to their emotional state. Britten used a similar technique for his setting of “The Little Old Table.” In this case, the pianist plays the role of the inanimate table with which the singer converses. Though Britten established a dialogue between the left hand of the piano and the singer, the cold and unemotional nature of the accompaniment contrasts with the sentimental musings of the singer. The generous use of expressive melisma at the end of each strophe intensifies the melancholy of the singer’s text, further contrasting against the plain and economic accompaniment (Graham Johnson 235). Britten made use of mixed modes, most notably the combination of major and minor thirds. By committing to neither a major nor minor modality, the harmony does not express the affects typically associated with either mode, thus rendering it comparatively neutral.⁹

The singer’s line will be all the more expressive if the pianist responds to this neutral aspect and does not attempt to sentimentalise it. Graham Johnson warns that the song becomes “hilariously mannered” if made to sound too precious or affected (235). A certain wryness can be achieved through very sparing use of the pedal. There is only one pedal marking in the piece (bar 44), which can be inferred to mean the remainder of the piece should go

⁹ The topic of the emotional implications of various modes is, however, a point of debate.

without. Even then, the pedal should be used moderately as to not muddy the texture when the semiquaver motif returns in the low register two bars later (see Ex.10).



Ex.10. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.4 “The Little Old Table”, bars 44-48.

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The way the accompaniment is written suggests legato can be achieved through the fingers without relying on the pedal. All the undulating thirds fit comfortably under the hand and the harmonic shifts use close voice leading, assisting in achieving a texture which is “always smooth” (as Britten instructed at the beginning) without needing to rely on the pedal. Bars 19-21 (see Ex.11) are the only exception where subtle pedaling may need to be employed to maintain the legato.



Ex.11. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.4 “The Little Old Table”, bars 18-22.

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No. 5 “The Choirmaster’s Burial (or The Tenor Man’s Story”)

“The Choirmaster’s Burial” is the cycle’s most substantial song, functioning as the work’s centrepiece, and is the most often performed song from the set as a stand-alone work (Graham Johnson 237). Hardy grew up with stories of “Gallery Music” where amateur village musicians would accompany the choristers from the west gallery. During the 1830s, however, those following the Oxford Movement, (also known as “Tractarianism”) wished to dispense with all music they considered overtly secular and meretricious (Temperley n.pag). In 1843, Rev. Shirley of Stinsford Church where the Hardy family attended joined the movement and removed the west gallery and replaced the instrumental choir with a barrel organ. It is believed the Hardy family never forgave him for this, as some of them were gallery musicians whose roles would have thus become redundant (Norman 30). Although not provable, it is hard to escape the impression that Hardy’s poem embodies this reaction.

The text is a complex embedded narrative (a story within a story), which generates various levels of diegesis: the narrator tells the story recounted to him by a former chorister about the choirmaster. However this complexity only becomes apparent in the final line, “Such the tenor man told / When he had grown old”. Only then is the listener retrospectively aware that a second order narrator had told the story. The use of a neutral or plural narrator is a favourite device of Hardy’s used to disown the responsibility of truth in a tale with supernatural elements (Brooks 134).¹⁰

¹⁰ The same device is used in poems such as “The Paphian Ball” and “The Lost Pyx” (Brooks 134).

The story is divided into four subsections. The first order narrator (“the tenor man”) firstly explains that the choirmaster requested “Mount Ephraim” (a hymn tune by B. Milgrove) to be played at his graveside (Graham Johnson 238). Secondly, as soon as the tenor man learns of the choirmaster’s death, he informs the vicar who then, thirdly, refuses the request on the grounds of its impracticability. Finally, later that night, a band of white-robed angels are heard singing “Mount Ephraim” by his grave. As it is a complex narrative involving multiple voices, the details relevant to the performers concern how Britten characterised each voice and how they can be made distinct.

Britten bookended the song with short, unaccompanied phrases centred on A \flat , neither of which harmonically relate to the music that follows or precedes it, being in B \flat . Annabelle Paestch argues this is to frame the story and impart a sense of narrative distance (regardless of who is telling the story) (547). Wilfrid Mellers compares this to the prologue and epilogue sung by Captain Vere in the opera *Billy Budd* (1953), establishing the opera’s events were drawn from the Captain’s memory (28).

After the narrator’s introduction, the piano enters with a simple setting of “Mount Ephraim.” Over the top of the “ancient stave”, the singer has a free recitative which Peter Evans describes as “affectionately, not maliciously artless” (360). Britten’s setting of the seemingly free rhyming structure of the first stanza faithfully replicates the intonation and stresses of speech. The singer’s melody, though diatonic, does not conform to the chords being played in the accompaniment, suggesting that the performers should take a more independent approach to their roles. Differing dynamic markings found in bars 12-14, for example, further support this idea (see Ex. 12). This suggests the pianist should phrase the hymn tune setting independent of the singer’s line, following the contours of the melody.



Ex.12. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.5 "The Choirmaster's Burial", bars 12-14. Note the contradicting dynamic markings.

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The singer ought to likewise approach his part independently, not influenced by the shape or phrasing of the accompaniment. It is advisable to approach the rhythms with a degree of flexibility given the speech-like quality of the setting. A natural sense of speech is preferable to achieving a legato tone, the exception being the rhapsodic Purcellian melisma in bar 17 on the word "seraphim" (Graham Johnson 239). The unaccompanied phrases that open and close the song could be sung in a more sustained, legato manner in contrast to the speech quality of the tenor man's text in order to delineate between narrator and character.

Britten humorously used a quickened *secco* recitative to move swiftly and unemotionally into the vicar's monologue. Philip Rupprecht discusses Britten's use of "utterance" in his vocal writing in *Our Hunting Fathers*, as "[the] unfolding process of vocal enunciation (the verb, to 'utter') and the discrete units of vocally realized thought or expression ("utterances") that result" ("Britten's Musical Language" 6). That is, Britten considered the intent and expression behind a character's words to influence melodic shapes and rhythms. Just as Britten used organic, speech-like rhythms and melodies to give a human and nurturing quality to the choirmaster in the first stanza, the melodies for the vicar's words are rigid, inexpressive and

often shapeless. The resulting character is a stern, unsympathetic man whose obsession with duty deprives him of empathy. Hardy's shift in poetic structure from a loose rhyming scheme in the first stanza to strict, austere rhyming couplets in the second motivated Britten's musical decision. Most notably and satirically, Mellers observes that the setting of the line "To get through it faster / They buried the master without any tune" is almost devoid of music. Here, the vocal line becomes "numbly reiterated B ♮ s" with the strong syllables accented with grotesque double appoggiaturas in the accompaniment (30) (see Ex. 13). In contrast to the subtle rhythmic flexibility discussed in the first section, the rhythm and pulse of this middle section should be rigidly adhered to. If the vicar is portrayed as obsessively duty-bound, the performers must be occupied by their duty to execute the rhythms precisely (Graham Johnson 239).

The image displays a musical score for three systems. The first system is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature. It features a vocal line with lyrics: "..... To get through it fas-ter They buried the master With - out a - ny". The vocal line is marked with a piano dynamic (*p*) and includes three triplet markings over the notes. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, including double appoggiaturas. The second system shows a vocal line with the word "tune." and a piano accompaniment with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Ex.13. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.5 "The Choirmaster's Burial", bars 48-51.

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The final section sees the return of the opening material with a much-embellished rendering of "Mt. Ephraim." Michael Kennedy appropriately describes the ethereal cross rhythms and harmonies in the accompaniment as "angelic" (210). Subtly overlapping the harmonic shifts

with the pedal achieve the unearthly, ghostly sonority by eliminating any sudden changes. Though it is not specified, use of the *una corda* pedal is almost certainly warranted. As the text at this point is relayed by the narrator and is not direct speech, the singer can draw attention to this difference by aiming for a sustained, legato tone in contrast to the speech quality of the first section.

Britten took liberties with the text, freely repeating “singing and playing” to gather momentum leading into the climax of this section in bar 72 at “The ancient stave” where the Purcellian melisma returns. There is a significant crescendo in the accompaniment from *pianississimo* (the last dynamic marking in bar 63) to *forte* in 72. Although there is a significant dynamic lift, the *una corda* might still be used through to the *forte* to maintain the same tonal colour. The dynamic markings, though limited, are more unified between singer and pianist in this final section than in the first. This suggests a more cohesive approach to both parts where the phrases rise and fall together, as opposed to the independent approach suggested in the opening section.

No.6 “Proud Songsters (Thrushes, Finches and Nightingales)”

Hardy’s short poem tells of birds that now sing loudly and cheerily, unaware of a time in the recent past in which they did not exist. This song is poetically linked to the first. Both texts combine a moment in the physical present and a negation in the final stanza inviting the reader to consider the mystery of transformation and growth from one state to another (Brooks 66). The image of birds in “Proud Songsters” acts as a similar metaphor to the way children were used in “At Day-Close in November” as only the narrator is able to conceive of another order of time (Paestch 551). According to Jean Brooks:

Twelve months ago the different species whose song is dwelt on so carefully ‘no finches were, nor nightingales’; the tall trees which had been set ‘in my June time’ have become a permanent feature of the landscape to children who ‘Conceive that there never has been A time when no tall trees grew here...’ Time and transience are the great negations which deny meaning to the physical world. (66)

This could explain why Britten set both texts with a similar character (both are marked as ‘Impetuous’). “Proud Songsters” is also thematically connected to “Wagtail and Baby” as they both use the image of birds to embody beings uncorrupted by consciousness.

Trevor Hold points out that this text is the only one in *Winter Words* that was also set by Gerald Finzi, and the two settings could hardly be more contrasted (310). Finzi’s setting, found in his cycle *Earth and Air and Rain* is a gentle meditation on themes of nature and the mysteries of birth and creation, stressing the “human” side of the poem and the inherent sadness in the transience of time (Hold 310; Weber 176). Britten’s, on the other hand, is a cacophonous representation of nature rivalling, in Graham Johnson’s opinion, the energy

and ecstasy of Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (240). Unlike Finzi, Britten was, as it were, *being* the birds who are oblivious to their situation (Hold 310).

The work is simply constructed and hence, according to Peter Evans, a thorough analysis would be "otiose" (360). There are details of its construction, however, that are useful in building a successful interpretation. The accompaniment is dominated by one chord cluster doubled in both hands decorated with clangorous triplets and trills stressing the resonant second. The piano's phrases follow the shape of the singer's line, which develops the first two melodic phrases characterised by falling intervals at the end of each poetic line (Evans 360; Paestch 552). Therefore, the phrasing between the singer and accompanist must be unified.

As with much of the cycle, the phrasing of the accompaniment should be informed by the stresses of the text. Britten did not adhere to one grouping of 5/4, often alternating between 2+3 and 3+2 groupings. For example bar 12 implies a 3+2 grouping while bar 13 suggests the other (see Ex. 14a). There are also moments where the sense of down beat is displaced. The *sforzandi* in the opening piano motif imply a 2+4+4 grouping over two bars. This deviating grouping reappears as the accompaniment's primary motif in short interjections at the ends of the singer's phrases (see Ex.14b).

The image displays two musical examples, Ex. 14a and Ex. 14b, illustrating phrasing in a song. Each example consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. In Ex. 14a, the vocal line has a 3+2 grouping of notes over two bars, with lyrics "pipe, as they can when". The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes and a pair of eighth notes, with a dynamic marking of *mf*. In Ex. 14b, the vocal line has a 2+3 grouping of notes over two bars, with lyrics "A - pril wears,". The piano accompaniment features a pair of eighth notes and a triplet of eighth notes, with a dynamic marking of *sf* to *f* and a trill.

Ex.14a. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.6 “Proud Songsters”, bars 12 and 13.

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The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 5/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a quarter note, and then a group of four measures with a '4' above them. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. It contains a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a quarter note, and then a group of four measures with a '4' above them. Dynamic markings include *f*, *sf*, *f*, and *mf*. The instruction "with Ped." is written below the bottom staff.

Ex.14b. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.6 “Proud Songsters”, bars 1-2.

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Britten’s precise dynamic markings not only reinforce the metric grouping but also suggest the pianist briefly seizes the foreground before subsiding as the singer enters. With such an active and vital texture in a very resonant register of the instrument, it is important for the pianist to utilise moments where the intensity drops to prevent it from becoming crude and noisy. Sensitive pedaling will also assist. Britten did not specify the use of the pedal beyond indicating “with Ped.”, though frequent pedaling will prevent the sound from accumulating and overwhelming the singer. Pedaling the metric groupings will also clarify the piano’s texture while clearly defining the changing rhythmic patterns. Half pedaling can be used in the pianissimo section in bars 19-25 to allow all the notes of the trill to speak while remaining soft creating a sparkling and active texture that does not engulf singer’s line.

Graham Johnson argues that Britten may have been less aware of the text’s place in the poet’s output than Finzi. Britten’s setting may be criticised as being trivial, not expressing the sombre undertones of the text. Being from the last collection of poems written in his late eighties, Johnson explains “Hardy knows that he has come to the end of his time of singing,

and he prepares to yield his craft to the new-born who will take his place" (240). Conversely, it can be argued that Britten was acutely aware of the poem's sombre undertones simply evidenced by the fact that the poem was included in a cycle that explores themes of transience and loss of innocence. The ecstatic scherzo character is justified by providing the tempo and character relief the cycle required at this point, especially after the extended ethereal closing of "The Choirmaster's Burial."

No. 7 “At the Railway Station, Upway (or The Convict and Boy with the Violin)”

The setting of the railway station, a frequently occurring image in Hardy’s writing, links this song with “Midnight on the Great Western.” Though the railway poems encompass a wide variety of circumstances and themes, “Midnight on the Great Western” and “At the Railway Station, Upway” use the railway as a metaphor for transience (Morgan 174). Furthermore, both texts’ titles plainly assert a place and encounter, and both involve a child acting as an allegory for vulnerable innocence (Bloom 149).

This movement has Britten’s most notable use of mimicry. While other movements allude to train whistles, creaking tables and running streams, the accompaniment in “At the Railway Station, Upway” is a conspicuous imitation of the violin, most clearly evidenced by being written on one line. While “The Choirmaster’s Burial” engaged the full resonance of the keyboard, the accompaniment here is minimalist and ruthlessly economic (Graham Johnson 242). Britten mimicked various violin techniques in the accompaniment such as open strings, double-stopping, *spiccato* and *staccato* bowing, finishing with a harmonic. It is likely that Britten was most concerned with imitating the sound of a violin and not so concerned with a violinist’s technical limitations. That is, Britten was interested in the accompaniment sounding like a violin, but not to such a degree where a violinist could comfortably play it. However, a pianist can nonetheless imagine how a violinist would technically approach this music to inform the phrasing, articulation and colour.

The performance indication “Lightly and like an improvisation” permits much rhythmic freedom, especially in the pianist’s solo opening and subsequent interludes, where ensemble isn’t a concern. The introduction has the boy tuning up his instrument. He checks all his open

strings and tunes his G and E (verified by the inclusion of F and A \flat) (see Ex.15). This motif, which is first introduced as purely onomatopoeic, becomes structurally significant as it is developed throughout the song. A similar technique is used with the train whistle motif in “Midnight on the Great Western.”



Ex.15. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 “At the Railway Station, Upway”, bars 1-2.

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As a violinist would need to cross all strings to play such a figure, the pianist could slightly overlap the notes in order to imitate the gesture. This principle can also be applied to all figures that could be interpreted as a double stopped violin chord. This not only includes all appearances and variations of the opening tuning motif (bars 8-9, 17-18, 31-33) but other melodic gestures where the intervals are too wide to be played melodically such as the first beat of bar 4 (see Ex. 17) and bar 24 (see Ex. 16). This must be distinct from what can be perceived as melodic writing where the violinist would play several notes with one bow stroke (i.e. non *détaché* bowing). In this case, the pianist’s touch can be legato without the notes overlapping, which can be achieved through finger legato and no pedal. Such cases include the final beat of bar 4 (see Ex 17), its corresponding places in bars 12 and 27, and bars 38-39 (see Ex.18).



Ex. 16 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 "At the Railway Station, Upway", bar 24.

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The articulation markings in the introduction indicate that Britten was very intentionally considering a violinist's technique. Notes that are marked with a *mezzo staccato* are followed by either the same note or a large interval (see Ex.15). In both cases, a violinist might need to take time to retake the bow or change string. In order to imitate this, the pianist could also take time and give adequate silences in between notes. These rhythmic liberties should only be taken during the pianist's introduction and solo interludes. When the tuning motif reappears to accompany the singer's narrator passages, these articulations need to be performed within a more regular pulse.

Another recurring motif is the long string of staccato semiquavers under a slur, appearing in bar 4 (see Ex.17), with variations in bars 12 and 27. It is likely a violinist would approach this passage using up-bow staccato. Having played the chord at the beginning of the bar with a down-bow, the staccato notes would be played by bouncing the bow during a single up-bow. This technique has a natural tendency to accelerate through the passage and the pianist can do the same to in order to imitate the technique.



Ex. 17 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 “At the Railway Station, Upway”, bar 4.

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The final violinistic illusion is saved for the very last note, which imitates a harmonic on the top E (see Ex. 18). One way to reproduce this particular timbre is to continue to sustain the lower E while the top note is played as softly as possible. As the top E is in the harmonic series of the lower, it suspends above the fundamental, assisting in emulating the unique timbre of a harmonic.

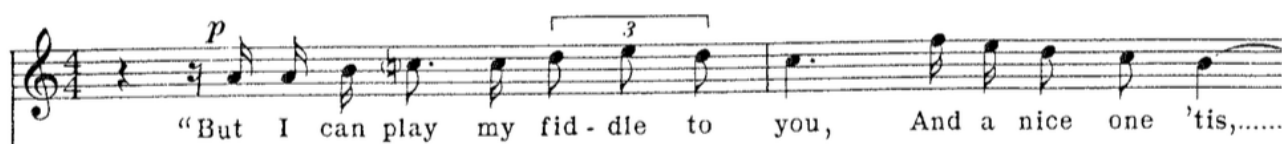


Ex.18. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 “At the Railway Station, Upway”, bar 37-40.

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Similarly to the “The Choirmaster’s Burial,” Britten distinguished different voices by varying the melodic shapes and rhythms. When the text is in quotation marks, the melody and rhythms are organic and fluid, imitating the rise and fall of natural speech inflection. Here a speech quality is preferred over a sustained legato, with a flexible approach to rhythm.

Rhythmic freedom is possible in such places, as the pianist (or violinist) is sustaining held notes, alleviating any issues of ensemble. When the narrator’s text enters, the intervals become plainer and rhythmic values are lengthened. The “sustained” marking assigned to the narrator’s text justifies the decision to sing the text in quotation marks with a speech-like quality. Note the difference in melodic contour and note lengths between direct speech (see Ex.19a) and the narrator’s text (see Ex.19b).



Ex.19a. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 “At the Railway Station, Upway”, bars 13-14.

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Ex.19b. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.7 “At the Railway Station, Upway”, bars 32-33.

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Graham Johnson marvels at Britten’s ability in this song to weave characters and levels of narrative in such an apparently organic manner using minimal material. He explains “any composer will tell you how hard it is to achieve what Britten does, seemingly without effort; here he is at his most enviable to his contemporaries, showing the lightest of touches, but the touch of genius nevertheless” (243).

No.8 “Before Life and After”

All the preceding poems used in *Winter Words* have combined action and narrative with characters and events. Britten’s selection of these texts was perhaps to remind the listener that Hardy was primarily a storyteller and a novelist (Graham Johnson 226). The chosen texts allowed Britten to draw on his strengths as a composer of opera and musical drama. In this concluding song, however, all action ceases. Britten chose one of Hardy’s philosophical ruminations to distill the themes of innocence and experience into a unifying conclusion. The preceding seven poems comment on the central theme from varying perspectives, which are then made explicit in “Before Life and After” (Paestch 553). The text centres on the transition from unconsciousness to consciousness, despairingly claiming that nothingness, or nonexistence, is preferable to the pain of existence (Mellers 31).

Britten’s setting tracks the transition from unconsciousness to consciousness, or bliss to anguish, through a thoroughly considered musical ground plan. At a first glance, the low, repeated root-position triads could be mistaken, as Peter Evans describes, as being “remarkably near the vampings of the most misguided player ‘by ear’” (361). But Britten used these deceptively simple reiterated triads, representing the primeval state, as a means to articulate a sophisticated musical scheme. The following diagram reproduced from Peter Evans’ analysis shows the movement of the bass line, revealing the song’s construction (see Table 2).



Table 2. The structure of the bass line in “Before Life and After.” Reproduced from Peter Evans’ *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (361).

The four stanzas can be discerned in this illustration. The first three stanzas consist of an ascending bass line arriving at a perfect cadence. Each is increasingly more complex and chromatic, tracking the poem’s gradual descent into anguish. The first stanza has a diatonic D-major ascending bass line arriving at a perfect cadence in C major. Though this is a harmonic surprise, it is only two removed on the circle of fifths, so the shift is relatively subtle. The next has a G-major bass line coloured by an F♯. It arrives at an E♭ major cadence, which is a more significant harmonic shift. The third stanza has a much more complex and chromatic ascent to the cadence, not resembling any conventional mode. A conflicting major and minor third clouds the stanza’s final cadence (see Ex.20).

Ex.20 Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.8 “Before Life and After”, bar 25. Note the strong false relation.

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The melodic dialogue between the singer and the right hand of the piano likewise contribute to the accumulative complexity and tension. An imitative interchange is established in the first two bars between the two melodic lines. In the first stanza, most of the melodic notes in both parts are consonant with the harmonies in the piano’s left hand. There are some expressive dissonances in the first stanza, but all resolve quickly and logically. The second stanza introduces modal inflections and stronger dissonances that do not resolve in an expected manner. A notable moment appears in bar 12 where the singer arrives on a B \flat against the A-major triads in the bass before moving upwards to a C \natural , contradicting the C \sharp s in the harmony (see Ex. 21). This is the strongest dissonance in the song thus far, arriving on the phrase “starved hope,” foreshadowing the descent into anguish. The third stanza continues to intensify the tension as the melodic dissonances outnumber the consonances.

None suf-fered sick - ness, love, or loss, None knew re-gret, starved hope, or

Ex.21. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.8 “Before Life and After”, bars 10-13.

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The final stanza alters the pattern to intensify momentum, driving the impetus to the final resolution. The direction of the bass turns from a single ascent to multiple descents with a much-accelerated harmonic rhythm. The dissonances in the melodies prevail and nearly all harshly contradict the piano’s chords. The seconds and fourths that characterised the preceding melodies are abandoned for upward scales moving in contrary motion to the bass, each arriving at different beats of the bar disturbing the sense of meter. The change in structure coincides with the crux of Hardy’s poem where “the disease of feeling germed”. As Evans describes it, “the musical ground plan accords with that of the poem, yet the progressive widening and quickening of tonal events... can be timed according to purely musical criteria” (361). This accumulating tension is all in preparation for the ultimate resolution where the singer’s final ascending phrase leads back to the same F# that began the song, appropriately on the final syllable of the word “reaffirmed”. Paestch explains that the *forte* recapitulation of the opening tonal harmony at the words “How long?” transforms the lament at the opening into an “eruption of longing for such a previous primeval state” (553). This is a much-intensified realisation of the harmonic structure used in “At Day-Close in November” where the musical tension finds its eventual release in harmonic clarity.

It ought to be the performer's priority to convey the thread that runs through the piece, tracking the slow progression from bliss to anguish. As the carefully constructed scheme already achieves this, there is little the performers need do, or indeed, should do. The song has great impact when performed with a consistent and unchanging pulse as if propelled by a strong and unstoppable force, such as the flow of time that the poem depicts.

Using a consistent tempo also solves the problems of phrasing imitative melodies in the vocal line and piano's octaves. As the interweaving lines are loosely imitated a bar apart, the points of arrival are often displaced. For example, the first note of bar 6 is the peak of a phrase for the piano, while the singer's point of arrival comes at the beginning of bar 7 on the word "consciousness" (see Ex.22).

The image displays a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. It is divided into two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first two bars. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 4/4. The lyrics are "tes - ti - mon - ies tell — Be - fore the birth of". The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with a melodic line and a left hand with a steady, rhythmic accompaniment of chords. The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the next two bars. The vocal line continues with the lyrics "con - scious - ness,". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern.

Ex.22. Britten, *Winter Words* op.54, No.8 "Before Life and After", bars 5-7.

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This independent phrasing is achieved through rise and fall in dynamics rather than through rubato. Britten indicated moments where phrasing in both lines aligns, such as bar 10 (see Ex. 22). A slackening of tempo should likewise be minimal at these points so the inherent momentum is not disrupted. The cadences at the end of each stanza could benefit from a slight relaxation in tempo as both melodic parts come to rest at these points and the quaver rhythm in the left hand momentarily ceases. However, this should only be slight and with the original tempo resuming as the quavers return.

CONCLUSION

Having completed the analysis, I now revisit the intention of this case study as set out in the introduction. The purpose of the analysis was to examine the structural details of Benjamin Britten's *Winter Words* op.52 to assist in the construction of an intelligent and artistically satisfying interpretation prior to a performance. The insights gained from this study could then work towards developing, as John Rink describes it, an "informed intuition" when constructing interpretations of similar works in Britten's output (39).

As with approaching any work from this perspective, an appropriate method of analysis had to be constructed to examine the selected work. Though a unique manner of analysis had to be used, some of the processes used on previously studied repertoire are applicable in *Winter Words*. Discerning the formal structure is an important step, as it signposts salient moments. This was observed in the analysis of the first song, "At Day-Close in November" where a harmonic analysis revealed the location of the climax and point of most relaxation. The interpretation was then constructed in order to give these points their due importance. By extension, the same information can highlight the areas of lesser importance. For example, the expressive octave leap in bar 23 of "Midnight on the Great Western" (see page 15) might be interpreted as a moment of importance on an initial read, but it was recognised to be a passing moment in a larger structure.

One aspect that is unique to vocal repertoire is the presence of poetry. As each song's structure is predetermined by the text, a song's structure is inextricably linked to that of the poem. On multiple occasions, moments that analysis revealed to be musically significant were also moments of poetic significance. This was demonstrated mostly clearly in "Wagtail and Baby" and "Before Life and After" where the poetic structure could be discerned in the

music's shape. The text also informs details at a macro level. Many decisions on phrasing were made in order to replicate the word stress and rhythm found in the poetry. Metric groupings in "Wagtail and Baby" and "Proud Songsters", for example, were chosen to best represent the word stress. Again, Britten's sensitive setting meant the decided phrasing also worked on purely musical terms. At times though, Britten engaged his authorial intent and used musical means to stress words or phrases that were unstressed in the original text. In such cases, the musical phrasing supersedes that of the poem. An example of this is in "At Day-Close in November" where the second of the two significant structural moments occurs on a word that is unstressed in the poem (see page 11).

In some movements, details relevant to performers were not derived primarily from musical analysis, but mostly from text analysis. Extensive non-musical discussion may seem irrelevant in a purely theoretical context, but as every musical detail is derived from the text, such analysis directly informs an understanding of the music. In songs with complex poetry such as "The Choirmaster's Burial" and "At the Railway Station, Upway" with multilayered narratives and numerous speaking characters, the performers must understand the intricacies of the text in order to project it with clarity.

It can be concluded that any further analytically informed interpretations undertaken on the song repertoire would greatly benefit from giving equal attention to the text and the music. Though every work is uniquely written and hence requiring a unique method of analysis that is consistent and scholarly, the understanding of the musical details is inextricably linked with the text. Vocal works written by masters of text setting such as Britten can illuminate and clarify the complexities of a poem. This commentary draws attention to the way in which Britten could faithfully recreate the structure and nuances of a poem in a setting that was also convincing on purely musical criteria, linking to two forms intimately. Hence studying the text informs the music, and studying the music informs the text.

As useful as this kind of study can be for performers, it cannot solely form a convincing interpretation. The dogmatic and rigid approaches of Wallace Berry and Eugene Narmour where a persuasive interpretation is built exclusively on analysis have largely fallen out of favour. To claim, as Narmour did, that Bernstein's crescendo from bars 128-29 in Haydn's Symphony no. 83 is an "obvious mistake" or that Julius Katchen's rendering of motifs in Brahms' Intemezzo op.118, no.1 is "inexplicable" denigrates the artistic intuition of the performer (Cook 240; Narmour 319, 323). Nicholas Cook explains this prescriptive approach "eliminate[s] the musician as an individual, and replace[s] him or her by a theory whose input is some kind of musical text and whose ultimate output is an aesthetic judgment" (242). This didactic relationship between analysis and performance, where the latter is deferent, has more recently been rethought. As Fisher and Lochhead claim, "the basic question thus becomes not what bearing analysis should have on performance, but what bearing can it have" (5).

A foundational incentive for this study was Erwin Stein's idea that "structural considerations cannot guarantee a good performance", but they can "help avoid a faulty one" (21). What makes an interpretation truly engaging and artistically rewarding lies in the intangible and unquantifiable elements of performance. No amount of objective analysis can make up for the use of colour, characterisation or emotion that can make a performance truly fulfilling. As Hans Lampl explains, "the mere absence of mishaps and a superficial perfection do not make for a truly musical performance, let alone one that is arresting and evocative" (6). Analysis can assist in making sense of the score, but just as a score is limited in the amount of information it can express, analysis can only go so far. It is the imagination and artistry of a performer that makes a truly satisfying interpretation.

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