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The Solo Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten: The Effect of the Text Upon the Music

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THE SOLO VOCAL MUSIC OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN:
THE EFFECT OF THE TEXT UPON THE MUSIC

By

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B. S., Minot State College, 1960

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of the

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This thesis submitted by David A. Reiser in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Committee under whom the work has been done.

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INTRODUCTION

For his solo vocal music, Benjamin Britten has selected texts written by poets who lived in a variety of historical eras. Since each era of music has certain stylistic traits which distinguish it from the other eras, would Britten, in his musical setting of a text written in the Romantic era, for example, utilize those stylistic elements of the Romantic era in the treatment of the music? The purpose of this study, then, is an attempt to determine to what extent, if any, Britten's musical settings of the various texts have been influenced by the musical stylistic period in which the text was written.

David A. Reiser

May, 1965

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CHAPTER I
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Benjamin Britten, the renowned English composer, was born in the village of Lowestoft, in Suffolk on November 22, 1913. His father was a dentist and his mother, an amateur singer, served as secretary of the Lowestoft Choral Society.

Displaying remarkable musical talent early in his childhood, Britten began composing when he was only five years old. Of this Britten comments: "I . . . wrote elaborate tone poems lasting 20 seconds, inspired by terrific events like a new girl friend or a wreck at sea."¹

Like most musical prodigies, Britten is sometimes compared to Mozart.

. . . The parallels in careers and similarities in creative personalities between Britten and Mozart are striking. Like Mozart, Britten started to compose while still very young; he has continued without pause. He, too, composes with tremendous facility, working out compositions in his mind and then transferring his thoughts to notation no matter where he is--backstage or in airplanes. He has written operas as well as instrumental music, sacred as well as secular choral works, pieces for children and pieces for sophisticates. Britten's

¹Timothy Green, "Benjamin Britten, the 'Compleat Musician', High Honor for a Shy Genius," Life, LVII, No. 6 (August 7, 1964), p. 42.

style is eclectic and one can hear in his compositions traces of composers as disparate in style as Purcell and Berg. He seems to sum up, and to have at his disposal, all of the musical techniques and idioms of his time just as Mozart made through use of the ideals and vocabulary of his age.²

Britten received no formal training in composition until 1927 at which time he had already written ten sonatas, six string quartets, three suites for piano, an oratorio, and dozens of songs.³ That year he met the English composer, Frank Bridge, through his viola teacher, Audrey Alston. Bridge spent one entire morning going through Britten's compositions and discussing them with him. From that day on, Britten studied with Bridge on weekends and holidays from preparatory school.

Frank Bridge was a strict and serious teacher and his lessons were mammoth; Britten would often end a session in tears. Years later Britten commented on these sessions with Bridge:

. . . It was not that he was beastly to me, but the concentrated strain was too much for me. I was perhaps too young to take in so much at the time, but I found later that a good deal of it had stuck firmly. The strictness was the product of nothing but professionalism. Bridge insisted on the absolutely clear relationship of what was in my mind to what was on the paper. I used to get sent to the other side of the room; Bridge would play what I'd written and demand if it was what I'd really meant. I badly needed this kind of strictness: it was just the right kind of treatment for me. His loathing of all sloppiness and amateurishness set me standards to aim for that I've never forgotten.⁴

²Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1961), p. 297.

³Eric Walter White, Benjamin Britten, (London: Boosey & Hawkes Limited, 1954), p. 14.

⁴Benjamin Britten, "Britten Looking Back," Musical America. LXXXIV, No. 2, (February, 1964), p. 4.

At the age of sixteen, Britten enrolled at the Royal College of Music in London where he continued his studies in composition with John Ireland. At one point in his college career Frank Bridge arranged for Britten to study with Alban Berg for a period of one year. The college, however, was opposed to this and prevented it from taking place, much to Bridge's chagrin. Of this Britten said:

I think, but I can't be sure, that the [college's] director, Sir Hughs Allen, put a spike in the wheel. At any rate, when I said at home during the holidays, "I am going to study with Berg, aren't I?" the answer was a firm, "No, dear." Pressed, my mother said, "He's not a good influence," which I suspected came from Allen. I think also that there was some confusion in my parent's minds--thinking that "not a good influence" meant morally, not musically. They had been disturbed by traits of rebelliousness and unconventionality which I had shown in my later school years.⁵

Britten's disappointment over this matter is reflected in his statement: "The year of study with Berg might have taught me how to unlock gates I did in fact have to climb over."⁶

Upon graduation from the Royal College of Music, Britten was offered a publishing contract with Boosey & Hawkes, an association which has continued to the present.

Except for a three-year stay in America during the late 1930's, Britten has spent most of his life in England in quiet seclusion.

Britten's studio is in a converted stable next to The Red House, his home in the village of Aldeburgh, just 10 miles from his birthplace. . . . He works all morning and in the afternoon

⁵Ibid., p. 6.

⁶The Earl of Harewood, "The Man," Benjamin Britten, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), p. 3.

takes long, lonely walks on the beach or nearby heathlands, sorting out his musical ideas. . . . The ideal existence, as Britten sees it, is to live quietly by the sea, surrounded by friends and untroubled by the cries of critics or the clamor of the public. . . . He is reluctant to see the press, and interviews are few and far between. Part of the reason for this reluctance is that he still feels he has important work ahead of him. He feels that he is still in midflight--and is therefore not yet ready to be "summed up".⁷

Britten's isolation has resulted in his being referred to as an "ivory tower" composer. The Earl of Harewood, however, in an essay on Benjamin Britten states that

Isolation at Aldeburgh has not made Britten into an ivory tower composer. He goes out to sea to fish, he plays tennis, he watches birds, he is by no means an unsociable neighbour, and he entertains frequently. He is unhappy in London, which he associates with concert-giving and visits to the dentist, with meetings and being rung up on the telephone, with auditions and having to see people on business--with anything in fact except composing. And that which he does in Aldeburgh is, after all, his life.⁸

⁷Timothy Green, p. 42.

⁸The Earl of Harewood, p. 8.

CHAPTER II

BRITTEN'S RELATIONSHIP TO PURCELL

It is indeed strange that following the death of Henry Purcell in 1695 the powerful and influential country of England fell into such a state of musical impotency. For a span of nearly two centuries while continental Europe was producing her Bachs, Mozarts, Chopins and Tchaikovskys, England was virtually without any major composers of native birth.

One can well imagine what a profound effect this would have upon a young English composer such as Benjamin Britten. To whom could he look as a prime example of a composer of English blood? Britten, then, really had no choice but to use Purcell as his model of a native English composer. Needless to say, Purcell has had a far-reaching effect upon Britten's career as a composer. One can hardly read an account of Britten without seeing some reference made to Purcell; one cannot help but note the admiration and interest Britten has shown toward Purcell.

Britten's passion for Elizabethan music is only exceeded by his devotion to Purcell, of whom he has an unrivaled understanding. . . .¹

¹The Earl of Harewood, p. 7.

Before undertaking this project, the writer asked in a letter to Benjamin Britten to what extent he had been influenced by Purcell. His reply read in part: "If you study [my] vocal works you will see one of the many ways in which Purcell has influenced [me]." ²

This answer, although rather indirect, proved to be very revealing. In the study of Britten's solo vocal works one must note that a number of these have been treated in a manner peculiar to that of the Baroque era. Since Purcell was a Baroque composer, any Baroque treatment by Britten, (other than to a musical setting of a text written in the Baroque era,) would serve to illustrate the effect Purcell has made. In addition to the general Baroque treatment, there are also a number of stylistic elements in Britten's solo vocal music that can be directly classified as Purcellian.

Britten has done a great deal of research into the works of Purcell and has written and published realizations of many of his songs, some of which have been published in several volumes by Boosey & Hawkes.

These are not the unimaginative realizations often encountered.

When we see the words "Continuo realized by So-&-So", we expect something like . . .



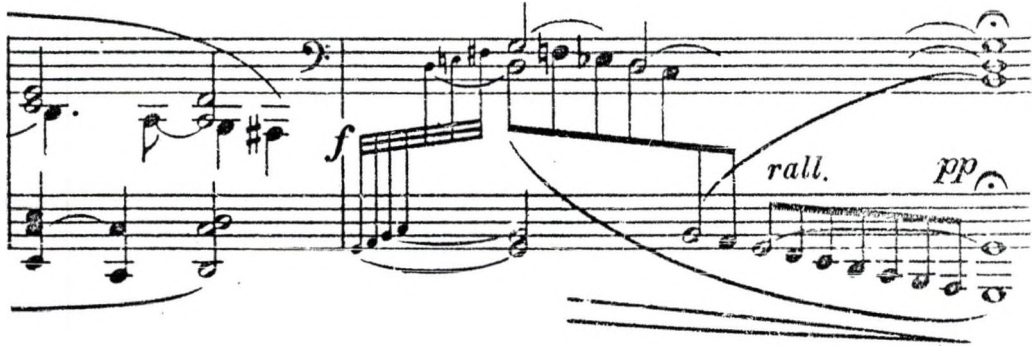
And when instead we find [as in the Britten realizations] ourselves looking at a live bit of pianoforte writing, we are shocked. ³

²Letter from Benjamin Britten, Aldeburgh, England, March 24, 1964.

³George Malcolm, "The Purcell Realizations," Mitchell and Keller, p. 75.

A "live bit of pianoforte writing" it is indeed. The following excerpt will bear this out.

EXAMPLE ONE



A great deal of controversy has raged over this manner of realizing Purcell's music. Apparently Britten had foreseen the criticism which would probably, and which eventually did, take place. To defend himself, Britten has included a foreword in all of the volumes which reads in part:

This edition of Purcell's music. . . is not intended to be a definitive edition or a work of reference. It is a performing edition for contemporary conditions. . . . It is clear that the figured basses in Purcell's day were realized in a manner personal to the player. In this edition the basses have also, inevitably, been realised in a personal way. But it has been the constant endeavor of the arranger to apply to these realisations something of that mixture of clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness which shires out in all Purcell's music.⁴

In other words, the realizations are "a record of one man's reactions to the composer's suggestions" rather than "a harmony exercise".⁵

⁴Henry Purcell, Orpheus Britannicus (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1947), p. 3.

⁵George Malcolm, p. 75.

The fact that Britten has so successfully maintained Purcell's style and, at the same time, expressed his own musicianship in these realizations illustrates his true understanding of Purcell. That Britten has such an affinity for Purcell makes it understandable why, in his own compositions, he would occasionally be influenced by the style of Purcell.

In the following chapter you will see, time and again, how this Purcellian influence has affected Britten's style of composition.

CHAPTER III
THE SOLO VOCAL MUSIC

Benjamin Britten has written music in many different idioms: to date he has composed some 70 major musical works, including operas, concertos, cantatas, symphonies, anthems, and songs. Of these many facets of his composing, his solo vocal music has been chosen as the basis for this study. This was done not merely because the writer is a student in the art of singing, but because this type of his music possesses a certain charm and beauty not found in his larger-scale works, a quality that is very appealing. Even Britten's most severe critic, Norman Demuth, admits that "Britten is more likely to survive through the medium of such works".¹

His friends also find this to be true. Peter Pears, who, for many years has been Britten's close friend and colleague, writes:

It would be strange if Benjamin Britten had never written for the voice. He was surrounded by singing as a child. He was not brought up on a gramophone or wireless set. (Perhaps he will be the last composer of whom that can be said.) When music was wanted for parties or pleasure, he played the piano and his mother sang.²

¹Norman Demuth, Musical Trends in the 20th Century (London: Rockliffe Publishing Corp., 1952), p. 324.

²Peter Pears, "The Vocal Music," Mitchell and Keller, p. 59.

Britten has thus far composed a total of thirty-one³ solo vocal works. These works fall into four categories: works with texts by one author, works with texts by more than one author, folk song arrangements, and a series of Purcell realizations.

Since this study is an attempt to determine to what extent Britten's musical settings of the various texts have been influenced by the musical stylistic period in which the text was written, it was necessary to arrange the solo vocal works in groups according to the chronological era in which the text was written. Therefore, those works which have texts by more than one author were not considered for analysis since in all instances, the authors represented within each of these works span several eras, thereby making it impossible to place any of these works in a specific period. The folk song arrangements and the Purcell realizations were also eliminated in that they are only arrangements and therefore not bona fide compositions by Britten. As a result, only those works with texts by one author have been chosen for analysis. (See Appendix I.)

Works with Texts Written during the Renaissance Era

The only texts written during the period of the Renaissance which Britten has set to music are a group of sonnets written by a man best

³Britten has actually composed thirty-three vocal (as opposed to choral) works. Two of these, however, (Canticle II and Two Ballads), are written for alto and tenor, and for two sopranos, respectively. Therefore, these two cannot be considered solo vocal music.

known for his sculpture and paintings, Michelangelo. Michelangelo wrote a large number of sonnets, thus demonstrating the versatility which typifies the "Renaissance man". Britten selected seven of these sonnets and incorporated them in a song cycle entitled, appropriately enough, Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo.

One of the most outstanding features of this work is the rhythmic and harmonic repetitiveness of the accompaniments, of which Peter Pears takes note.

Characteristically, in these sonnets. . . Britten takes a rhythmic pattern or figuration or harmonic scheme, and works it out by logical balance and times phrasing. In each one the tension is held by the persistent use of these patterns, unswervingly developed.⁴

This device has been used in a great number of Britten's works, but never to the extent as he has done in the Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo.

In the right hand of the accompaniment of Sonetto XXXI, the following rhythmic figure is employed in all but a few of the song's seventy-two measures.

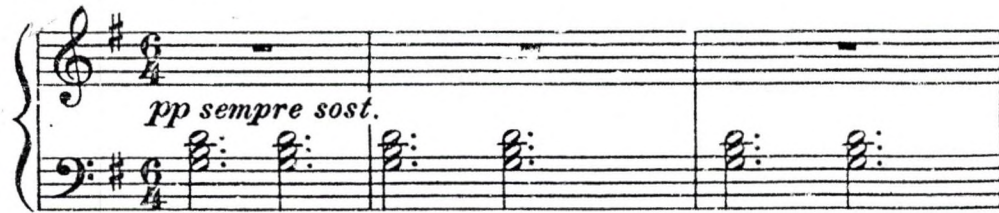
EXAMPLE TWO



The accompaniment of Sonetto XXX is made up of an uninterrupted series of dotted half-note triads.

⁴Peter Pears, p. 70.

EXAMPLE THREE



Sonnetto LV has in its accompaniment a syncopated figure which, with the exception of a brief, four-measure interlude, is used throughout the entire song.

EXAMPLE FOUR



In Sonnetto XXXVIII there is a playful, triple-rhythm figure which Britten employs almost exclusively in the accompaniment.

EXAMPLE FIVE



These repetitious and relatively simple accompaniments are apparently a device by Britten to give the impression of a lute accompaniment. This is important, since the lute was one of the basic forms of accompaniment for Elizabethan music, which flourished in Renaissance England. Even those sonnets which Britten chose as the text for this work, though not English by origin, nevertheless have an

Elizabethan quality. The underlying theme of these sonnets is that of unrequited love, a theme which forms the "backbone of Elizabethan repertoire".⁵

That Britten would utilize these elements of Elizabethan music in his treatment of a Renaissance text makes more evident to us his understanding and love for his English heritage.

Works with Texts Written during the Baroque Era

The authors of the texts written in the Baroque era lived in a period which could be classified as either late Renaissance or early Baroque. These have been placed in the Baroque era, however, since the musical settings of these texts have been treated in a Baroque manner, indicating that Britten preferred to approach them from a Baroque standpoint.

The first of these texts consists of a group of sonnets written by the Metaphysical poet, John Donne, and are included in Britten's cycle, The Holy Sonnets of John Donne.

Britten's use of Baroque elements throughout this work is quite evident. For example, in the first song, "Oh my blacke soule", there is a persistent use of pedal point. In fact, for the first nine measures the accompaniment consists exclusively of F-sharps played in octaves.

⁵Denis Stevens, A History of Song (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1960), p. 84.

EXAMPLE EIGHT

The first system of the musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The melody features a series of eighth notes, some beamed together, and a long, sweeping slur that spans across several measures. The lower staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. It features a complex ground bass pattern of eighth notes, with a large slur underneath that indicates a continuous, moving bass line. A diagonal line connects a note in the upper staff to a note in the lower staff, highlighting a specific harmonic or melodic relationship.

The second system of the musical score continues the two-staff format. The upper staff in treble clef shows the continuation of the melodic line with various note values and rests. The lower staff in bass clef continues the intricate ground bass pattern, maintaining the same rhythmic and harmonic structure as the first system. The overall texture is dense and characteristic of Baroque-style accompaniment.

This ground bass pattern passes from one octave to another and is cleverly disguised by the variety in the remainder of the accompaniment and by the through-composed dramatic vocal line throughout the song.

In the voice part of most of the second section of the song, Britten uses another Baroque technique, ornamentation. Throughout this section he uses two-, three-, and four-note figures over nearly every syllable of the text.

EXAMPLE NINE

pp con moto

From rest and sleepe, which but thy pic- tures bee..

A few measures later there occurs what Peter Pears refers to as a "Purcellian embellishment".⁶

EXAMPLE TEN

f marcato

And dost with poy - son, warre,.. and sick - ness

molto marc.

The other text which Britten has set is by Francis Quarles, an English author who, like Donne, is of the Metaphysical group. This text, which is used in the work, Canticle I, is based upon the Biblical verse, "My beloved is mine and I am his", from the second chapter of Song of Solomon. Quarle's adaptation of this rather earthy text gives the

⁶Peter Pears, p. 71.

poetry a distinct Romantic flavor. Britten also apparently had this impression for, although Canticle I is treated predominantly in a Baroque fashion, there is a subtle trace of Romantic treatment in the first part of the work as well. This Romantic touch is heard in a rhythmic element--two against three--which one would expect in a song by a Romantic composer, such as Richard Strauss. Throughout the first six pages of the work, the voice is in duple meter while the accompaniment is in triple meter. This immediately brings to mind Strauss' vocal composition, "Zueinung", in which the same rhythmic element is employed.

EXAMPLE ELEVEN

The musical score for Example Eleven consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in G major (one flat) with a *sostenuto* marking. The lyrics are "like two lit-tle bank di-vi-ded". The second and third staves are piano accompaniment. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern of two against three, with a four-measure phrase in the second measure of the first system.

The first sign of Baroque treatment occurs in the third and fourth pages of the work, where a number of long roulades appear.

EXAMPLE TWELVE

The musical score for Example Twelve shows a vocal line in G major (one flat). The word "fire" is written below the first few notes, followed by a dotted line. The score is marked *dim.* and features a long, flowing melodic line with many notes.

On pages five and six Britten employs another Baroque element, the recitative. And in the accompaniment of the final section of the work there is used a rhythmic figure which can be classified as Purcellian. Throughout this entire section there occurs in the rhythm of the accompaniment a predominance of "Scotch Snaps". This reverse of the familiar dotted eighth-note followed by a sixteenth-note pattern was one of Purcell's favorite rhythmic devices. In addition, there is in the accompaniment a pedal point effect.

EXAMPLE THIRTEEN

The musical score for Example Thirteen consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains the lyrics: "wealth: I give him all my vows: I give him songs". The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment, also in treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The accompaniment features a prominent rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, characteristic of Purcellian "Scotch Snaps".

Works with Texts Written during the Romantic Era

Britten's cycle, Winter Words, is a setting of eight lyrics and ballads written in the Romantic era by Thomas Hardy. In his treatment of these texts, Britten uses a device which was employed to a great extent by one of the most famous Romantic composers of solo vocal music, Franz Schubert.

Schubert is known, among other things, for his extremely descriptive accompaniments. For instance, in Schubert's first and probably

best-known song cycle, Die Schöne Müllerin, he used a number of pianistic devices to depict the various objects mentioned in the text, such as the brook, the millwheel, and so on.

Throughout Winter Words Britten repeatedly uses this Schubertian technique for the same reason.

For instance, in the second song, "Midnight on the Great Western", which is about a young boy taking a trip on a railroad train, the accompaniment is so written as to depict a train whistle.

EXAMPLE FOURTEEN



After this slow introduction the tempo changes to a steady, deliberate rhythm which is designed to give the illusion of train wheels moving over the track.

EXAMPLE FIFTEEN



This type of accompaniment is used throughout the majority of the song. The "train whistle" is heard several more times during the course

of the song, and also at the end where, this time, it is played very softly, as if to give the impression of the train traveling out of sight.

The fourth song, "The little old table", is a rather comical setting. The text is about an old table which creaks every time it is touched. The "creaking" sounds are heard in both the voice and piano.

EXAMPLE SIXTEEN

Quick and light (♩ = 108) *p*

Creak, creak

(always smoothly)

pp

The musical score for Example Sixteen is written for voice and piano. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a rest followed by the lyrics "Creak, creak". The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, marked "pp" and "(always smoothly)", featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom staff is the bass line, also marked "pp", with a few notes. The tempo is "Quick and light" with a quarter note equal to 108 beats per minute. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The dynamic marking *p* is placed above the vocal line, and *pp* is placed below the piano accompaniment.

"Proud Songsters", the sixth song, is about birds. The sound of the birds' chirping is portrayed by the use of rapid triplets and trills.

EXAMPLE SEVENTEEN

f *sf* *f* *sf* *mf*

trun *trun*

with Ped.

The musical score for Example Seventeen is written for piano. It consists of two staves. The top staff is the right hand, featuring rapid triplets and trills. The bottom staff is the left hand, featuring chords and single notes. The key signature is two flats (Bb, Eb) and the time signature is 5/4. The dynamic markings are *f*, *sf*, *f*, *sf*, and *mf*. The trills are marked with *trun*. The instruction "with Ped." is written below the left hand.

The seventh song, "At the Railway Station, Upway", is about a young boy who plays his violin for a convict about to be taken away to prison. The accompaniment is written on only one staff, as is violin

EXAMPLE NINETEEN

Schif-fer heim an den stil-len
fish-er steers in-to qui-et

The musical score for Example Nineteen consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains two measures of music with lyrics. The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment, also in treble and bass clefs respectively, with the same key signature. The accompaniment features a continuous flow of arpeggios in a triple rhythm, with the number '7' written below the notes in the middle staff to indicate the triplet. The piano part is marked with a fermata over the first measure and a slur over the second measure.

In the fifth song, "Halfte des Lebens", the accompaniment is a continuous flow of arpeggios in triple rhythm, a feature employed by a number of Romantic composers, and particularly by Johannes Brahms. In addition, like "Die Heimat", there again occurs the two-against-three rhythm.

EXAMPLE TWENTY

p smooth (sanft)

Mit gel - ben Bir-nen hän -
With gol - den fruit it hangs

The musical score for Example Twenty consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a time signature of 3/4. The lyrics are written below the notes. The second system shows the piano accompaniment in treble and bass clefs, with the same key signature and time signature. The piano part features a continuous flow of arpeggios in a triple rhythm, with a slur over the notes and a fermata over the first measure. The piano part is marked with a fermata over the first measure and a slur over the second measure.

In the sixth song, "Die Linien des Lebens", or, translated, "The Lines of Life", Britten returns to the Schubertian trait of descriptive accompaniments in the treatment of this text. In this instance, however, the descriptive accompaniment takes on a deeper and more profound meaning than those which were used in Winter Words.

The "lines of life" are depicted by a series of many seven-note phrases. That Britten uses seven-note phrases is significant; if each note would represent a decade, each phrase of seven notes would then represent the Biblical "three score and ten" years, or one lifetime. Also, each phrase gradually rises to a peak and then falls, as if it is a graph depicting birth, growth, maturity, old age, and death of one man.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-ONE



During the first part of the song each phrase proceeds independently, sometimes standing alone, while at other times it comes in contact with one or more other phrases, as, similarly, do the lives of men.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-TWO



The accompaniment fits the text very well at this point which reads: "Each line of life is different from another, as rivers are, or like the mountain ranges".

The text concludes: "What we are here is there by God completed with harmony, reward and peace eternal". At this point, the phrases are finally united; that is, they no longer move independently. This musical analogy thus beautifully depicts the union of all souls in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The third work of Britten's which includes texts written during the Romantic era is Les Illuminations, which consists of a group of poems by the French writer, Arthur Rimbaud.

The treatment of these texts is similar to that of Winter Words, in that Britten again uses the Schubertian device of descriptive accompaniments.

For instance, in the opening song, "Fanfare", the text, translated reads: "I alone hold the key to this savage parade". Britten achieves the impression of a parade by a steady, march-like tempo, close to a military cadance. In addition, there are heard what resemble bugle calls. Since these "bugle calls" are based upon the overtone series of "Bb" and "E", there is created the illusion of two alternating bugles, pitched in "Bb" and "E", respectively. The "savage" element is depicted in the left hand by a continuous flow of violent trills.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-THREE

ff quasi trombe

ff simile

In song IIIa, "Phrase", there is in the text a mention of bells and bell towers. The pealing of bells is heard in the accompaniment.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-FOUR

poco più f

des guir-lan-des de fe-nêtre à fe-nê-tre;

più f

Later on in the work there is another text which deals with a parade. In this case, however, it is not a parade in the general sense of the term: it is a parade of creatures--"Hottentots, simpletons,

hyaenas, Molochs, old insanities, sinister demons"---as one would expect to see in a nightmare. Britten depicts this fiendish scene by clashing dissonances, while at the same time maintains the impression of a parade by a repeated rhythmic figure in the left hand.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-FIVE

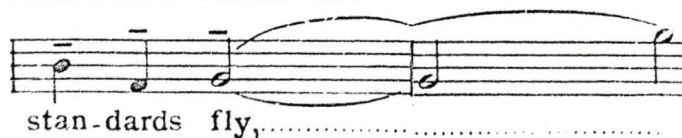


Works with Texts Written during the Twentieth Century

As we begin the study of Britten's solo vocal works with texts written in the Twentieth Century, something unexpected appears. Instead of treating these texts in a Twentieth Century manner, Britten, as you will see, has used a Baroque treatment throughout.

In the cycle, On This Island, which is a setting of several texts by W. H. Auden, the Baroque treatment is quite evident. For instance, in the first song, "Let the florid music praise", Britten uses characteristics of the Baroque era, such as tone painting,

EXAMPLE TWENTY-SIX



roulades,

EXAMPLE TWENTY-SEVEN

f con bravura

on,

anticipations, and vocal ornamentation.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-EIGHT

have had power, The weep - ing
la puis-sance Sans fail - lir.

In the second song, "Now the leaves are falling fast", Britten utilizes more Baroque elements. First of all, there is a two-note figure which is used repeatedly in the left hand of the accompaniment which gives both a ground bass and a pedal point effect. In the right hand there is a steady, driving eighth-note rhythm employed, which is a feature peculiar to the accompaniment of Baroque arias. On the keyboard instruments of that era, with the exception of the organ, this was the only way in which the composer was able to simulate a sustained tone. In the following example, both of these Baroque characteristics are shown.

EXAMPLE TWENTY-NINE



In the vocal line there is a predominance of vocal ornamentation.

EXAMPLE THIRTY



Towards the end of the song Britten uses still another Baroque feature, the recitative.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-ONE

Tranquillo

p

Cold, im - pos - si - ble, a - head Lifts the
Un froid im - possible, en tête, Des monts

p sostenuto

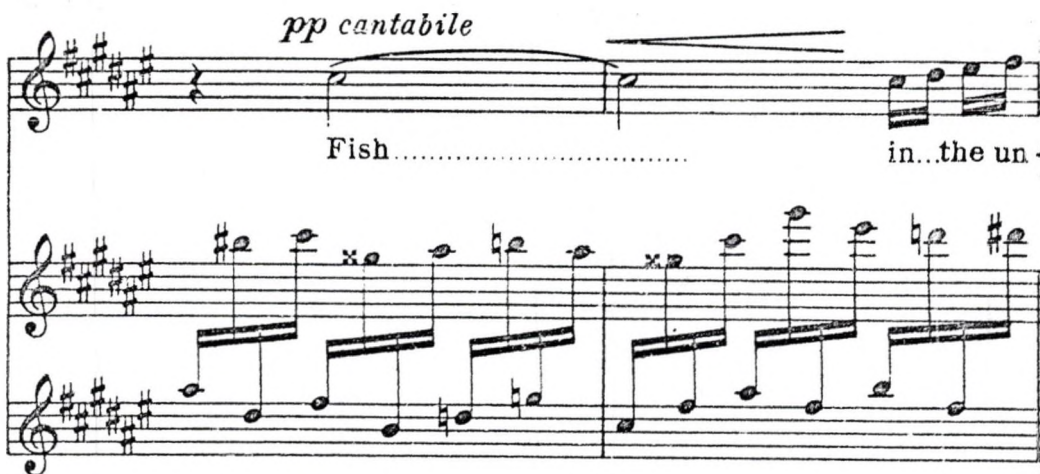
The accompaniment of Fish in the Unruffled Lakes, the next work, for the most part is based upon a two-measure figure which gives a ground bass effect.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-TWO



At the entrance of the voice, Britten uses a half-note anticipation on the dominant tone, which is identical to the manner in which Handel introduced the voice in his aria "Ombra mai fu", or better known today as Handel's "Largo". Similar anticipations are used at the beginnings of other phrases throughout the song. Also, Britten uses two- and four-note ornamentations on the various words and syllables of the text, similar to what Purcell has done in his song "Fairest Isle", from Orpheus Britannicus.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-THREE



The next work, Canticle III, is based upon a poem written by the late Edith Sitwell during one of the many Nazi bombing raids over London

in 1940. Like his well-known work, Serenade, Britten has scored Canticle III for voice and French horn.

Throughout the work the voice is relegated to a series of six nearly identical recitatives, separated by florid melodic interludes, in tempo, by the horn.

The treatment of these recitatives is in a Baroque manner, employing the Purcellian "Scotch snap" and much ornamentation.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-FOUR

Free recitative* (♩ = about 72)

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for the voice, starting with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a dynamic marking of *p*. The melody is written in a free recitative style, with a tempo indication of "Free recitative* (♩ = about 72)". The lyrics "Still falls..... the.... Rain —....." are written below the notes. The middle staff is for the French horn, with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, containing a few notes. The bottom staff is for the bass, with a bass clef and a key signature of one flat, containing a few notes.

Only after the sixth of these repetitious recitatives does the voice part become measured rhythmically. At this point the voice joins with the horn in a brief melodic passage which ends the work.

The next work, Our Hunting Fathers, is a setting of several poems of Old English origin which were adapted and modernized by W. H. Auden.

The opening song, "Prologue", is set completely in free recitative and leads directly into the second song, "Rats Away".

The text of this second song is a petition to God and a rather large number of Saints and Angels to rid a certain dwelling or area of rats.

This rather humorous situation, (which was probably not so humorous in those days when infestations of rats were rather prevalent) is treated by Britten in a tongue-in-cheek style. His heavily-ornate Baroque treatment is really too serious for the nature of the text, indicating that it is probably a burlesque. At any rate, the result is humorous.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-FIVE

⑥ Soprano Solo
* *f* *sempre f*
Ra - - - - -
pp (*>*) *sempre pp*
Vin. I *p* Bsn.

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Soprano Solo, starting with a circled number 6 and the text 'Soprano Solo'. The melody is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and the instruction *sempre f*. The lyrics 'Ra' are written below the first few notes. The middle staff is for Violin I, also in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature. It starts with a dynamic marking of *pp* and the instruction *sempre pp*. The bottom staff is for Bassoon, in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature. It starts with a dynamic marking of *p*. The score shows a complex, ornate texture with many notes and rests.

Britten has also included a feature of medieval music to correspond to the old text. In one section almost the entire melodic line is sung on fourth-space "D", which gives the impression of chanting. Here again Britten maintains the element of humor; the manner in which this section is written gives the illusion of a priest attempting to sing the Benediction, but who is continually being interrupted by rats.

EXAMPLE THIRTY-SIX

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics "Et in no-mi-ne (Rats!) Pa-tris, et (Rats!)", a woodwind line with "Wood" and "cresc." markings, and a bass line with "Timp." and "f" markings. The second system continues the vocal line with "Fi - li-i, (Rats!) et Sanc-(Rats!) -ti Spiriti" and includes a circled measure number "15". The third system features a vocal line with "Rats! Rats! Rats!.....) Amen!", a woodwind line with "cresc." and "sf" markings, and a bass line with "f (Timp.)", "Str.", and "ppp" markings. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time.

The Birds, which is the last text to be analyzed, is based upon a text by Hilaire Belloc, an English poet of French descent.

This is the earliest written published solo vocal work by Benjamin Britten, having been composed in 1929 when he was only fifteen years old. Although it went unpublished for six years, it is also the first such work of Britten's that was published.

The Birds is a modified strophic setting of three verses with a simple but beautiful melody. The harmonic scheme, however, is very clever, reflecting the keen imagination Britten already possessed at such an early age.

The first verse begins in the tonality of E major, but in the last two measures, the tonality is raised by a major third, to "Ab", which is also the tonality of the second verse. In the last two measures of the second verse, the tonality again rises by a major third to "C", the tonality of the last verse. This same tonality change occurs at the end of the final verse, which puts the song back into the tonality of E major where it started, making the song a "circle of thirds", so to speak.

Although this composition does not relate to any particular stylistic period, as his earliest solo vocal work it clearly demonstrates the promising career Britten at that time had in store and which he ultimately has fulfilled.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

From the musical examples cited, it would appear that Britten's treatment of texts written in the Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic eras have been affected by the respective stylistic elements of those epochs. However, it remains to be seen to what extent this treatment appears in the entire body of solo vocal works. The music, for the most part, related to a particular era in a much lesser degree and, in some instances, not at all. Therefore, the extent of Britten's chronological eclecticism is not so intense as it would appear in the body of this study. Britten, then, has spontaneously inserted here and there in the musical treatment of a text some of the stylistic elements relative to the chronological era in which the text was written.

In regard to those works with texts written in the Twentieth Century, it has been established that, for the most part, Britten has treated them in a manner peculiar to that of the Baroque era. A possible explanation for this might be the Purcellian influence as discussed in Chapter II. But how is this Purcellian influence in these particular works to be accounted for? This is probably due to the fact that all of the works in this category, with the exception of Canticle III, were written in Britten's

early career when, apparently, the Purcellian influence was at its strongest.¹

Melodically and harmonically, Britten's style of composition is that of subdued modernism. That is, it is not so excessively modern as those whom Britten refers to as the "flashy avant-garde".² Britten, confiding that his shelves are crowded with manuscripts that young composers have sent him for his comments, admits that "I don't always understand what they are at, but then I'm older and not necessarily 'with it' ".³

Benjamin Britten's style of composition, then, is a mixture of many things. With his more relaxed form of modernism he has skillfully blended the very best elements of the other epochs of music. In doing so he has come to terms with the great musical traditions of all ages, resulting in a wealth of music which we, and those of all ages to come, may enjoy.

¹Arthur Berger, "Britten: Serenade," The Music Quarterly, XL, No. 2 (April, 1954), p. 284.

²Timothy Green, p. 42.

³Ibid., p. 42.

APPENDIX I

SOLO VOCAL WORKS WITH TEXTS BY ONE AUTHOR

The Birds, (no opus number), text by Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953).

Composed 1929, published 1935. For medium voice and piano.

Our Hunting Fathers, op. 8, text by W. H. Auden (1907-____). Com-

posed 1936, published 1936. For soprano and symphony orchestra.

On This Island, op. 11, text by W. H. Auden. Composed 1937, pub-

lished 1938. For high voice and piano. French translation by Maurice Pourchet.

Fish in the Unruffled Lakes, (no opus number), text by W. H. Auden.

Composed 1937, published 1947. For high voice and piano.

Les Illuminations, op. 18, text by Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). Com-

posed 1939, published 1940. For high voice and string orchestra.
French text only.

Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, op. 22, text by Michelangelo (1475-

1564). Composed 1940, published 1943. For tenor and piano.
Italian text only.

The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, op. 35, text by John Donne (1573-

1631). Composed 1945, published 1946. For high voice and
piano.

Canticle I, op. 40, text by Francis Quarles (1592-1644). Composed

1947, published 1949. For high voice and piano.

Winter Words, op. 52, text by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). Composed

1954, published 1954. For high voice and piano.

Canticle III, op. 55, text by Edith Sitwell, (1887-1965). Composed

1954, published 1956. For tenor, French horn, and piano.

Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente, op. 61, text by Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-

1843). Composed 1958, published 1962. For high voice and
piano. German text with English translation by Elizabeth Mayer
and Peter Pears.

APPENDIX II

SOLO VOCAL WORKS WITH TEXTS BY MORE THAN ONE AUTHOR

Serenade, op. 31. For tenor, French horn, and string orchestra.
Prologue. Pastoral (Cotton). Nocturne (Tennyson). Elegy
(Blake). Dirge (anon. 15th century). Hymn (Ben Jonson).
Sonnet (Keats). Epilogue.

A Charm of Lullabies, op. 41. For mezzo-soprano and piano. A Cradle
Song (Blake). The Highland Balou (Burns). Sephestia's Lullaby
(Greene). A Charm 'Randolph). The Nurse's Song (Philip).

Nocturne, op. 60. For tenor, seven obligato instruments and string
orchestra. Prologue (Shelley). Bassoon obligato (Tennyson).
Harp obligato (Coleridge). Horn obligato (Middleton). Timpani
obligato (Wordsworth). English horn obligato (Owen). Flute and
clarinet obligato (Keats). Postlude (Shakespeare).

APPENDIX III

REALIZATIONS OF HENRY PURCELL
(For Solo Voice)

Orpheus Britannicus

Seven Songs. For high or medium voice and piano.

Six Songs. For high or medium voice and piano.

Man is for the Woman Made. For medium voice and piano.

Suite of Songs. For high voice, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, bassoon,
trumpet, and strings.

Five Songs. For voice and piano.

Odes and Elegies

The Queen's Epicedium. For high voice and piano. (Latin text).

Harmonia Sacra

The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation. For high voice and piano.

Job's Curse. For high voice and piano.

Three Divine Hymns. For medium voice and piano.

Two Divine Hymns and Alleluia. For voice and piano.

FOLK SONG ARRANGEMENTS

British Folk Songs. For high voice and orchestra.

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 1, British Isles. For high or medium voice and piano.

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 2, France. For high or medium voice and piano. (English translations by Iris Rogers.)

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 3, British Isles. For high or medium voice and piano.

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 4, Moore's Irish Melodies. For voice and piano.

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 5, British Isles. For voice and piano.

Songs from the Chinese. For high voice and guitar.

Folk Song Arrangements, Vol. 6, British Isles. For high voice and guitar.

PUBLISHED WORKS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN (With Opus Numbers)
(Published by Boosey & Hawkes unless otherwise indicated)

- Op. 1. Sinfonietta. For chamber orchestra.
Op. 2. Phantasy Quartet. For oboe, violin, viola and violincello.
*Op. 3. A Boy was Born. Choral variations for mixed chorus.
*Op. 4. Simple Symphony. For string orchestra.
Op. 5. Holiday Diary. Suite for piano.
Op. 6. Suite for Violin and Piano.
Op. 7. Friday Afternoons. Twelve children's songs (2 vols.)
Op. 8. Our Hunting Fathers. Symphonic cycle for soprano solo and orchestra.
Op. 9. Soirees Musicales. Suite of five movements from Rossini, for orchestra.
Op. 10. Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge. For string orchestra.
Op. 11. On This Island. For high voice and piano.
Op. 12. Mont Juic (with Lennox Berkeley). Suite of Catalan dances for orchestra.
Op. 13. Piano Concerto No. 1.
Op. 14. Ballad of Heroes. For solo, chorus, and orchestra.
Op. 15. Violin Concerto.
Op. 18. Les Illuminations. For high voice and string orchestra.
Op. 19. Canadian Carnival (Kermesse Canadienne). For orchestra.
Op. 20. Sinfonia da Requiem. For orchestra.
Op. 21. Diversions. For piano (left hand) and orchestra.
Op. 22. Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo. For tenor and piano.
Op. 23. No. 1. Introduction and Rondo alla Burlesca. For 2 pianos.
Op. 23. No. 2. Mazurka Elegiaca. For 2 pianos.
Op. 24. Matinees Musicales. 2nd suite of 5 movements from Rossini, for orchestra.
Op. 25. String Quartet No. 1.
Op. 26. Scottish Ballad. For 2 pianos and orchestra.
Op. 27. Hymn to St. Cecelia. For mixed chorus, unaccompanied.
Op. 28. A Ceremony of Carols. For treble voices and harp. (Also arranged for SATB).
Op. 29. Prelude and Fugue. For 18-part string orchestra.
Op. 30. Rejoice in the Lamb. Festival cantata for choir and organ.
Op. 31. Serenade. For tenor, horn, and string orchestra.
Op. 32. Festival Te Deum. For choir and organ.
Op. 33. Peter Grimes. (Opera)
Op. 34. The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra. For orchestra.
Op. 35. The Holy Sonnets of John Donne. For high voice and piano.
-

*Published by Oxford University Press.

- Op. 36. String Quartet No. 2.
Op. 37. The Rape of Lucretia. (Opera)
Op. 39. Albert Herring. (Opera)
Op. 40. Canticle I. For tenor and piano.
Op. 41. A Charm of Lullabies. For mezzo-soprano and piano.
Op. 42. St. Nicolas. Cantata for tenor solo, mixed chorus, piano duet, strings, percussion and organ.
Op. 43. The Beggar's Opera. (Opera)
Op. 44. Spring Symphony.
Op. 45. Let's Make an Opera. (Opera)
Op. 46. A Wedding Anthem: Amo ergo sum. For soprano and tenor soli, choir and organ.
Op. 47. Five Flower Songs. For mixed chorus, unaccompanied.
Op. 48. Lachrymae. Reflections on a song of John Dowland, for viola and piano.
Op. 49. Six Metamorphoses after Ovid. For oboe solo.
Op. 50. Billy Budd. (Opera)
Op. 51. Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac. For tenor, alto, and piano.
Op. 52. Winter Words. Eight Songs for high voice and piano.
Op. 53. Glorianna. (Opera)
Op. 53a. Symphonic Suite "Gloriana". For orchestra.
Op. 54. The Turn of the Screw. (Opera)
Op. 55. Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain. For tenor, horn, and piano.
Op. 56a. Hymn to St. Peter. For mixed voice choir with treble solo (or semi-chorus) and organ.
Op. 56b. Antiphon. For choir and organ.
Op. 57. The Prince of the Pagodas. (Ballet)
Op. 57a. Pas de Six from Ballet, "The Prince of the Pagodas".
Op. 58. Songs from the Chinese. For high voice and guitar.
Op. 59. Noye's Fludde. The Chester Miracle Play.
Op. 60. Nocturne. For tenor solo, seven obligato instruments, and string orchestra.
Op. 61. Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente. For high voice and piano.
Op. 62. Cantata Academica: Carmen Basiliense. For soprano, alto, tenor, bass soli, mixed chorus, and orchestra.
Op. 63. Missa Brevis in D. For boy's voices and organ.
Op. 64. A Midsummer Night's Dream. (Opera)
Op. 65. Sonata in C. For cello and piano.
Op. 66. War Requiem. For soprano, tenor and baritone soli, mixed chorus, boy's choir, and orchestra.
Op. 67. Psalm 150. For voices (s.a.) and instruments.

(Without Opus Numbers)

Folk Song Arrangements. Volume 1: British Isles, for high or medium voice and piano. Volume 2: France, for high or medium voice

- and piano. Volume 3: British Isles, for high or medium voice and piano. Volume 4: Moore's Irish Melodies. Volume 5: British Isles. Volume 6: England, for high voice and guitar.
- Two Ballads. For two sopranos and piano.
- Fish in the Unruffled Lakes. Song with piano.
- Two Part Songs. For mixed chorus and piano.
- *Three Part Songs. For two-part boy's or women's voices and piano.
- *Te Deum. For choir and organ.
- *Jubilate Deo. For mixed choir and organ.
- **May. Unison song with piano.
- The National Anthem. For mixed chorus and orchestra.
- The Birds. For medium voice and piano.
- A Hymn to the Virgin. Anthem for mixed chorus, unaccompanied.
- The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard. For male voices, piano.
- The Holly and the Ivy. For unaccompanied mixed chorus.
- Prelude and Fugue on a theme of Vittoria. For organ.
- Choral Dances from "Gloriana". For mixed voices, unaccompanied.
- Nocturne. (Thro' the Night's caressing grip).
- O can ye sew Cushions? For SSA arr. Imogen Holst.
- The Salley Gardens. Unison song.
- A Hymn of Saint Columbia: Regis regum rectissimi. SATB and organ.
- Advance Democracy. SSAATTBB, unaccompanied.
- Night-Piece (Notturmo). For piano.
-

*Published by Oxford University Press.

**Published by A. & C. Black, Ltd., The Year Book Press.

APPENDIX VI

On Monday evening, April 12, 1965, a Lecture Recital based on the contents of the thesis was presented by the writer in the Education Building Auditorium on the campus of the University of North Dakota. The program of this Lecture Recital will be found on page 50 of this volume. For the convenience of any person who may be interested in hearing the program, a tape recording is on file in the library of the Music Department.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA
Department of Music

Lecture-Recital

By

DAVID A. REISER, *Tenor*

(B.S., 1960, Minot State College)

assisted by

PAUL E. LUNDQUIST, *Pianist*

Monday, April 12, 1965

Education Auditorium

8:15 P.M.

THE PROGRAM

*Excerpts from a thesis written by the candidate on
"The Solo Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten: The Effect of the Text Upon the Music"*

Solo Vocal Works to be Analyzed

- I WORKS WITH TEXTS WRITTEN IN THE RENAISSANCE ERA
Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, opus 22 - - - Michelangelo
- II WORKS WITH TEXTS WRITTEN IN THE BAROQUE ERA
The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, opus 35 - - - John Donne
Canticle I, opus 40 - - - - - Francis Quarles
- III WORKS WITH TEXTS WRITTEN IN THE ROMANTIC ERA
Winter Words, opus 52 - - - - - Thomas Hardy
Sechs Hölderlin Fragmente, opus 61 - - - Friedrich Hölderlin
Les Illuminations, opus 18 - - - - - Arthur Rimbaud
- IV WORKS WITH TEXTS WRITTEN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
On This Island, opus 11 - - - - - W. H. Auden
Fish in the Unruffled Lakes (no opus number) - - - W. H. Auden
Canticle III, opus 35 - - - - - Edith Sitwell
Our Hunting Fathers, opus 8 - - - - - W. H. Auden
The Birds (no opus number) - - - - - Hilaire Belloc

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts*

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