***The Middle of Life***

**Introduction**

Britten turned forty years of age in 1953 and, like most of us, this landmark no doubt gave him cause for pause, reflection and a stocktake of his life, work and mortality. The success generated by the London premiere of *Peter Grimes* in 1945 made Britten one of the most famous composers of his generation, a status that would surge in the years that followed. Having just written three operas in as many years, the ensuing years of the mid-1950s, were a relatively fallow period in Britten’s output. No doubt, the generally negative reaction to ‘Gloriana’ was a contributing factor as were several health problems and a self-imposed sabbatical from composing. However, that such factors aligned in this ‘mature‘ period of his creative life, makes a focused study of the works created therein, all the more fascinating. Accordingly, this recording has selected four diverse vocal works between the years 1952 to 1958.

While the theme of innocence and innocence corrupted was a lifelong preoccupation, there is a concentration of focus in this decade and his choice of texts in the vocal works chosen for this recording reflect that. The title of the CD is a translation of the fifth song of the Hölderlin set “Hälfte des Lebens” and this choice, as well as the bias of other texts on this album, is surely a consequence of his reflection in these middle years. One sees similar reflections in the two major operatic works of this decade. While *Gloriana* was a specific commission to celebrate the crowning of the new Queen Elizabeth, his subject of focus is the aging Elizabeth I. In *The Turn of the* *Screw* (1954), the theme of innocence corrupted has never been so overtly treated.

In this decade, we also see Britten re-assessing the character of his musical language. The post WWII emergence of the avant-garde saw the new generation of composers adopting serialism and electronic media as a basis for their compositions. (In retrospect, it doesn’t seem surprising, but how interesting that the two great global cataclysms of the C20th, spawned such radical movements in the arts – dada following the first and the revolutionary language of the avant-garde following the second). This move towards mechanisms/technology and scientific/rational structures, risked intellectualising the arts and as a consequence, alienating audiences. Britten had always seen his role as one who was ‘useful’ to the community, writing music to engage people, never to alienate. (See his address on receiving the first Aspen Award: http://www.aspenmusicfestival.com/benjamin-britten/).

However, there is some evidence that he re-evaluated his position as a composer ‘of his time’ and thought deeply about reconciling this with his desire to communicate. Certainly, his attitude to the avant-garde was anything but an outright dismissal and he would never have sided with commentators such as Smith Brindle and his articles in the Musical Times (see “The Lunatic Fringe” May/July 1956). That having been said, a clear insight into Britten’s attitude to the new, is hard to read from the available correspondence of the time. Certainly he was concerned about the growing gulf between artists and their audiences but there is also some evidence that in the 1950s, like the majority of post-war artists, he felt the need to take stock, if not of his artistic creed, then of the musical language that he employed to promote it. His letter to Edith Sitwell, wherein he states ‘*I am* *taking off next winter to do some deep thinking’* hints at this but more clearly we see it in his compositions from this period, particularly in his grafting of the 12 tone system to his unique voice. There are many instances where he confirmed his commitment to tonality but if he could meld this with a modified dodecaphonic system, perhaps he could arrive at an evolved language that satisfied both.

There is certainly a ‘spareness’ immediately apparent in *Winter Words* and the other vocal works represented on this recording. Written in 1952, immediately following his pageant opera *Gloriana*, the Hardy cycle, compared with earlier vocal works such as the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, *Holy Sonnets of John Donne,* *Les Illuminations*, *Serenade for Tenor Horn and Strings* etc, demonstrates a clear intention “to prune back musical ideas almost to their stocks, discouraging the proliferation of florid textural detail” (Peter Evans: *The Music of Benjamin* *Britten* p356).

In the commentary on the individual works on this recording, I have developed these ideas and offered a personal perspective that has grown from my study and appreciation of these extraordinary works. I hope that the contents of the recording and the commentary prove stimulating and pleasurable.

**A commentary on the chosen works**

**Songs from the Chinese. Op 58 (1957)**

The great guitarist and lutenist Julian Bream became part of the Aldeburgh fabric in 1952 when he made his first appearance at the Festival. It was the lute that he played in that concert and it was via this this instrument that he began what would be a long association with Peter Pears, with whom he shared a passion for the Elizabethan vocal repertoire. However, while the songs of Dowland, Rossiter and Campion remained central to their partnership, it was the guitar that soon gained prominence, with Britten providing them with settings of these six poems chosen from Arthur Waley’s English translation of ancient Chinese texts. Britten would go on to arrange a volume of folksongs for Bream and Pears as well as a major solo work for the instrument (*Nocturnal*), written for specifically for Bream

Britten had over 150 poems to choose from in Waley’s collection and in selecting these six, demonstrated yet again his extraordinary insight in picking just the right texts for his music. While achieving different ends, the set shares something in common with *Winter Words* (see below) in that the first and last songs act as a sort of prologue and epilogue (a structural device he was also wont to use in other vocal works eg: *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings, Billy Budd, The Turn of the Screw* etc). Firstly, these bookends - *The Big Chariot* and *Dance Song* - are both drawn from very ancient volumes dating back to the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, whereas the inner four texts are relatively more recent. These outer songs provide a sort of insulation to the inner songs that carry the emotional weight of the set, for the most part focusing upon transience of life and the passing of youth.

**The Big Chariot**

*Don’t help on the big chariot; you will only make yourself dusty.*

*Don’t think about the sorrows of the world; you will only make yourself wretched.*

*Don’t help on the big chariot; you won’t be able to see for dust.*

*Don’t think about the sorrows of the world; or you will never escape from your despair.*

*Don’t help on the big chariot; you’ll be stifled with dust.*

*Don’t think about the sorrows of the world; you will only load yourself with care.*

I have to confess that, for some time, I have been a little perplexed by this curious text. When I first heard the cycle in my youth, I had no doubt that Britten’s setting of this poem was ironical. However over time, as I read sleeve notes to various recordings or scholarly commentaries on the work, it became clear that many, if not most, take the poem and setting on face value. Complicating the issue, I knew of at least two other translations of the poem, one by Ezra Pound, that add to the ambiguity. Obviously, a performer needs clarity when taking on the task of interpreter, so it was incumbent upon me to investigate all possible pathways in order to arrive at a convincing reading. The following is a formalisation of that process which readers may find of interest.

As discussed below, in respect to the Britten and Finzi settings of Thomas Hardy’s poem “Proud Songsters”, any poem can evoke contrasting interpretations, according to the perspective a composer may take in response to the multiple layers found in a poetic work. However, when a composer chooses to set a poem, it is that specific viewpoint that must become the interpreter’s perspective, thus narrowing the potential interpretations.

So, the performer’s blueprint to interpretation will always be found in the music. Having said that, the poem itself should always be the interpreter’s first point of encounter.

With “The Big Chariot”, one first needs to acknowledge that its age and unfamiliar ethnicity are contributing factors to its obscurity. From that perspective, it is understandable that the modern western mind might form multiple interpretations. We know that the poem springs from a cultural environment that was influenced by Taoist thinking and a western mind’s familiarisation with such culture and thought would certainly advance this intimacy. We know that while Britten and Pears didn’t quite make it to China in their protracted visit to the far east in 1956 – the year prior to the composition of this work - they may well have been exposed to eastern philosophy influenced by the Chinese Tao. Thus, it is important to entertain a speculation that such exposure may have had upon them. I believe it is fair to reason that Taoist thinking regarding ‘The Big Chariot’ would promote an interpretation that issues a caution to those with ambitions to save the world, that their endeavours will inevitably be undone. For the Tao taught that the most a person can do is to save oneself!

However, I am not convinced that this is the viewpoint that Britten takes.

Others have suggested that Britten could well be reflecting upon his own fame. By the late fifties, he had achieved a pre-eminent status in the hierarchy of composers but with that fame came private jealousies and public criticisms, something that Britten’s fragile ego did not handle well. Was the paraphernalia of being on the ‘big chariot’ worth it? That his insecurity made him sensitive to such critics, might make this poem a vehicle for the voicing of his frustration; that his best efforts were of little consequence. Jeremy Noble, commenting on the work soon after its publication (“Tempo” 1959), seems to support such a stance, arguing that the scaled down forces he used in the cycle, were symbolic of an interpretation that was “… a warning against the perils of public life and by analogy, the grand gesture.”

I find this also to be an implausible notion, for such a reading suggests that the setting is layered with cynicism. This characteristic I find nowhere else in Britten’s work, save perhaps for a tinge in his 1937 setting of Auden’s “Underneath the Abject Willow”, where Britten’s gives a musical retort in response to Auden’s sexual advice to the ‘repressed’ composer!

The most compelling reading for me remains the one that I first perceived; that Britten treats the text as ironic. This more principled view gains some weight when seen through the lens of Britten’s aspirations to be artistically useful.

Britten was the first recipient of the Aspen Award, the citation which read:

*“To Benjamin Britten, who, as a brilliant composer, performer, and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods, and thoughts, has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.”*

In his address on accepting the award, he articulated his artistic philosophy in some details, a philosophy that is borne out repeatedly in his oeuvre. Therein he says:

*‘… it is the composer’s duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings.’*

And elsewhere:

  ‘*I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to “enhance their lives.”’*

Such a position, clearly articulated and confirmed by artistic action, provides us with a foundation on which to examine the music.

On studying the score, one is immediately aware of a certain duality at play; in the poem it is the ‘public’ (“the big chariot”, “the sorrows of the world”) and the ‘private’ (“despair”, “load yourself with care” etc). Similarly, each line presents a cautionary statement followed by its consequence. This duality is also revealed in the score. The guitar part clearly has two characters - the chordal structure that supports the voice and the scurrying semi-quavers that seems to gain its various figurations from the vocal phrase “.. the sorrows of the world”. Is there not a sardonic character at play here, with the trudge of the chordal writing at odds with the trilling of the semi-quavers? The writing for the voice shows its own dichotomy via the ‘call/response’ character of each line, with each forceful urging to abjure commitment receiving an inflective response that seems purposely lightened and tinged with satire. Note the lightness of touch on ‘dust’ ‘dusty’, ‘despair’ etc. The prevailing syncopated figures also contribute a certain facetiousness as does the guitar’s coda, which sustains a certain tongue-in-cheek character with its no-nonsense exit from the scene.

**The Old Lute**

*Of cord and cassia wood is the lute compounded;*

*Within it lie ancient melodies, weak and savourless,*

*Not appealing to present men’s taste.*

*Light and colour are faded from the jade stops;*

*Dust has covered the rose-red strings.*

*Decay and ruin came to it long ago,*

*But the sound that is left is still cold and clear.*

*I do not refuse to play it if you want me to;*

*But even if I play people will not listen.*

*How did it come to be neglected so?*

*Because of the Ch’iang flute and the zithern if Ch’in.*

Britten’s writing for the guitar here, exquisitely awakens our ears to the dormant beauty of the neglected lute. The guitar’s sliding counterpoint shows a two-fold inspiration. In the first instance, it pays homage to his growing affection for heterophony\*, a device intensified by his recent visit to the Far East, to whose musical tradition it was intimately bound. Its use here is not only an appropriate response to an oriental text but being notated in traditional four-part polyphony, associates it with the Elizabethan lute traditions of his own country - the other inspiration - giving it an aural resonance immediately recognisable to the western ear.

The immense sadness of the poem – that something of innate and profound beauty can be supplanted by a cheap new variant (cf quote from Menschenbeifall??)– is reflected in the drooping lines of the vocal part and in the poignant dissonances from the guitar. The contrast in the final two lines is stark. Here Britten shuns the emotionally charged harmony of his lament for frothy and superficial harmonics symbolising the now ‘in vogue’ style that brought about the demise of the old lute.

\*The polyphonic exploitation of a melodic cell by variations of metre, duration, pitch etc. See other examples of its use by Britten in the Hosanna from his War Requiem, Church Parables etc

**The Autumn Wind**

*Autumn wind rises; white clouds fly*

*Grass and trees wither; geese go south.*

*Orchids all in bloom; chrysanthemums smell sweet.*

*I think of my lovely lady; I never can forget.*

*Floating pagoda boat crosses Fên River;*

*Across the mid-stream white waves rise.*

*Flute and drum keep time to sound of rowers’ song;*

*Amid revel and feasting sad thoughts come;*

*Youth’s years how few, age how sure!*

The poet here is the Emperor Wu-ti (157-87 B.C.E). From his royal barge, he writes of his sadness that his official duties have taken him away from his consort.

Like his beloved Schubert, Britten has the unerring knack of employing accompaniments that at one and the same time represent both the inner and outer worlds of the poetry. As with Schubert in *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, Britten in *The Autumn Wind*, via a flurry of semi-quavers, not only conjures up the movement of wind and water but also the agitation in the poet’s heart. The rhythmic out-of-step-ness, along with recurrent semi-tonal clashes, add to this but also serve to highlight the dark realisation in the poem’s final lines “Youth’s years how few, age how sure!’ Thus the metaphor of autumn as the precursor of winter, with all its metaphorical implications, is made clear and inexorable in the poetry and musical realisation.

**The Herd Boy**

*In the southern village the boy who minds the ox*

*With his naked feet stands on the ox’s back.*

*Through the hole in his coat the river wind blows;*

*Through his broken hat the mountain rain pours.*

*On the long dyke he seemed to be far away;*

*In the narrow lane suddenly we were face to face.*

*The boy is home and the ox is back in its stall*

*And a dark smoke oozes through the thatched roof.*

The face of the published score of the Chinese songs features an 11th century Chinese painting that well may have inspired this poem and indeed Britten. For here the heavy gait of the ox is clearly heard in the guitar’s bass, while the contrasting lightness of texture in the vocal line evokes the young lad on his back. While the guitar’s accompaniment consists mainly of a single line, Britten succeeds in evoking a rich harmonic suggestiveness of competing modes that conjure up the lumbering sway of the boy’s ride.

**Depression**

*Turned to jade are the boy’s rosy cheeks;*

*To his sick temples the frost of winter clings.*

*Do not wonder that my body sinks to decay;*

*Though my limbs are old, my heart is older yet.*

The poet contemplates the inexorable approach of old age. In his setting, Britten exploits a specific characteristic of the guitar in a series of glissando chords that simply but effectively reveal the weight of years and the inevitability of decay. Since such movements on the instrument require shifts that are in parallel motion, the resultant harmonic implications are replete with false relations and an acerbity that ideally match the mood of this desolate text. The voice too echoes the weariness implied in the poem with a line dominated by rising and falling perfect 4ths that echo the guitars glissandi and by way of a rhythmic figure that seems to ‘limp’ from word to word. Despite the tone of overarching bleakness, Britten achieves a sort of eloquent submission to fate in the song’s final lines (“..Though my limbs are old, my heart is older yet.”). Here, exploiting its limping rhythm, the voice rises valiantly to its climax, accompanied by the guitar whose glissandi textures now thicken to utilise all six strings of its tuning.

**Dance Song**

*The unicorn’s hoofs!*

*The duke’s sons throng,*

*Alas for the unicorn!*

*The unicorn’s brow!*

*The duke’s kinsmen throng,*

*Alas for the unicorn!*

*The unicorn’s horn!*

*The duke’s clansmen throng,*

*Alas for the unicorn!*

The unicorn is a creature of western mythology. However, the Chinese do have an equivalent in the Qilin which, while fearsome-looking, shares similar qualities of benevolence and gentleness of disposition with its western counterpart.

Arthur Waley in his published ‘Book of Songs’ comments on this curious text. He suggests that it is a ceremonial dance song, probably associated with hunting, because it shares similarities with another text that was known to have that purpose. Also ‘unicorn’ dances have been recorded in various other tomes. One found at Annam, takes place on the full moon of the eighth month and as we see in Chinese ceremonial dances today, masks play a central part. Waley suggests that at the conclusion of such ceremonies, often the central mask is set up and shot at and contends that that is what is happening here, with the archers shooting first the hooves then the brow and finally the horn.

Britten achieves a certain frenzy that would certainly not be out of place in the climax of such a ceremony. The 7/8 time signature with its erratic distributions of 2+2+3, 2+3+2 and 3+2+2 etc achieves a sort of euphoria that is mockingly contrasted with the voice’s glissandi “…Alas” at the end of each verse.

**Canticle III: *Still falls the Rain*. Op 55 (1954)**

Britten wrote five Canticles between the years 1947 and 1974. They were never planned as a set but evolved naturally and individually over time. As the title suggests each is linked by a text that draws upon a Christian sentiment, yet the musical forces required have no commonality other than the tenor voice.

Canticle III: *Still fall the Rain* is for Tenor, Horn and Piano and is a setting of a poem by the British poet Edith Sitwell. Subtitled “The Raids, 1940, Night and Dawn”, it is a harrowing response to the Luftwaffe’s bombing of London in that year. Sitwell’s imagery is complex and eclectic but returns frequently to the image of Christ crucified. In many ways this work exemplifies the new pathways that Britten was contemplating at this time, pathways that he hints at in a letter he wrote to Sitwell on 28th April 1955.

*Writing this work has helped me so much in my development as a composer. I feel with this work and the Turn of the Screw … that I am on the threshold of a new musical world. … I am worried about the problems which arise and that is one reason that I am taking off next winter to do some deep thinking. But your great poem has dragged something from me that was latent there and shown me what lies before me.*

Britten sets the poem as a series of free recitative passages which are unified by an idée fixe, a recurring melismatic cell on the eponymous text “Still falls the rain… “. These passages separate six variations for horn and piano, a form he had just used so compellingly in his opera “The Turn of the Screw”.

It is a remarkably simple and logical format but all the more persuasive for that fact. The cumulative effect of the variations combined with the idée fixe, inexorably draw the listener to the work’s climax where the voice declaims a passage from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. This in turn leads to a moment of remarkable stillness, not unlike that breathless moment of encounter in his *War Requiem*, some eight years later.

The theme, stated by the horn and piano, uses all twelve tones of the chromatic scale. This is a technique that we see often in this period and, as discussed in the introduction, may well be his nod to the avant garde or at least an attempt to engage with Schönbergian practice, yet on his own terms.

The sonic character of the theme serves to create an appropriate mise-en-scene for what is to come, (some have heard the distant drone of approaching bombers in its ominous tones), while the character of each variation seems to be inspired by a word, phrase or idea contained in the ensuing recitative.

Thus, the piano’s throbbing figure in **Variation I** is surely linked to the phrase “… a sound like the pulse of the heart, that is changed to the hammer beat… ” in Verse II.

In **Variation II**, the horn’s sliding chromatic line presages “that worm with the brow of Cain” stated in Verse III.

The interval of the 4th has been a conspicuous presence not only in the structural architecture of the theme but also in the voice recitatives describing the character of the “Rain”. Now in **Variation III**, it completely dominates the piano and horn writing, so not only are these initial associations recalled but enhanced by the onomatopoeic figures that Britten creates. The verse that motivates this variation refers to the parable of Dives and Lazarus, concluding that “.. under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one”. The tragedy is that the spawning the ‘Rain’ the holds no discrimination between rich and poor, young and old or believer and unbeliever.

**Variation IV** features a rapidly repeated figure in the horn that immediately recalls the “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” (from Wilfred Owen’s *Anthem for Doomed Youth* that Britten was to use in his *War Requiem*), a figure that is then taken up by the voice to accentuate the ‘wounds’ borne by the Christ figure on behalf of all but also analogous with the Soldier/Christ analogy contained in another Owen poem *At a Calvary near the Ancre* similarly appropriated for the Offertorium of his ‘War Requiem’.

**Variation V** is the most robust and vehement of the set, the horn and piano ranging wide over their compasses in a series of ascending and descending 5ths. In the verse that follows, the voice forsakes singing for impassioned declamation. The passage from Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (“*O Ill leape up to my God; who pulls me down?”*)is surely the inspiration for the heights and depths spelled out in the variation. After this outburst, the voice resumes its ‘sung’ position as echoes of the previous variation resonate in the piano. The vocal line here also holds remnants of its ‘cri du coeur’ with the vocal lines defined by sharply descending compound intervals (“deep to the dying..”, “..the thirsting heart”, ..”dark smirched with pain..”) while resonating with Faust’s plea – that follows in the play -that just a drop of Christ’s blood would be enough to rescue him from his imminent descent into Hell.

The cumulative effect of this short series of variations and interpolated verbal imagery is inexplicably overwhelming. We have passed through the night of terror to the stillness (and hope?) of dawn. And so we are led to **Variation VI**, which for the first time in the work, voice and horn join forces. There are echoes here of Britten’s Canticle II: *Abraham and Isaac*. There, as here, two elements that have distinct functions in the work are combined to evoke the voice of the divine. It is a movement of sublime stillness - the horn restating its original theme as the voice sings a mirror inversion of it. As well as serving as the obligatory blessing, this device provides an allegory for the work as a whole. For “Still falls the rain” is one of those rare works, that when perceived with ingenuous reflection, offers a mirror to a species that seems predisposed to destroy itself.

**Winter Words. Op 52 (1953)**

The title of the cycle borrows its name from a collection of poems by Thomas Hardy that were published in 1928, shortly after the poet’s death. However, only one of the eight poems chosen by Britten originates from this collection. Britten’s encounter with middle age, while not quite the ‘winter’ of his life, would have put him in mind of its inevitability and certainly the chosen texts seem to be unified by that reflective quality that only an experienced observer possesses.

As always, Britten’s choice and ordering of his texts is masterly. The opening and closing songs act as a sort of philosophical parenthesis, whose premise is confirmed, both individually and collectively, by the more narrative qualities of the inner songs.

1. **At Day Close in November**

This opening song provides a splendid example of the importance that tonality plays in Britten’s music - in this case how bi-tonality can illuminate a poetic or dramatic idea. We have seen it used as a dramatic and structural force in *Billy Budd,* where the opposing keys of Bbmaj and Bmin establish the central conflict that will dominate the drama. We have seen it also in his first great opera, *Peter* Grimes where in the Prologue’s duet between Peterand Ellen and later with Peter’s entry in the Pub scene’s fugue, Britten uses it to establish his protagonist’s alienation from the community.

In this song, the two keys concurrently at play are D minor and A major and this conflict casts a shadow over the exultation implied in the text, preparing the listener for what is the philosophical core of the poem. Britten uses it to illuminate the shifting tenses in Hardy’s poem, which converge in the crucial final stanza, where past and future tenses vie with the present perspective of the child.

*And the children who ramble through here*

*Conceive that there never has been*

*A time when no tall trees grew here,*

*A time when none will be seen.*

Those who know Britten’s work will recognise the themes at play here. It is the guilelessness of the innocent, so often portrayed in his work through the perspective of the child. We will find it a recurring perspective in these Hardy poems. In this final stanza of this poem, the only reality of their world is the present and the narrator’s entry into that world is realised by Britten with a dynamic drop to ‘pianissimo’ and a more suspended and rhythmically ambiguous version of the prevailing ‘waltz’ metre. We have the impression as though time is suspended and we are captured within the world of the child whose innocence has little concept of its impact on Nature. The harmonic ambivalence of the opening is recalled with chords of D minor and A major forming the accompaniment pattern that lead back to the impetuous opening flourishes, only to be answered by the stark descent to D, the original tonal centre. With such a recapitulation, the listener comes to the realisation that the relative calm of the closing stanza reflects not the direct reality of the children's world but, rather, the children's world as perceived through adult eyes.

As well as an appreciation of Britten’s harmonic language, we can also delight in identifying the seeds of his melodic language. Much of it springs from a tiny cell that appears early in the piano’s prelude.



This tiny thread, ‘hidden’ in the piano introduction, ( .. is this Britten indulging in a game of ‘hide-and-seek’?) becomes the dominant melodic motif of the song, continually re-pitched but repeated over and over for more than half the song. By the expansion and contraction of this repeated cell, the larger melodic line is given grace and buoyancy that aptly springs up to respond to the poem’s narrative and mood (‘waltzers’ and the flight path of the ‘late bird’ are each evoked in one stroke), while propelling the harmonic logic of the phrases in their inevitable descent to the song’s tonal centre of D.



1. **Midnight on the Great Western**

How often, in the Lieder of Franz Schubert, is it movement that provides the inspiration (*Gretchen am Spinnrade, An Schwager Chronos, Auf der Bruck* etc). So it is with many of Britten’s works and certainly here in this second song of the set. Not only is the ‘chug’ of the train represented but the whistle is evoked by a subtle pedalling technique offering an aural stimulus to underpin the narrative of the text. This whistle motif also offers a structural purpose, for as well as being a marker delineating each verse, its triadic character, moving in root position, has significant meaning in Britten’s harmonic language as a symbol of innocence/beauty a device we will see dominate the entire structure of the final song in the set.

While the song begins as a seemingly casual observation of a solitary child undertaking a train journey, it becomes clear that it is also a reflection of our own journey from innocence to experience. The first two stanzas, set strophically, relate the scene and give a strong impression of forward movement. In the third stanza, while there remain echoes of the train’s movement and whistle, time and motion are now suspended and the prevailing sonority raises us aloft from the action, as the questions posed go beyond the curiosity of casual observance. The whistle’s triads that linger, morph and float in the piano’s accompaniment are not only all in root position but incorporate all twelve notes. Motion recommences but the unanswered questions endure until the end of the song. It is perhaps not until the final song of the set “Before Life and After”, wherein the root position triad dominates the piano writing, that any hint of resolution will be forthcoming.

1. **Wagtail and Baby**

I wonder if it was intentional or simply an innate action of his musical brain that Britten uses the same three note cell sequence that pervades the first song, *At Day-Close in November.*



Perhaps it was an ornithological stimulus that formed the cell for the “late bird” and then lingered in the memory for the “wagtail”. Whatever the reason the piano’s fluttering figure perfectly captures the alighting movement of the wagtail (..again, movement is the stimulus!) and then, by subtleties in registration and harmonic colour, the menagerie of the other creatures that it encounters.

In this little ‘satire’, we are again shown a vision of the world through the clarity and innocence of the child’s eye. The wagtail shows no fear or hesitation in its preening until the appearance of ‘a perfect gentleman’, at whose approach it flies off in terror.

Britten’s curious postlude offers new material. How reminiscent this is of the Lieder of Robert Schumann, where a musical afterthought, taken up by the piano, so often offers an insight not always dealt with in the text. Could we attribute a similar interpretation to Britten’s postlude? Is the fact that “the baby fell a thinking” in reality the emergence of “the birth of consciousness” mourned in the final song of the cycle?

1. **The Little Old table**

This is a curious little poem, whose enigmatic language hints at a past relationship linked to the gift of a little table. Surely there is a Schubertian influence here, both in subject and in Britten’s writing for both the piano and the voice; echoes of *Der Einsame* perhaps, Schubert’s little gem of domesticity? The cricket on the hearth, evoked so simply yet eloquently by Schubert, is replaced here by the creaking table of the Hardy poem which Britten suggests with an economy and charm that is no less appealing. There is also a charming interplay between the voice part and the piano’s bass line – a conversation that only serves to disguise the secret that becomes a sort of code emanating from the table’s ‘creaks’. One thinks of Schubert’s “Geheimes” or Strauss’s “Heimliche Aufforderung” as models where the relationship is vivid and knowing to the participants but frustratingly obscure to the outsider who ‘will never know what a history hangs upon this creak, creak”

1. **The Choirmaster’s Burial**

This narrative poem, which could have come out of one of Hardy’s Wessex-based novels, inspires Britten to one of his most popular songs. The mention of ‘Mount Ephraim’ as the Choirmaster’s favoured hymn tune, provides Britten with the inspiration for the structural and tonal shape of the ballad.





The tune, written by B. Milgrove (1731-1810) but here reharmonized by Britten, is heard in full underpinning the tenor man’s opening account and will return in varied form at the story’s denouement.

The tale is simple but poignant. The ‘tenor man’ sets about fulfilling the late Choirmaster’s request of having his musicians play over his grave site at his interment. The Vicar, however, has no time for such old-fashioned rituals and uses the inclement weather as an excuse to deny the request. (Britten’s depiction of the Vicar’s pomposity and the resultant hasty burial are wonderful examples of his economy of means and accuracy of characterisation in this middle period). Heaven it seems has other plans and later that night the Vicar beholds a celestial band of angels descend upon the grave site and, in a transfigured form of the Mt Ephraim tune, fulfil the choirmaster’s wishes.

1. **Proud Songsters**

This is a poem written by Hardy in his final years, penned in the knowledge that his creative years were numbered. It is interesting to compare Britten’s setting with that of Gerald Finzi, a Thomas Hardy devotee and scholar. Where Finzi’s setting is reflective and tinged with regret, Britten’s song - the shortest song in the cycle, all done within sixty seconds! - explodes with life and joy. While many will prefer the introspection of the Finzi setting, Britten’s is totally in keeping with the prevailing theme of his cycle. Britten’s songsters, like the children in the first song, are only aware of the ‘now’ and it is typical of him that it is this sense of innocence that captures his imagination. It seems that Britten is either oblivious to, or consciously ignores, the Finzi perspective – that of the observer/narrator who stands ‘knowingly’ aloof from the present and is thus capable of regret, a perspective that for Britten will be given full voice in the final song.

1. **At the railway station, Upway**

The penultimate song and final narrative of the set is once again like many of these narrative poems, related by an impartial observer. Here, a child plays his violin to two of his fellow travellers - a policeman and his prisoner – while awaiting the arrival of a train. The piano part is written on one stave only, as if it were for a violin. However, it is so typical of Britten’s accomplished instrumental writing, that if it were played on a violin, it would sound wrong!

 The lad obviously is free of all self-consciousness and being so, is happy to undertake a raft of violinistic techniques that include staccato, speccati, thrumming, harmonics and even the odd cadenza. It is a perfect little vignette, with the characters of the boy, constable, convict and narrator, subtly yet clearly evoked in the vocal rhythms, pacing and registrations.

1. **Before Life and After**

What has been implied in the foregoing movements, is now made explicit in this final, extraordinary song. In yearning for the pre-conscious state, Thomas Hardy joins with other great poets such as Wordsworth (*Intimations of Immortality*) and William Blake (*Songs of Innocence and Experience*) and provides Britten with a text that seems to embody his artistic creed. While it is tempting to view it as such, It is important to state that Hardy’s poem and Britten’s setting is not a desire to return to a primal state at the risk of never having been born. For, rather than despair, the result has something of the heroic about it. As Wilfred Mellers writes: “… the heart-wringing and sense-stinging generate a kind of pride in being human.” The pain is worth it for the privilege of experiencing Beauty, for one can only exist with the other. I think Britten confirms this by the way he sets Hardy’s poem. The shifting, first position, triads that dominate the piano’s left hand throughout, go some way to confirm this. Peter Evans, in another context, contends that “Britten has allotted to the triad as a symbol of Beauty” and its ubiquitous presence here should be seen in that context.

There is a superficial absence of sophistication in Britten’s setting – the piano part looks like something that a self-taught dabbler might have wrought. Of course, this is a ruse, for this “unsophisticated” writing is anything but so. Not only can the style be seen a metaphor for pre-rationalisation but the root position triads confirm Peter Evans’s contention, while forming a series of scalic passages that lead inexorably to the song’s powerful climax. It also masks great subtlety in the vocal writing, for the opening piano right hand figure (answered immediately by the voice at the 4th), is already asking the question explicitly posed by the voice at the song’s conclusion. This little cell permeates the song’s melodic fabric in inverted and transposed forms, eventually rising to expose the great question at the heart of the poem.

***Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* Op 61 (1958)**

Britten’s cosmopolitan outlook had already seen him turn to European languages in several earlier works, notably *Les Illuminations* (Rimbaud) in 1939 and *Seven Sonnets of* *Michelangelo* in 1940. He now turned to the language of the Lied and in doing so, may have felt some apprehension in following the footsteps of his heroes Schubert, Schumann and Wolf. Perhaps this is one reason that he turned to Friedrich Hölderlin, a poet hardly represented in the output of the great Lieder composers. However, a more immediate reason for the choice was that the work was to be a 50th birthday gift to his friend and patron, Prince Ludwig of Hesse, who adored the poetry of Hölderlin and was instrumental in introducing his verses to the composer. However, perhaps the overriding reason that sealed the choice was that Britten in Hölderlin identified a kindred spirit. Both, in their own ways, were outsiders and more importantly, it seems clear that Hölderlin’s verses embodied a philosophical view with which Britten identified at this, the crossroads of his life. As always, Britten’s skill in choosing just the right texts is in evidence. The narrative tone that dominates the inner songs of *Winter Words*, are here all but absent and Britten’s musical voice appropriately strikes a more ascetic quality that perfectly matches the more philosophical tone of these poems.

Like Schiller, who lamented the loss of Beauty in the Germanic world of his day (see his poem *Die Götter Griechenlands …* “Schöne Welt, wo bist du?”) Hölderlin perceived the Germany of his time to be lacking a spiritual core and saw it as his task to revitalise this by amalgamating the tenets of Greek philosophy with his inherited Lutheranism. Of course, neo-hellenism already held a prominent place in German romantic poetry. Poets paid homage to and drew lessons from figures such as Ganymede, Prometheus, Memnon, Atys etc. Goethe, especially, was quite specific about the lessons to be learned there when he stated in *Iphigenie auf Tauris* “das Land der Griechen mit der Seele suchen”. (“Seek the land of the Greeks with one’s soul”)

It could be argued that for Hölderlin, who translated the works of Pindar and Sophocles, the meeting with the Hellenic mind produced an even more intimate bond than with either Goethe or Schiller. The result is a sort of pantheism where the quest for the ‘divine’ in both Nature and Man was the goal. So often this finds a parallel with Britten’s own quest for innocence uncorrupted and so the figure of the child, untainted by ‘consciousness’ is often the common factor in their search.

1. **Menschenbeifall (Public Acclaim)**

*Is not my heart holy, more full of life’s beauty since I fell in love?*

*Why then did you hold me in greater esteem when I was prouder and wilder, full of splendid but empty words?*

*Ah! The crowds are gratified by whatever is in the marketplace and those in servitude only respect tyranny.*

*Only they that are themselves god-like believe in the divine.*

As Britten navigates this middle period of his creative life, one can see a tempering of his style in order to seek the heart of creative truth – it seems that to more clearly expose it, there is a need to cut away any excess. To the casual listener, such leanness can appear lacking warmth. However a more committed attention to his methods reveal a world that is ultimately more satisfying. The great Russian cellist Rostropovich noted this of Britten’s later style when he commented “How few notes there are in Britten’s composition, yet how much thought and feeling.”

This opening song is a good example of that refining technique. Britten’s structure follows that of the four sections clearly delineated in Hölderlin’s text. The bare octaves that stride across the page at the song’s opening confirm the hollowness that is at the heart of the poem’s message. Their shape too is important, the lines striving upwards via a series of noble 4ths (C-F-Bb-Ab-Dd). The voice confidently declaims the opening statement (“Ist nicht heilig mein herz..”) also based upon the interval of the 4th, as it poses its rhetorical question.

The next statement is also a question (“Warum…”) but is in antithesis to the first. Predictably Britten writes this as a melodic inversion of the original – motion halts temporally too, as the question is posed akin to recitative. The piano ‘chatter’ that begins the third section derives from the opening vocal phrase and surely underwrites the text “the masses delight in whatever is in vogue.” Here, the interval of the 4th is replaced by a dominance of sweetened 3rds … In the final statement the piano returns to the striding octaves of the start but here are hesitant and faltering, while the voice arches above it in a nobly sustained line – an inversion and augmentation of its original shape - as it states Hölderlin’s “Only those who are themselves godlike, believe in the gods”, not so much a boast as a recognition of potential as well as a pertinent statement on behalf of the creative artist and that relationship with the public.

1. **Die Heimat (Home)**

*Joyfully the boatman wends his way homeward over the calm waters,*

*from far islands where he has reaped his harvest.*

*Gladly would I also be turning homeward but what have I harvested, save sorrows?*

*You beloved shores that nurtured me, can you quell the grief of love?*

*Ah! You woodlands of my childhood, when I return to you,*

*can you give me that peace I once knew?*

Surely the most lyrical and unashamedly romantic of the set, ‘Die Heimat’ yearns for the return to the land of one’s youth wherein lies the hope of solace and peace. The piano part is a rocking barcarole figure that surely springs from the poetic image of the homeward-wending boat but whose close seconds - so often associated with sleep and dreams in Britten’s oeuvre (see Oberon’s celeste music in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the linking figure in his *Nocturne,* ‘A Cradle Song’ from *A Charm of Lullabies* etc) - also giving a nocturnal feel.

Britten’s graceful vocal line quickly generates a twin in the piano part that follows at the distance of a bar. This canonic energy then generates a third sibling as the yearning reaches its zenith (“Ah! Can you forests of my childhood grant me the peace I once knew?”). It is the interval of the sixth that dominates the melodic contours, arching upwards to express his yearning and sweeting dipping downwards when envisioning the hope of release, the latter particularly evident as we are returned to the original tonality in the melodic reprise of the final page.

1. **Sokrates und Alcibiades (Socrates and Alcibiades)**

*Why, blessed Socrates, do you pay homage to this youth?*

*Are there not more lofty matters for your attention?*

*Why does your eye rest on him so lovingly, as if he were a god?*

*He who ponders deeply, loves what is most full of life;*

*High virtue is understood by him who has observed the world,*

*And so often, in the end, the wise man bows to Beauty.*

While the binary structure of Hölderlin’s poem might, in retrospect, make the shape of Britten’s setting obvious, the response at once belies the genius of the composer and indeed, perfects the poem.

The speaker harangues Socrates as to why he devotes so much time and attention to the youth Alcibiades – why is he viewed in such a god-like manner? (One should probably be aware that Alcbiades was reportedly a most handsome youth but, it seems, while a pupil of Socrates, did not exhibit the noblest of Greek values in his everyday life!).

Britten sets the speaker’s series of questions in a freely declaimed vocal line over a single melodic line in the piano, one which while not harmonised, is rich in harmonic potential. Of course, this very melody is concurrently the gentle response that Socrates gives to the challenge, which the questioner, so sure of his own voice, is too pompous or self-absorbed to perceive. When, in the second part Socrates clearly articulates his reasons, it is via this melody that we have already heard in the piano. But now it is fully realised harmonically in a series of sustained chords that have their roots in each of the twelve notes of the dodecaphonic scale. In this, we see Britten not only giving a nod to the serial techniques advanced by Schönberg, but in the celebration of the triad, reinforcing a symbolism that has revealed itself elsewhere (*Billy Budd*, etc) as a symbol of Beauty and as a confirmation of an observation made by Peter Evans “that Beauty must awaken love”

1. **Die Jugend (Youth)**

*When I was a lad I was often rescued by a god*

*From the cries and brutality of men.*

*Then, safe and secure,*

*I played with the flowers of the fields*

*And the breezes of the heavens*

*And they played with me.*

*And as the hearts of plants delight,*

*As they reach up and incline their arms towards you,*

*So too has my heart been enchanted, Father Helios!*

*And like Endymion, I was your beloved, Blessed Luna!*

*Oh! All you faithful, friendly gods,*

*How I wish to tell you how my soul loved you!*

*I was taught the music of the whispering trees*

*And I learned to love among the blooms and grew up in the arms of gods*

If one were describing the cycle symphonically, this song would be the scherzo. The song is through-composed and has the impression of being improvised on the spot. However this is anything but the case, yet that impression aligns beautifully with the youthful energy and delight that inhabits the poem. The song opens with a little tapping figure in the piano’s bass – it is a figure akin to that which opens Britten’s violin Concerto Opus 15, a work that he revised in 1958, the year of the Hardy cycle and no doubt was on his mind when he wrote this song cycle. The voice responds to this hopping figure with even wider intervallic leaps as he recalls the children’s games he played with the Sylvan deities. These figures then morph seamlessly into an enraptured legato as his entwinement in the arms of the gods is recalled.

As the gods are addressed by name (“Vater Helios” and ‘Heilige Luna’), the scherzo is suspended just long enough to give the importance required to the youth’s allegiance to the gods in whose hands he received his education of the world – a homage that achieves its return to the tonic key with the words “ wie euch meiner Seele geliebt” (“..how my soul loved you”). That the homage and debt is firmly instilled is demonstrated by the final three notes of that phrase lingering on in the left hand of the piano for the rest of the song.

1. **Hälfte des Lebens (The Middle of Life)**

*Laden with yellow pears and resplendent with wild roses,*

*the land hangs into the lake.*

*You lovely swans, drunk with kisses,*

*you dip your heads into the sacred calm waters.*

*Alas! Where shall I find the flowers when winter comes?*

*And where shall I find the sunlight and the shadows of earth?*

*The walls stand silent and cold; the weathervanes clatter in the wind.*

In contrast to the improvised quality of the previous song, here a single piano motif dominates throughout. Above it a vocal line of truly Pearsian tessitura laments the passing of youth, beauty and even creative inspiration. Britten responds to the pervading sense of impending loss by setting a slowly descending vocal line against a rhythmic figure in the piano that seems at odds with the voice and the prevailing tonality? With the approach of the symbols of winter (so often a metaphor for age and decay), the piano figure momentarily gathers in pace and agitation, slowing again with the remembrances of spring. In many ways it is a frightening song, whose ending almost has the effect of awaking from a nightmare. Surely for Hölderlin the verse “Die Mauern stehn sprachlos und kalt..”,( ..”The walls stand silent and cold..”) being ‘wordless’ (‘sprachlos’) would indeed be a nightmare, the loss of creative power being worse than death itself.

1. **Die Linien des Lebens (The Lines of Life)**

*The lines of life are all different,*

*Just as pathways and the outline of mountains are.*

*What we are here, there a god can perfect,*

*with harmony, eternal order and peace.*

Hölderlin was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his late twenties. The condition deteriorated in the following years and in 1805 he was delivered into a clinic in Türbingen only to be discharged one year later as incurable and given three years to live. As fate would have it, he was taken in by a cultured man, Ernst Zimmer, and given a room in a tower, part of the old Türbingen City Hall. He stayed there thirty-six years and the poetry he wrote there was simple and direct. *Die Linien des Lebens* is one of these verses, written for his host on a piece of wood.

To these remarkable four lines of text, Britten responds in a two-page wonder. From the piano the ‘lines of life’ arise organically in a series of rising and falling phrases that mingle, forming a counterpoint of growing intensity. The voice draws on these shapes but contributes its line in augmentation. The climax, given to the piano, is a repeated phrase of mirrored octaves, gleaned from the initial figures and reminds us of the final variation in “Still falls the Rain”; there, calm and consoling, here forthright and resolute, yet the metaphor of reflection and insight being just as compelling.