

The Artificial and the Natural in Britten's *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*, Op. 31

by

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Using artificial or human-devised means to represent naturally occurring phenomena summarizes much of the artistic process. Emily Dickinson's "I Heard a Fly Buzz" conveys a disturbing image of the inexorable nature of death through the aural image of a buzzing fly:

"With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -  
 Between the light - and me -  
 And then the Windows failed - and then  
 I could not see to see -"

The artificial media of pen, paper, and the written word (not to mention such constraints as meter and rhyme) portray the natural process of dying. Monet's *Water Lilies* depicts plants that grow naturally in ponds using artificially constructed brushes, canvases, and paints as well as Impressionist brushstroke technique that veils objective representation.

In such cases, the artificiality of the artistic medium exists in tension with the naturalness of the subject, and the artist may choose whether to minimize or exaggerate this tension by choosing a lesser or greater level of abstraction with which to represent their subject. Benjamin Britten chose this latter route of exaggerated tension while writing his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*, op. 31, in which uncanny poetry – whose themes range from the beauty and divinity of the natural world to the darkness of night, sleep and death – is mated with music struggling between artificiality and naturalness.

Seeing a dichotomy between the artificial and natural in a musical context proves harder than in the context of other artistic disciplines. The problem is not in finding

artificiality, which exists as readily in the act of composing highly ordered music with complex harmonic relationships as it does in the making of a poem or painting. The problem lies in defining *naturalness* in musical terms.

While this question has no objective answer, there have been – over the course of centuries of inquiry – many attempts to provide a firm foundation for understanding what music “naturally” expresses, and what might be its ways of doing so. Historical perspectives range from the Baroque period’s doctrine of the affects to Schopenhauer’s view that music represents the Will to modernism’s assertion of music as non-representational absolutism. Was Britten seeking to represent anything? Certainly all his musical decisions mimetically support and convey an *interpretation* of the text. The anguished shifting between major and minor thirds in the *Elegy*, for instance, evoke mystery and melancholy, although not literal images of a rose and a worm. Yet even the ability to convey melancholy through music is not universal, so we may only safely claim that the musical ideas – melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and timbral elements, autonomous of possible and expressive extra-musical reference – are the music’s subject. Nevertheless, several mimetic possibilities connecting the poetic texts and Britten’s settings of them will be tendered in the following presentations of musical materials.

What makes a purely musical idea more natural than another? It is true that scholars of modernism have properly assaulted any claim that the common practice of

Western tonality is “natural” or “universal.”<sup>1</sup> For the sake of this paper, however, we will make the “conventional” claim to associate tonality with naturalness, if only because of the historical precedent for this that existed before the time the *Serenade*’s writing. But in accordance with the times’ changing scholarship, Britten’s music can be understood as integrating the “artificial” elements into the conventional ones to demonstrate that there is nothing more “natural” about tonality than atonality. As defined here, contrast between the terms “artificial” and “natural” is relative and metaphorical, not absolute or physical.

Following the assertion associating tonality with naturalness, we can define *asymmetry* (like the pair of minor and major thirds that make up most tonal triads) as a part of naturalness and *symmetry* (like the whole tone scale or other sets that divide the octave into equal parts) as a part of artificiality. This principle applies melodically and harmonically – we consider a modulation to a chromatic mediant to be more artificial than a modulation to the dominant, with its implied and often-realized extension into a larger set of thirds, dividing the octave into symmetrical parts.

The second phrase of the Elegy (Example 1) illustrates Britten’s conception of symmetrical and asymmetrical sets. Each half of the horn’s phrase descends by half

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Botstein writes that during the early 20th century, dissenters of the Modernist movement saw tonality as “. . .the functional equivalent of conventional but spurious claims to objective external reality and a natural system of representation.” He points out that this belief was then contradicted by new scholarship studying “the physics of sound, the physiology of hearing and the psychology of sensation” and “non-Western musical cultures not based on tonality.” (Leon Botstein, “Modernism, §5: Social and cultural aspects,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 30th, 2015, *Oxford Music Online*.)

Example 1, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade, "Elegy,"* Op. 31, mm. 7-11

The musical score for Example 1, Benjamin Britten's *Serenade, "Elegy,"* Op. 31, mm. 7-11, is presented in a standard orchestral layout. The score is in 4/4 time and features a voice part and orchestral instruments: Horn in F, Violins I and II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The music is marked with dynamics such as *p*, *cresc.*, *f*, *sf*, *dim.*, and *ppp*. A box containing the number 10 is located in the upper right corner of the score.

step, the smallest symmetrical division of the octave. The first phrase fills in the interval of a minor third (from the written B to G-sharp), and the second fills in the interval of a major third (from written A to F). The entire phrase traverses the interval of an augmented fourth, the largest symmetrical division of the octave.

Viewing the line as an attempt to combine natural and artificial elements is perhaps more fruitful than a conventional, functional analysis, which would yield a rather murkier interpretation in music so coloristic. While it is possible to analyze parts of this music with Roman numerals (Example 2), every moment Britten transgresses the bounds of functional analysis. In light of his regard for Blake's own poetic outlook, it is plausible that Britten understood the rose as a metaphor of pristine Romanticism, assaulted by forces of dissonance forbidding us from accounting for the music in "natural" terms.

Example 2, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade, "Elegy,"* Op. 31, mm. 18-25 (piano reduction)

**Recitativo (Lento)**

Voice  
O Rose, thou art sick; The in-vi-si-ble worm That flies ..... in the night, ..... In the how-ling storm,  
Has found out thy bed Of crimson joy; And his dark, se-cret love Does thy life.....des.-troy.....

Piano  
*pp espress.*  
*molto cresc.*  
*f espress.*  
*ppp*  
*pp come sopra*

e: *ppp* i V<sup>7</sup>/VII VII V<sup>7</sup>/VI

11 *f* 12 **Tempo primo**  
VI V i Solo

We will also consider simple melodic figures as more natural than concepts like key, modulation, and harmony. Simple melodic figures are immediately apparent in nature while organized modulation is not. Certainly the simple intervals of birdsong or the visceral howl of a wolf has existed as long as the animals have, and human song has existed at least since ancient times. But modulation didn't appear in Western art music

Example 3, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade, "Dirge,"* Op. 31, mm. 1-2

**Alla marcia grave** (♩ = 60)  
*come un lamento*

Voice  
This ae nighte, this ae nighte,

until the 15th century,<sup>2</sup> millennia after humans began singing simple step-wise melodies.

Example 3 shows the opening motive from the "Dirge." These three notes, G, A-flat, G, (a neighbor-tone figure), exemplify the most fundamental idea of

<sup>2</sup>"Modulation," The Oxford Dictionary of Music, *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 30, 2015, *Oxford Music Online*.

departure and return. After the solo voice delivers the first phrase, the accompaniment enters in E-flat minor – at bitonal odds with the G minor vocal *ostinato* – significant since the concept of bitonality is even more unnatural than modulation. At the most climactic moment of the piece, the accompaniment modulates to E minor (Example 4), rising to the harmonic area a half-step above. Two verses before the end, the accompaniment returns to E-flat minor, transforming the local melodic motive from the opening into the large-scale harmonic outline of the movement. Here, the vocal motive is a natural event that is transmuted by the artificial medium of modulation. The enlargement of the neighbor-tone motive into the harmonic scheme could be an analogy for the medieval text's structure itself: a consideration of the human world (including mundane candle-light) suddenly and irrevocably opens up into a cosmic plea for redemption ("and Christ receive...").

Example 4, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Dirge," Op. 31, mm. 30-32

The musical score for Example 4, Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Dirge," Op. 31, mm. 30-32, is presented in a multi-staff format. The top staff is for the Voice, with the lyrics "thy saule. ... From Brig o' Dread when thou may'st pass,". The second staff is for the Horn in F. The third and fourth staves are for Violins I and II, respectively. The fifth staff is for Violas. The sixth and seventh staves are for Cellos and Basses. The score is in 4/4 time and E-flat minor. The vocal line begins at measure 30. The instrumental parts are marked "molto largamente" and "ff" (fortissimo). The score shows a complex bitonal texture with various articulations like "pizz." (pizzicato) and "arco" (arco) for the strings, and "tr." (trills) for the cellos and basses.

*Balancing the asymmetry of diatonic triads' profiles with symmetrical pitch sets and transforming local motives into large scale harmonic areas*—these are the major mechanisms through which Britten balances artificial and natural elements. The following investigation systematically categorizes and studies these mechanisms with the intention of illuminating the principles of Britten's unique compositional construction and eventually gaining insight into Britten's interpretation of the text.

Britten wrote the *Serenade* in 1943, a year after returning to live in England after an extended stay in the United States. Perhaps Britten's personal return to home influenced the *Serenade's* unique musical language, where tonality is the "default," but atonality lurks just out of reach, ever seducing our ears towards the unfamiliar.

Certainly historical factors influenced Britten's compositional choices concerning artificiality and naturalness, regardless of whether he was aware of it in such terms. An unprecedented range of harmonic and stylistic languages was available by the mid-twentieth century. Even as a school boy Britten was attracted to the edgy music springing up across the channel (Walter Greatorex, Britten's public school music master, first addressed Britten by saying, "So you are the little boy who likes Stravinsky"<sup>3</sup>). Britten's *Quatre Chansons Françaises*, written at age fourteen, shows definitive influence of composers as modern as Debussy, Ravel, Wagner, and Berg.<sup>4</sup> In his early 20's Britten developed strong opinions against what he perceived as English pastoralism; his letters and journal entries record harsh critiques of composers like Elgar and Ralph Vaughan

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<sup>3</sup> Niel Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Liner notes, *BRITTEN: Illuminations (Les)/Our Hunting Fathers/4 Chansons francaises*, Felicity Lott, Phyllis Bryn-Julson, English Chamber Orchestra, Steuart Bedford, Naxos 8.557206, 2004, compact disc.



Williams.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, by the early 1940's, Britten's detractors were accusing his music of "cosmopolitanism."<sup>6</sup>

Britten was frustrated that his admiration of composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky was discouraged during his studies at the Royal College of Music.<sup>7</sup> When he had the chance to study in Vienna, his conservative mother forbade him studying with Berg, having been warned by the academy that Berg was "not a good influence."<sup>8</sup> Yet during the height of Modernism and Darmstadt ideology, listeners outside the English musical establishment found Britten's use of elements like "12-note manipulation" to be "conciliatory and accommodating," as though he incorporated these elements into his otherwise tonal music out of obligation.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps because of these circumstances, Britten's compositional style never fully assumed the artificial, *avant-garde* idiom of mainland Europe, instead remaining a colorful synthesis of unfamiliar and familiar.

In addition to historical reasons, aesthetic considerations also account for Britten's choice to balance artificial and natural elements. This balancing results in crunchy sounds grabbing listeners by surprise. When Britten thwarts our expectations with a well-placed modulation by chromatic mediant instead of to the dominant, it simply sounds good viscerally, in a different way than the chromatic mediant modulations of Romantic composers like Brahms. Brahms argues his chromatic mediant relationships within the context of perceptible triadic function, while Britten persuades

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Brett, et al. "Britten, Benjamin §2: College and the profession, 1930-39," *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 30th, 2015, *Oxford Music Online*.

<sup>6</sup> Brett, "Britten, Benjamin §3: North America, 1939-42."

<sup>7</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Brett, "Britten, Benjamin §9: Reception, influence, significance."

us that such devices as the chromatic mediant modulation are autonomously significant, capable in their own right of being elevated to the level of structural significance.

Text setting is the most fruitful lens through which to consider Britten's compositional choices. Generally, poetry about the night is well suited to the willful obscurity springing from the musical tension between artificial and natural elements. Also, specific events in the text can cause specific events in the music. The literary impetus of the descending half step (especially when it is the third of a triad) in the *Elegy* is found in measure 25 (Example 5), where the musical figure is paired with the words "life destroy," this time in its inversion, ascending from the triad's minor third to its major third. It is as though the corruption of the rose described in the text has

Example 5, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
"Elegy," Op. 31, m. 25

**12**

**Tempo primo**

Score for Example 5, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Elegy," Op. 31, m. 25. The score is in 4/4 time and features a voice line and an orchestra. The voice line has the lyrics "life..... des - troy.....". The orchestra includes Horn in F, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello/Double Bass, and Bass. The score is marked "pp" (pianissimo) and "pp express".

infected the triad, while at the same time the major harmonization of "destroy" attests to the possible relief and freedom from the implacable demands of the rose's beauty that this destruction incurs.

A consequence of combining artificial and natural musical elements is a lack of conformity to rigid, obvious patterns. Thus, many passages are not fully explicable as symmetrical or asymmetrical sets, such as the modulations beginning at rehearsal 2 of the *Pastoral*. This paper later accounts for the first

modulations from D-flat to F to A and the modulations from A-flat to D with symmetrical sets, but these harmonic areas are connected by a short section in G-flat. This makes sense tonally as subdominant of the home key, but is oddly placed between A and A-flat. Understanding the artificial elements as obscurations of a default tonal language helps decipher this ambiguity. Britten's innate musicality never capitulates to self-imposed constraints for the sake of following a rule; a phrase never sacrifices going to the place it belongs musically for going to the place it "should" according to an artificial constructive principle like completing a symmetrical set.

Having been appropriately cautioned, let us begin considering how Britten uses symmetrical and asymmetrical sets. Often prolonging completion of a set heightens dramatic tension, as in the Nocturne, in which a diatonic C-minor triad (at relative odds with the movement's E-flat major tonic) is achieved through increasingly climactic musical repetitions corresponding with the structure of Tennyson's text.

Tennyson arranged his text into three stanzas whose last two lines function like a refrain that differs just slightly in the second repetition. Likewise, two alternating sections form the Nocturne's large scale musical structure, with the verse-like (A) sections accompanied by incessant dotted rhythms in the strings and the refrain (B) sections marked "*Cadenza (come sopra)*," characterized by echo-like imitation between horn and tenor.

The arresting opening of the movement foreshadows the C-minor triad goal. In the first measure, a series of syncopated forte-pianos elaborate on a C-minor triad in the first violins (Example 6).

Example 6, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
 "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 1

Maestoso (♩ = 88)

The first verse describes the light of the setting sun falling on a castle, mountains, and lakes. The fairly unconcealed textual description is delivered via a simple diatonic melody. The phrase setting the words "long light shakes" (Example 7) highlights the lower notes of our C-minor triad by moving between them in a scale, twice repeating the figure C, D, E-flat.

Like the first A section, the first B section is in E-flat major. Example 8 shows the vocal line fluttering between C and E-flat, this time getting as far as F, just missing the G.

Example 7, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 6-8

<sup>6</sup>Maestoso (♩ = 88)

Example 8, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 10

*Cadenza (senza misura) - più mosso* (♩=72)

*più f*

Voice

Horn in F

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

'Cello

Basses

Bugle blow; an- swer, echoes answer .....

*tr*

*ppp*

*tr*

*ppp*

*tr*

*ppp*

*tr*

*ppp*

*tr*

*ppp*

In the second verse, the poem moves from observing the natural to seeking the mystical, summoning us to listen for the ephemeral sounds of the “horns of Elfland.” In accordance with this change, the key signature assumes all naturals (at the very moment the text transcends the “natural”!), and the phrase setting “sweet and far” (analogous to “long light shakes” of the previous verse) moves from C to D to E-natural, resting for just a moment before sequencing the figure up to D, E-flat, and F (Example 9). Going from C to E-natural proves the significance of completing a triad with the root C in particular (the figure wasn’t sequenced down a third in compliance with the key change), and the move from D to F suggests that we are still moving forward; this figure has not yet reached its goal.

Example 9, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 17-19

**Maestoso** (♩ = 88)

17

Voice  
..... O sweet ..... and far ..... from cliff and scar.....

Horn in F

Violins I

Violins II

Violas  
div.

'Cellos

Basses

Likewise, the second iteration of the B material begins in C major before toying with G major – instead of the previous E-flat to C to F figure, the notes are changed to E-natural, C, and F-sharp (Example 10). The addition of a leading tone heightens our anticipation of the future resolution to G.

Notice also how this central verse tonicizes the two key areas lying a diatonic third away from the tonic E-flat major (C and G major). Thus, the C minor triad is a microcosm of the movement from a harmonic standpoint, as well as a melodic one.

The third and final verse praises the raptures of love, the fulfillment of the natural and the supernatural. The text stretches up to the “yon rich sky” and into the future, “for ever and for ever.” The key returns home to E-flat major, and the analogous phrase to “long light shakes” (now “echoes roll”) at last culminates with an ascending

Example 10, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 21

*Cadenza (come sopra)*

Voice  
Horn in F  
Violin I  
Violin II  
Viola  
Cello  
Basses

Lyrics: Bugle blow; answer, echoes answer .....

Dynamic markings: *ppp*, *f*, *ff*, *poco a poco cresc.*, *poco f*, *(senza cresc.)*

Performance markings: *trem.*, *div. trem. arco*, *Sul C*, *Sul G*

Example 11, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 28-29

**Maestoso** (♩ = 88)

Voice  
Horn in F  
Violins I  
Violins II  
Violas  
Cellos  
Basses

Lyrics: Our echoes roll ..... from soul to soul.....

Dynamic markings: *fp*, *mf*, *cresc.*

line from E-flat to the long-awaited G (Example 11).

Example 12 shows the last permutation of the B material. The first part of the phrase is transposed down a minor third to begin on C, so that a C-minor triad actually spells itself out on the metrically accented notes when the second part of the phrase is

Example 12, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, m. 31

*Cadenza (come sopra)*

Voice: *cresc.*  
 set the wild echoes flying,..... And answer, echoes answer,.....  
 Horn in F  
 Violin I: *p* *poco a poco cresc.*  
 Violin II: *p* *poco a poco cresc.*  
 Viola: *p* *poco a poco cresc.*  
 Cello: *p* *poco a poco cresc.*  
 Basses: *pp ad libitum* *poco a poco cresc.*

altered to leap to the promised G.

The fact that the high G was present in other phrases throughout the movement challenges the idea that dramatic tension was heightened through the delay of completing the C-minor triad. As any tonal music in E-flat major naturally would, the harmonies are littered with G's, and a high G does arrive in each B section on the word "dying," although by then the section's climax has passed.

However, the dramatic significance of set completion is actually strengthened by these other G's, just as a poem is rendered more coherent by the appearance of a word later in a poem that also rhymes with a previous line. The first line of the second stanza begins with "Oh hark, Oh hear!" and is immediately followed by "how thin and clear," the completion of the rhyming set. Rather than detracting from the significance of the earlier rhyming set, the appearance of "hear" in the penultimate line of the stanza



("Blow, let us hear") intensifies the text's consistency. Likewise, significance of musical set completion is contingent upon the set completion being forecast in specific places and fulfilled in a subsequent repetition of that place or in another place of dramatic musical significance. The consistency brought about by the appearance of crucial words and sonorities elsewhere enhances the expressive power of text and music together, driving home the goal of the song's expression.

Britten's use of set completion also mirrors Tennyson's structure on multiple structural levels. The poem contains rhyming sets within each stanza's first and third lines (completion at the local level), between the second and fourth lines (completion at the level of the stanza), and between each stanza (completion at the largest structural level). Likewise, Britten's use of set completion saturates his music at the local motivic level, through extended melodic passages, and at the level of large-scale harmonic structure.

Another set that is of local, melodic, and harmonic significance in the Nocturne are the four notes that saturate the texture at every cadenza section (Example 13). Curiously, this arrangement of notes has a hole in the center, as though the third of a triad were replaced by its neighbor notes.

Example 13, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Nocturne," Op. 31, mm. 9-10

*Cadenza (senza misura) - più mosso* (♩=72)

The score shows the following parts and markings:

- Voice:** Lyrics: "ca tar act leaps ... in glo - ry: Blow, bug le, blow,". Includes "Pitch Set" boxes and triplet markings.
- Horn in F:** Includes markings *p accel.*, *rit.*, and *(simile)*.
- Violins I & II:** Start with *ffp* and transition to *ppp* with *poco a poco cresc.* markings.
- Violas:** Start with *ffp* and transition to *ppp* with *poco a poco cresc.* markings.
- Cellos:** Start with *ff* and transition to *ppp* with *poco a poco cresc.* markings. Includes *pizz.* and *arco* markings.
- Basses:** Start with *ff* and transition to *ppp* with *poco a poco cresc.* markings. Includes *pizz. div.* and *unis. arco* markings.

This set elucidates the series of seemingly inexplicable modulations before the second cadenza section beginning at rehearsal 5. The music moves from C to G major, then through D and F major before E-flat and C major. The modulations "fill in" the fifth from outside to the inside, finally delivering the missing third from the set saturating the cadenza sections before returning to the key of the section. Significantly, the set's outer fifth as it appears in the cadenza section goes from E-flat to B-flat, but in this section the outer fifth is from C to G, harkening back to the significance of the C-minor triad as stated in the opening measure.

Sometimes symmetrical and asymmetrical sets are at odds with each other. In the Hymn, these competing types of sets represent the paradox of bequeathing

supernatural qualities to nature, a paradox inherent in a poem praising Diana, goddess of the hunt and a personification of the deity of the natural world. Perhaps it is also the disorienting sense of wonder in the face of the divine that provides inspiration for these disorderly pitch elements at odds with themselves.

In the second measure of the Hymn, the introduction of the raised fourth scale degree in the horn part creates a series of symmetrical thirds (from the written D, the notes descend a minor third, a major third, and minor third) from what would have otherwise been an asymmetrical diatonic set. The accompaniment absorbs this and for the next few bars the horn and strings go back and forth in attempts correct one another (Example 14).

Example 14, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Hymn," Op. 31, mm. 2-5

The musical score for Example 14 shows the first five measures of the 'Hymn' from Britten's *Serenade*. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The score includes parts for Voice, Horn in F, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The music features a series of symmetrical thirds in the horn part, starting from a written D. The accompaniment consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with rests, marked 'pizz.' (pizzicato). Dynamics range from 'pp' (pianissimo) to 'sf' (sforzando).

Similar events transpire during the second stanza, where chromatic alterations beginning in measures 63 and 72 create symmetrical diminished triads on the last three notes of each phrase (Examples 15 and 16).

Before the last stanza (and a return to the initial musical material), a series of asymmetrical diatonic thirds cascades through the strings (Example 17), a powerful declaration of the natural.

Example 15, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Hymn," Op. 31, mm. 61-65

Voice  
 Earth,... let not thy en - vious shade

Horn in F  
*fpp*

Violins I  
 Violins II  
 Violas  
 'Cellos  
 Basses  
*pp* *distinto*

Example 16, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Hymn," Op. 31, mm. 71-74

Voice  
 Cyn - thia's shining orb - was made,

Horn in F  
*pp*

Violins I  
 Violins II  
 Violas  
 'Cellos  
 Basses  
*pp* *distinto*

Example 17, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Hymn,"  
Op. 31, mm. 98-100

In the end, the conflicting musical elements reach an intriguing compromise (or perhaps – balance), just as the nature of the divine reaches a compromise with the imagination of Jonson’s reader, which as a finite entity can never truly conceptualize the infinite. (Perhaps the melismas humorously express of this compromise, too – their absurd length draws attention to a serious question: how can music really exemplify the word “excellently”?) The horn reiterates the initial statement that introduced the raised fourth scale degree, but this time

continues down a series of diatonic thirds which, because of where they are begun, happen to be symmetrical (that is, they perfectly extend the pattern of alternating major and minor thirds) (Example 18). The new series of thirds eventually settles on the diatonic fourth scale degree, resting for two bars before proceeding to the dominant and tonic.

Example 18, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Hymn," Op. 31, mm. 141-146

Voice  
 (Ex) - cel-lent - ly bright.

Horn in F  
*pp*

Violins I  
*pp* *ppp*

Violins II  
*pp* *ppp*

Violas  
*pp* *dim.* *ppp*

'Cellos  
*pp* *dim.* *ppp*

Basses  
*pp* *pp dim.*

Not only does the horn's conspicuous concert E-natural in the opening statement have implications for the symmetrical and asymmetrical sets, it allows us to see the central section's modulation to B major at rehearsal 25 as an amplified consequence of the opening disagreement between E-flat and E-natural. As a further bit of Jonsonian comedy, the horn's transposition visually provides the song's respective tonics B-flat and B natural, here at the very beginning.

As in the Nocturne, Britten simultaneously weaves multiple musical narratives throughout the Hymn. While conflicting sets of symmetrical and asymmetrical thirds go about their own struggle, Britten completes a D-minor triad over repetitions of the word "goddess," the word which begins the last line of each of the poem's three stanzas.

Perhaps this is symbolic; like that of the D minor triad, the spelling of the word “Diana” (the goddess the Hymn praises), both begins with “D” and ends with “A”! Unlike the Nocturne, the dramatic tension in the text isn’t heightened by prolonging completion of the triad – here an instigating event and subsequent elaborations on a D minor triad highlight the static, repetitious nature of Jonson’s text.

In keeping with the *Serenade*’s theme of mediant relationships, Britten chooses to emphasize a triad whose root is a third away from the movement’s tonic B-flat, as in the Nocturne. Here, Britten’s textual justification for emphasizing a triad other than the tonic lies in the elusiveness of the moonlight from “Cynthia’s shining orb,” or in the unattainability represented by her chastity (maybe the pun on “chaste” – which could be heard as “chased,” a reference to her status as goddess of the chase – provides incentive for the movement’s sprightly tempo).

Example 19, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, “Hymn,” Op. 31, mm. 28-31

22

Score for Example 19, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, “Hymn,” Op. 31, mm. 28-31. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. It features a vocal line and instrumental parts for Horn in F, Violins I and II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The vocal line has lyrics: “State in won - ted man - ner keep:”. The instrumental parts show a dynamic shift from *pp* to *sf* in measure 31.

Oscillating perfect fourths (recalling the perfect fourth that opens the piece) begin in the vocal line in measure 28, leaping from D to A (Example 19). This event is similar to but distinct from future related events, suggesting this event brings the others about. It occurs in the middle of the poem’s first stanza rather than at the end of the stanzas as do the subsequent events, and the

Example 20, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
 "Hymn," Op. 31, mm. 40-42

The musical score for Example 20 consists of the following parts:

- Voice:** Treble clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter). The lyrics are: "God-dess, god - dess, god - dess," with a *cresc.* marking above the first measure.
- Horn in F:** Treble clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (half), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).
- Violins I:** Treble clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).
- Violins II:** Treble clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).
- Violas:** Alto clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).
- 'Cellos:** Bass clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).
- Basses:** Bass clef, 2/4 time, D minor key signature. The melody is: D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), F4 (quarter).

musical interval outlines a fourth rather than thirds. The fourth is significant since it outlines a dominant-tonic figure, bestowing importance on D requiring elaboration.

In measure 40 the tenor sings oscillating thirds from D to F on the words "goddess," (Example 20) filling in the third of the forecasted D minor triad. "Goddess" is not repeated in the original poem; the fact that Britten repeats it three times adds to the significance of the music chosen to set it.

The analogous phrases beginning in measure 88 (Example 21) and 130 (Example 22) oscillate from A to F and F to D respectively, again on repetitions of the word "goddess."



Example 21, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
“Hymn,” Op. 31, mm. 88-90

Example 21 musical score showing Voice, Horn in F, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The voice part has the lyrics "God - dess, god - dess, god - dess,". The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* (pianissimo). The voice part is marked *cresc.* (crescendo).

Example 22, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
“Hymn,” Op. 31, mm. 132-134

Example 22 musical score showing Voice, Horn in F, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The score is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. The voice part has the lyrics "god - dess, god - dess, god - dess,". The piano accompaniment is marked *p cresc.* (piano crescendo) and *mf cresc.* (mezzo-forte crescendo). The voice part is marked *cresc.* (crescendo).

These melodic events take place in three different keys (D minor, B-flat major, F major, and back to B-flat major), so simple sequencing (the more natural device) does not account for this unnatural preoccupation with the D minor triad – if Britten was just transposing the same material in each place, the pitches would be different. The similarity of the music in each example and the fact that the repetitions *as a whole* don't ascend in pitch (the last repetition is no higher than the second, and it is a descending third) highlight the circularity of the text as well as picture the text's subject (the moon). Not only does each stanza return to the line "Goddess excellently bright," the poem opens at sunset ("Now the sun is laid to sleep") and ends with the suggestion of morning ("Thou that mak'st a day of night").

Britten combines mediaeval elements and conflicting sets to heighten the terror of the Dirge, an anonymous text which dates from the 15th century and describes a soul's journey through purgatory. After the voice begins, the string entrances parody fugal entrances with an important distinction. The first string entrance precedes the first repetition of the 6 measure vocal *ostinato* by a bar, and subsequent string entrances follow one another every 4 bars, not lining up with the *ostinato* until measure 19, when the first violins break the pattern by entering 5 bars after the seconds. The "out-of-sync" feeling both recalls the isorhythms of mediaeval isometric motets and lessens our sense of control by placing the entrances at unexpected places. At the same time, the regularity of the *ostinato* increases our sense of inevitability.

Through all this, Britten creates a sense of strangeness through the loss of tonal order implied by the equalization of a G-minor triad in the *ostinato*. The phrase outlines a G-minor triad with the downbeats of the first, third and fourth bars (Example 23). The only note in those bars that isn't clearly a chord tone, a neighbor tone, or a passing tone is the D-flat on the 3rd beat of the 4th measure. The contrast between the phrase's dominating stepwise motion and the leaps that precede these four notes (the G-minor triad plus the D-flat) emphasizes their importance. When substituted for the D, the D-flat creates a G-diminished triad, part of a symmetrical set.

Example 23, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Dirge," Op. 31, mm. 1-4

**Alla marcia grave** (♩ = 60)  
*come un lamento*

Voice

This ae nighte, this ae nighte, E-ver-y nighte and alle, Fire and fleet and candle-lighte,

Not only do these various suggestions of symmetry (the repetitions of the *ostinato* and fugal entries) replicate the suffocating amount of repetition in the text's structure (the refrains "Every nighte and alle" and "And Christe receive thy saule" occur every two lines), the development of the minor third pitch set vividly illustrates the if-then statements intended to warn a listener of their behavior's consequences. "If ever thou gav'st hos'n and shoon/. . ./Sit thee down and put them on;/ . . ./If hos'n and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane/. . ./The whinnes sall prick thee to the bare bane." Just as the text states the positive consequence of good behavior followed by the negative consequence of bad behavior, each *ostinato* spells the G-minor triad and then darkens it with the introduction of the D-flat. In a terrifying affirmation of this darkness, the

Example 24, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Elegy," Op. 31, mm. 15-16

The musical score for Example 24, Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Elegy," Op. 31, mm. 15-16, is presented in a standard orchestral layout. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Voice:** Silent throughout the measures.
- Horn in F:** Plays a melodic line starting on G4, moving to A4, and then to B4. Dynamics include *pp* and *ff*.
- Violins I and II:** Play a rhythmic ostinato of eighth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *dim.*
- Violas:** Play a rhythmic ostinato of eighth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *dim.*
- 'Cellos:** Play a rhythmic ostinato of eighth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *dim.*
- Basses:** Play a rhythmic ostinato of eighth notes. Dynamics include *f*, *fff*, *ff*, and *dim.*

modulation to E minor at the text's pivotal moment ("From Brig o' Dread") delivers the note E as a completion of the G-diminished set.

Thirds are not the only type of symmetrical set present in the *Serenade*'s construction. As noted earlier (Example 1), the second phrase of the

Elegy descends a tritone from concert E to B-flat in the horn part. When the voice enters, the first leap is from a G to a C-sharp, completing a symmetrical set of minor thirds when combined with the E and B-flat of the horn part. In measures 15 through 16 (Example 24) and the repetition in measures 38 and 39, the most climactic moments of the instrumental sections, the harmony shifts from the B-flat major triad it has dwelt on for the past 5 measures to an open fifth built on E. The tritone represents the polarized elements in the poem: the rose, normally associated with love and beauty, is consumed by death and corruption.

Another example of symmetrical and asymmetrical sets occurs in the Pastoral, in which Britten renders a local asymmetrical event into a structural symmetrical one. Several events establish an argument for the D-flat major chord as being the “Ur” of the movement, the place from which other events originate. The strings’ downbeat states

Example 25, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, “Pastoral,” Op. 31, mm. 1-5

**Lento** (♩ = 54) *dolcissimo*

Voice: The Day's grown old; the faint-ing Sun

Horn in F: *pp*

Violins I: *pp* con sord.

Violins II: *pp* con sord.

Violas: *pp* con sord.

'Cellos: *pp* con sord.

Basses: *pp*

the tonic D-flat major triad harmonically, and the tenor's entrance in bar two reiterates the triad melodically, soon imitated by the horn (Example 25). At the movement's conclusion, the horn arpeggiates down the D-flat major triad, echoing the tenor entrance one final time (Example 26).

Example 26, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*,  
"Pastoral," Op. 31, mm. 57-59

The musical score for Example 26 is presented in a standard orchestral layout. It includes the following parts:

- Voice:** A single line with a fermata over the final note.
- Horn in F:** A melodic line that concludes with a descending arpeggiated triad. Dynamics include *ppp* and *pizz.*
- Violins I:** A rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, concluding with a fermata. Dynamics include *ppp*.
- Violins II:** A rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, concluding with a fermata. Dynamics include *ppp* and *pizz.*
- Violas:** A rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, concluding with a fermata. Dynamics include *ppp* and *pizz.*
- 'Cellos:** A rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, concluding with a fermata. Dynamics include *ppp* and *pizz.*
- Basses:** A single line with a fermata over the final note.

The score is marked *rall.* at the end and features a fermata over the final notes of all parts.

In the central section of the movement, where the text depicts how “The shadows now so long do grow,” the key areas move from D-flat major to F major to A major (Example 27), outlining a chord which augments the D-flat major triad into a symmetrical set of major thirds. To further clarify the key areas, the horn arpeggiates down the tonic triad in each key.

Example 27, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade, "Pastoral,"* Op. 31, mm. 57-59

(♩ = 63)

Voice

Horn in F

Violins I

Violins II

Violas

Cellos

Basses

A ve - ry lit - tile, lit - tle flock

Shades thrice the ground that it would stock; Whilst the small stripling

*pp* (*pizz.*) *pp dolce* *pp*

*pp* (*pizz.*) *pp* (*pizz.*) *pp* (*pizz.*) *pp*

*ppp* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.*

Here the combination of artificial and natural elements has a specific text painting purpose. The original melodic statement of the diatonic triad is simultaneously transformed into an augmented triad and into a structural harmonic event. These two types of expansion illustrate the lengthening shadows described in the text, which not only make things appear longer, but also transformed into other things entirely (“Whilst the small stripling following them/ Appears a mighty Polypheme”).

Interestingly, the music's recapitulation begins in A-flat major (m. 42) before proceeding to the home key's Neapolitan, D major (m. 51). Britten counterbalances stretching the triad's fifth by subsequently shrinking it. The A-flat major key area derives from the fifth of the original triad but is followed by a key area derived from a chromatically raised root, suggesting the symmetrical diminished triad.

The relationship between natural and artificial elements is most complex and paradoxical in the Sonnet, the *Serenade's* final song. As such, it is congruous with such disturbing poetry – disturbing because this text stands out in its characterization of darkness. The Elegy and Dirge portray darkness either as destructive or terrifying, which may seem disturbing at first, but is at least an expected portrayal of darkness. The Hymn treats darkness as something nature's deity (represented by the light of the moon) has power to transform ("Thou that mak'st a day of night"). The Pastoral and Nocturne go so far as to describe the increasing darkness at sunset as beautiful ("The splendour falls").

In the Sonnet, darkness is not just given a positive portrayal, but an irresistibly seductive one. Darkness is pleasurable ("Our gloom pleas'd eyes") and offers "forgetfulness divine." The speaker begs the "embalmer of the still midnight" to save him from the light of "the passèd day" that threatens to "shine/Upon my pillow, breeding many woes" and from "curious Conscience." The allure of darkness is life-consuming and final: in the last line the speaker begs Sleep to "seal the hushèd casket of my soul."

Considering the historical precedents for associating both sleep with death and death with sex, Keats likely intended Sleep as a metaphor for sex. Certainly the line

“Turn the key deftly in the oilèd wards” is a powerfully evocative image, seemingly expressive of the desire to receive sexual fulfillment from a male figure. Possibly Britten felt a level of kinship with Keats because of this, although Keats was heterosexual. Metaphorical or not, this line provides a source for the movement’s harmonic disturbance; the imagery of the twisting lock provides textual antecedent for opening chord progression’s pattern of expanding roots.

The mysterious harmonic progressions beginning the Sonnet defy all functional analysis (Example 28). However, the chords can be seen as harmonizing the bass line, which outlines a dominant seventh of the home key. The second and third chords can be understood as “neighbor chords” to the tonic, as they are both major triads build on the leading-tone and flat second scale degree. However, the tonic chord isn’t returned to immediately as it would be in a neighbor tone figure; a C-major triad occurs first, continuing the pattern of outwardly expanding roots (D, C-sharp, E-flat, C-natural).

Example 28, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, “Sonnet,” Op. 31, mm. 1-3

*Adagio* (♩=40)  
*tranquillo e liberamente*

Voice  
O soft ... em - bal - mer of the still mid - night Shut - ting with care - ful

Violins I  
div. a 2  
*ppp* *cresc.*

Violins II  
*ppp* *cresc.*

Violas  
div. a 3  
*pp espress. e sost.*

'Cellos  
*pp espress.* G.A. *ppp* *cresc.*

Basses



This first phrase provides a basis for explaining the three climactic chords that stand like pillars in the central section of the movement. The first G major chord (Example 29) is implied in the D and E-flat major chords in the opening progression; these chords would be V and VI in G minor, the only key where these two chords can exist concurrently. The E major chord (Example 30) continues the pattern of outwardly expanding roots in the opening progression. The passage between the second and third chords is in A minor (Example 31), the home key's dominant, which needs a dramatic statement here since the first modulation away from the tonic was to the mediant F major in measure 11. Notably, only the notes of the A minor collection and its dominant chord are present here; as a final nail in functional tonality's coffin, there is not a

Example 29, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 25

Example 29 is a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 25. It features six staves: Voice, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, 'Cellos, and Basses. The key signature is two sharps (D major/E minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The voice part has a triplet of eighth notes with the lyrics "breed-ing ma-ny woes;". Above the voice staff is a *con forza* marking. The 'Cello and Bass parts have a *Solo fp espress.* marking. The string parts (Violins I, Violins II, Violas, 'Cellos, and Basses) play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

Example 30, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 28

Example 30 is a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 28. It features six staves: Voice, Violins I, Violins II, Violas, 'Cellos, and Basses. The key signature is two sharps (D major/E minor) and the time signature is 4/4. The voice part has a triplet of eighth notes with the lyrics "th at still lords ..... Its strength for". Above the voice staff is a *f* marking. The 'Cello and Bass parts have a *Solo fp espress.* marking. The string parts (Violins I, Violins II, Violas, 'Cellos, and Basses) play a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

statement of the momentarily active tonic A minor chord. The final tonic chord in the home key of D major (Example 32) offers a moment of clarity to accompany the tenor's line, "Turn the key. . ." before being consumed by the mysterious opening progression and at last fading into the night.

Example 31, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 29-30

Example 31 shows a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, measures 29-30. The score is in 4/4 time and D major. It features a voice part with lyrics "darkness burrowing like a mole;" and a piano accompaniment for Violins I & II, Viola, Cellos, and Basses. The piano parts include dynamics like *ppp*, *p*, and *molto cresc.* with various articulations like *col tutti* and *marc.*

Example 32, Benjamin Britten, *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, m. 31

Example 32 shows a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Serenade*, "Sonnet," Op. 31, measure 31. The score is in 4/4 time and D major. It features a voice part with lyrics "Turn the key deftly..... in the oil-ed wards," and a piano accompaniment for Violins I & II, Viola, Cellos, and Basses. The piano parts include dynamics like *pp*, *ff*, and *ppp* with articulations like *tranquillo sempre*.

Britten's use of symmetrical and asymmetrical sets and his tendency to use local melodic figures as larger harmonic structures are both part of a more general pattern in the *Serenade*: *balancing extremes*. This pattern manifests structurally. The Prologue and Epilogue ask the solo horn player to use only the natural harmonic series of the instrument. (Ironically, to a first-time listener's ears, some of the notes in the natural harmonic series may sound strange and artificial!) The simplicity of these identical bookend-like movements counterbalance the complex music sandwiched in between. In

the *Elegy*, the horn plays without the voice for the outer thirds of the piece, and the voice sings without the horn for the middle third. In the following movement, the *Dirge* does almost the inverse: the voice sings 9 repetitions of the strophic melody while the horn is silent except for the 6th and 7th repetitions. All of these phenomena give testimony to the composer's desire to present his instrumental and vocal resources in dramatic, uncanny, and extremely divergent and complementary ways.

Britten balances other, more local, kinds of extremes throughout the *Serenade*. The opening phrase of the *Hymn* is littered with V/Vs, as if atoning for the imminent modulation to the submediant rather than the dominant. In the *Sonnet*, the movement whose harmonies evade analysis most adeptly, the voice has many prominent measures of static and stabilizing repeated notes, contrasting with the fluctuating chords.

The balancing of extremes extends to Britten's choice to integrate large-scale instrumental forces – which reference the centuries-old orchestral tradition – with a text and a singer – which reference a tradition of *lieder* and chamber-like settings. Words and instrumental music are almost complementary opposites – instrumental music possesses a great ability to express emotions or psychological moods but has limited power to convey specific ideas; words can express specific ideas, but have a comparatively smaller capacity to emote. Furthermore, *poetry* incorporates natural and artificial elements in a way text without metaphorical concentration cannot. Blake epitomizes the tension between the natural and the artificial; his rose must be understood as the corruption of innocence, the corruption of Romanticism, and as the biological corruption of a literal flower.

Britten's specific choice of texts balances the extremes of unity and diversity. Successfully marrying the writings of 6 poets from across 5 centuries, the *Serenade* stands as a vision of poetic unity brought about through a wildly constructive selection and unification of divergent texts.

Britten's inclusive attitude towards his beloved poets might be incentive for the working-out of the same pitch relationships at different hierarchical levels, though his inclusive attitude towards the poets extends across a wider range of historical periods and textual "registers." This strategy of replicating the small-scale "ontogeny" of a musical motif onto the higher level of a movement's "phylogeny" could have an ethical dimension for Britten, having to do with his own nature, his own constant struggle to assert his own authentic identity against the narrow compass of social and musical convention.

Finally, mimesis embodies the balance between artificial and natural extremes, by extending the limits of music's "natural" expression. The "natural" way of addressing music is through a technical understanding of pitch, motive, harmony, structure, etc. What else is music, if not these literal components? To make any claims about the "meaning" of these elements—especially in relation to the texts they are serving—can only be an "artificial" procedure. Certainly making such claims felt unnatural for my imagination, which readily sees artificiality and naturalness in the purely musical but struggles to connect with the mimetic. Studying the *Serenade's* mimesis reshaped my conception of text setting and gradually teaches me (yes, present tense) to see mimetic elements as natural, just as the *Serenade's* musical construction has reshaped a generation of listeners' conception of the relation between tonal and atonal, symmetrical

and asymmetrical, gradually teaching us to hear atonality's conventionality through integrating artificial elements with natural ones.

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