Playful aesthetics in the music of Benjamin Britten

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Marinu Leccia

St Catherine's College
University of Oxford



Supervised by Dr. Joanna Bullivant & Prof. Laura Tunbridge

Examiners: Prof. Philip Rupprecht (Duke University) & Prof. Daniel Grimley (University of Oxford)

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Abstract

There is a great contrast between musicological studies of the works of Benjamin Britten which focus on unquestionably serious themes of pacifism, innocence corrupted, and sexuality, and the playful aspect of Britten's character which emerges from biographical studies. This thesis argues that the playful aspect of Britten's music is crucial to understanding the composer and his aesthetics. Initially, I demonstrate how play and games drive his writing and style, using concepts of 'motivic toying', overcoming self-imposed obstacles, child art, or didactic music exercises. Consequently, I explore the semiotic implications of that play, especially in relation to the double-sided and paradoxical aspect of play (fun and serious, meaningless and meaningful, unstable and ruled, etc.). This research does not restrict itself to works 'for children', but gives a broader perspective by focusing on a wider range of genres (opera, songs, cantatas, or didactic works). Ultimately, I argue for a resituating of Britten's modernism in the context of twentieth-century engagement with childhood and play.

The Introduction explores the reasons why a 'playful Britten' has been ignored so far and offers a new reading of the historiography and reception of Britten's music through such a question. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical basis of how play, games, and childlikeness may be considered in aesthetic terms. Chapter 2 goes one step further to Britten by exploring the special importance of ludic elements in modernism. That way, the chapter re-inscribes Britten in a set of French, Russian, and American ludic influences at the origin of his own playful aesthetics. Chapter 3 develops analytical tools to fathom Britten's playful aesthetic proper, and considers the mechanics and topical sides of play in his art. Chapter 4 and 5 are case studies on two operas, questioning the relation between play and enigma (*The Turn of the Screw*), and the symbolic and aesthetics of music-making as a childlike behaviour (*Noyes' Fludde*).

“The freedom to play, to toy with ideas,

is an indispensable prerequisite

for the creativity of humans

doing research.”

(Gabor Csepregi, *Attitudes of Play*,

McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022, p. 29)

Introduction:

Playful Britten?

1. Caricature and music analysis

One may be tempted to give only a superficial importance to the art of caricature, but a caricature offers, albeit in an exaggerated version, a *reading* of a trait, may it be facial, gestural, or musical. It may offer, similarly, a reading of a musical style. This is the case of Dudley Moore's 'Little Miss Britten' (a pseudo-Britten song on the nursery rhyme 'Little Miss Muffet'), which is a musical caricature of Benjamin Britten's music and Peter Pears' voice, broadcast in 1961 in *Beyond the Fringe*.[1] Moore's caricature, like any caricature, is a lie which focuses on the *salient* aspects of a musical work or performance (a *sine qua non* condition for a caricature to be understood as such). In Moore's parody, Britten is directly recognisable, and there lies the paradox of the art of caricature, which is "a focus on, and an exaggeration of, selected salient traits." Caricature "may be spare in detail, but aims to be immediately recognisable".[2] In consequence, a well-done caricature points its finger at essential and peculiar elements of a subject, in Moore's case of Britten's musical style. As it happens, musical caricature bears many similarities with musico-stylistic commentary. Musical caricature, in its own way, is a form of music analysis. This is why the present study opens with Moore's parody: it is an attempt to reveal salient traits of Britten's music which I will explore further.

[1] See "Dudley Moore Little Miss Britten", Youtube, 22 Nov. 2009. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdmoxlqQQ4c). One cannot avoid suspecting a potential homophobic understatement in the title, as perceived so by Brian Young or George Haggett. Brian Young, "Britten Romantic Poetry", in Kate Kennedy, *Literary Britten* (Boydell Press, 2018), 102. George Haggett, "Mock The Object Itself: Homophobia, The Songful and the Grain in Dudley Moore's Britten Parody", georgekhaggett.blogspot.com, 14th Febr. 2018.

[2] Laurence Grove, *et al.*, "Introduction: Caricature", *European Comic Art*, 2/1 (2009), vi.



Figure i.1 Dudley Moore's musical caricature of Benjamin Britten (as transcribed in Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, et al., *The Complete Beyond the Fringe* (Methuen, 2003), 84-86.

What is heard in 'Little Miss Muffet' (fig. i.1)? Staccato repetitions (in the right hand), raising and falling scales (in the left-hand and in the voice), bittersweet major-second clashes, quartal harmonies, fanfare arpeggiations (in "eating her curds" and in the singing-exercise-like final bars). The piece is characterised by bi-tonal layering, with obsessive superpositions which does not always match ("there came a big spider"), and infused by an overall impression of tonality which do not seem really tonal when listened to more closely. On the video recording of the show, the giggles and laughter of the audience reveal which elements of the parody were particularly effective live. Firstly,

laughter erupts at the entrance of the voice, "*à la* Peter Pears" (which is not our direct concern). Secondly, giggles appear in bar 8-9, during the awkward obstinate repetition of the piano part. Then, the 'modulation' and high note on "whey" provokes another peal of laughter. The sudden change seems overdramatic for such a trivial word. Later, the repetition of the word "away" creates another laughing reaction in the audience, especially in relation to Moore's facial expression, which wants to imply that his musical repetitions are the result of a lack of ideas. Lastly, the contrasting and abrupt final bars win laughter and applause thanks to its out-of-topic vocalise, accompanied by unimaginative and misplaced harsh chords (fig. i.2). In summary, apart from Pears' voice, two kinds of elements make the audience giggle. On the one hand, there is an over-simplification of the music, with everlasting repetitions and scale-like simplicity that recalls musical exercises. On the other hand, there is a choice of inappropriate musical topics, for example in the over-dramatization of "whey" by sudden whole-tone harmonies; or in the final grandioso vocalise disconnected from Miss Muffet, the spider, or the action of running away. In other words, Moore's music is schoolboyish (with scales, arpeggios, simple means, and mishandled tonality) and eccentric in ways that seem bizarre, since it does not offer a disruptive eccentricity, but consists of well-behaved indulgences while lacking a powerful romantic surge. The music sounds childlike and obsessive-compulsive. The choice of the text — a nursery rhyme — is itself a parody of the childlike poetic interests of Britten, and the extensive presence of child performers and children-themed elements in his works. The childlike and the playful, then, are central to what Moore caricatures as being Britten's style. The *salient trait* caricaturised in this music is thus a general playfulness and trick-like mode of composition, turned by Moore into ridicule, into an underwhelming series of misfiring firecrackers. Moore parodies the element of play and childlikeness he identifies in Britten's compositions.

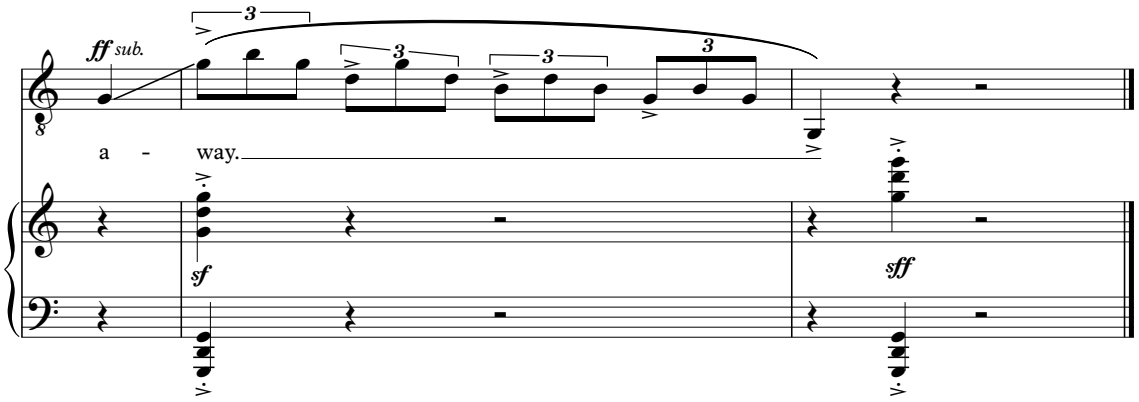


Figure i.2 Final cadence of Moore's caricature

At the core of this salient trait is a motivic sparseness and an ongoing toying with limited musical elements. This toying is presented in fig. i.3. First of all, the central staccato ostinato is based on a diatonic clash of major seconds. The initial g-eb-f (seventh minor and second major) is characterised by a succession of major seconds. Its transformation bar 19 (on "whey") presents another version of a major seconds. More precisely, it is another 'major-second' way to fill a-g-f interval. The two major-second versions (the g-eb-f and g-a-f trichord) follow an inherent logic of mirrored transformation. In themselves, these two elements are non-tonal, and only the encounter with the left-hand strata hints at tonal polarities. The beginning (top of fig. i.3), with its accompaniment made of a scale in thirds, is arguably in F major or Bb major (but it is impossible to choose between the two options). The combination of scale in thirds with the g-a-f trichord creates a whole-tone scale. The whole-tone fits the major-second quality of the g-a-f trichord. Therefore, the transformation of the accompaniment, in correlation to the transformation of the staccato chord, serendipitously creates a new harmonic sphere. The melody is also derived from those elements. As shown on fig. i.3, the descending line of 'Little Miss Muffet' combines the eb-f focus of the g-eb-f trichord,

and the scalic nature of the left-hand accompaniment. Similarly, "there came a big spider" explores major seconds which result from the new whole-tone focus on the g-a-f aggregate and its interlocking with the left-hand.

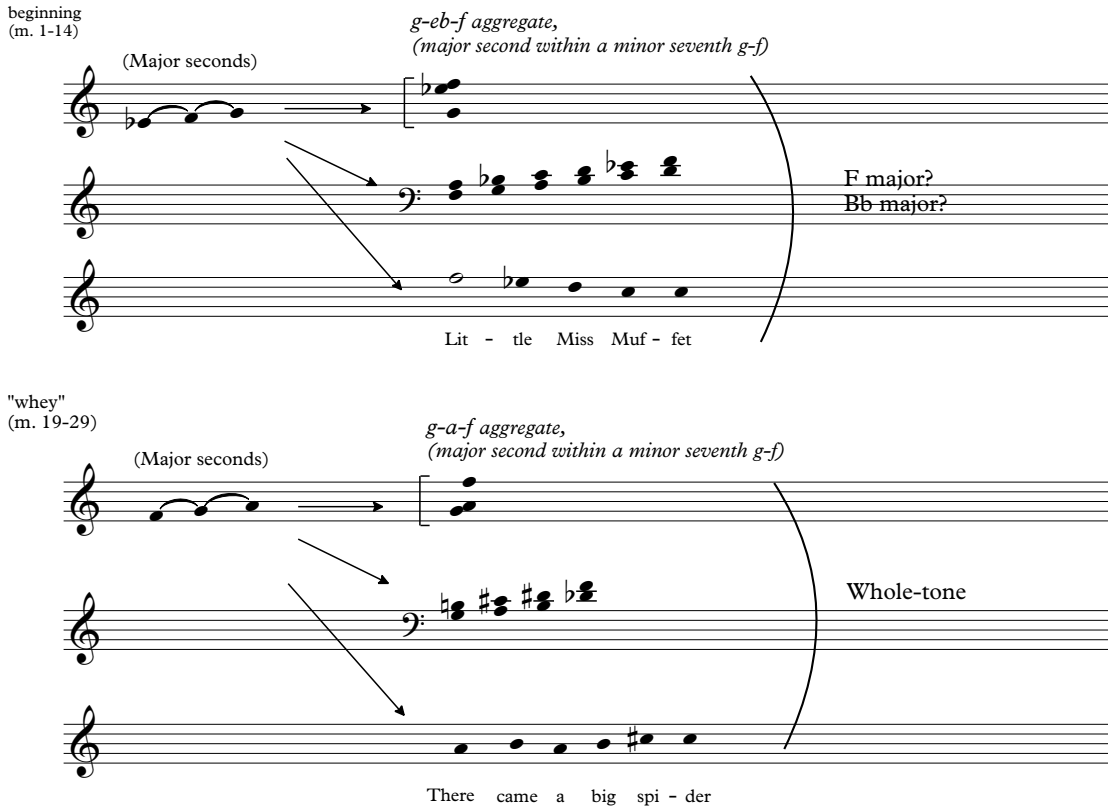


Figure i.3 Analysis of Moore's caricature

There is a playful manipulation of motivic elements, in the sense that there is a constant tinkering with a very simple idea: a succession of seconds. The playful aspect of these configurations has therefore a direct link to the general scarceness of style and economy in means displayed by Moore. Moreover, there is a conscientious strategy to use superposed transformations to create fortuitous combinations. This is the case when Moore suddenly integrates strata into whole-tone scales, or hints at ambivalent keys. As mentioned, there is something not-quite-tonal about the piece, due to the presence of tonal-like vocabulary, but perturbed by the ongoing play with music material (simple scales, simple superpositions of major seconds) and the nonsensical atmosphere it sets

up. The diatonic nonsense of the first bars holds together a childlike aesthetic of simplicity (a collection of piano-exercise-like elements) and a compositional toying with simple material. The result of that play creates unforeseen echoes with the text like the too-spooky accompaniment of "curds and whey".

Thus, what is funny in Moore's spoof caricature is firstly the presence of momentary absurdist encounters in the writing and secondly a general 'lack of ideas'. As a caricature, this song is an *exaggerated truth* which derides Britten's compositional process. The toying with musical elements is mocked as nonsense. The overall thread-bare construction is presented as unimaginative. But then, once the exaggeration is removed (i.e., when removed the absurdist and un-imaginative traits of the song), toying and sparseness remain as stylistic traits of Britten's music. Moreover, one is left with the overall childlikeness of the nursery rhyme, of the simplicity, of the play with the expectations of tonality, of the singing-exercise and piano-exercise topics, of the series of trick-like manipulations of the music material. There is at the core of what is here caricatured a general playfulness at work which combines play (in a sense of 'tinkering with' or 'toying with') and childlikeness. This playful salient trait, caricaturised by Moore may come as a surprise to anyone used to the current literature on Benjamin Britten. Rarely is this playfulness explored in the music analysis of Britten's works. But, as testified by the laughter of the audience, Dudley Moore's arrow hit its target straight on a central feature of Britten's aesthetic. Thus, if playfulness is an important category for Britten's music, why is the theoretical apparatus to its understanding missing in Britten studies? Why has playfulness, which transpires on all biographical account in the man, not trickled down into any music-analytical or aesthetical outlet? What are play and the childlike, and how can these poetic and aesthetic categories be approached in non-derogatory ways (in ways where we are not just invited to laugh at Britten's style like in

Moore's caricature)? Are these features of Britten influenced by the rhetorics of other composers? How to consider playfulness not just in Britten's work for children, but in his music more generally, as a salient stylistic trait? In short, is Britten, and his ways of composing, playful?

The playful side of Britten's aesthetics is a blind spot of the scholarship to date on the composer. I propose in this Introduction a literature review of Britten studies which on the one hand explains the reasons for the lack of interest in playfulness, while on the other hand helps collecting a series of tools for building up a theory of a playful Britten in the following chapters. In particular, a last section puts together pieces of scholarship which would benefit from closer inspection in relation to play. These include studies by various Britten scholars and critics, namely John Bridcut, Joanna Bullivant, Philip Rupprecht, and Daniel Albright. Thus, in this Introduction, I review a series of prejudices which start with the reception of Britten's early pieces.

2. Cleverness

The critics of the 1930s have famously been disparaged for not coming to grips with Britten's music, seen as lacking of seriousness, and as not expressing its due respect to the greatness of art.[3] It is worth probing, however, how such a reading articulates with the playful traits of Britten's music. Especially, while such anti-modernist readings are at odds with ideas of play, the notion of 'cleverness', on which most of those music critics rely, seems to express something, albeit unclearly, about the playful aesthetics of Britten. Such critics were indeed obsessed by 'cleverness', as the qualification endlessly popped up in countless concert reviews.[4] For some, it was a compliment: "Britten is clever, and

[3] As noted by Mervyn Cooke, "Introduction", in his (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.
[4] *Ibid.*

it is delightful to watch his nimble mind disporting itself with such virtuosity".[5] For most of the others, however, it was not: "Britten's *Temporal Suite* [...] is a triviality. It is the kind of music that is commonly called 'clever'."[6] This reputation for cleverness, according to Donald Mitchell, "was established at the [Royal College of Music] and caused difficulties for him there [and] was by no means a passing phenomenon."[7] Like a curse, the adjective followed Britten to the US. Heather Wiebe describes how the American and British critics targeted in Britten an "apparent lack of feeling" and saw his music as "inconsistent in style, facile, clever and artificial."[8] 'Clever' emphasised the idea of skill and dexterity; it implied a certain knack, a formal manipulation and a play with the listener's expectations. 'Clever', however, also hinted at a brain-only activity; at a heartless one. The adjective, then, reveals a fear of a de-romanticisation and instead of an exaltation of the mechanic instincts in art. Britten's music expressed for some "a steely efficiency and heartless wit proper to the young men of an age that is at once disillusioned and mechanically minded."[9] In sum, there was for these critics an undeniable craftsmanship at work, a virtuosity of the mind, but which did not express an actual inspiration from the heart, was insincere, and most of all was not to be trusted. In that sense, Britten fell in the category of what Daniel Albright calls the "Modernist composer" cliché, who "is a sort of scientist, conducting, with scalpels of sounds, research into the darkest regions of the human psyche."[10] 'Clever' referred to this cold-blooded image of

[5] "International Festival", *The Times* (21 June 1938), 14. I thank Joanna Bullivant who brought my attention to some of the following varied sources.
[6] "Recitals of the Week", *The Times* (18 Dec 1939), 12.
[7] Donald Mitchell, "Introduction", in Donald Mitchell, et al. (eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten* (Faber & Faber, volume 1, 1991), 6.
[8] Heather Wiebe, "Discovering America: From 'Paul Bunyan' to 'Peter Grimes'", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 27/2 (2015), 147-148.
[9] Review of *Go Play, Boy, Play* in "London Concerts", *Musical Times* (Jan 1934).
[10] Daniel Albright (ed.), *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

the shrewd scientist; a rational 'genius' which contrasted with the godly-inspired 'genius' of Romantic composers.

Next to this first allusion to heartlessness, 'clever' referred, for many early critics, to a whole array of suspicious figures. Among them was the pretentious highbrow young man. William McNaught, whose column in *The Listener* contains a record-breaking number of uses of the word 'clever', distrusted Britten's "undergraduate cleverness".[11] He found in Britten's music a "cleverness raised to a high degree, nearly all manneristic, very admirable and too soon finished."[12] For McNaught, Britten and his music manifest more an attitude.[13] As analysed by Joanna Bullivant, "The idea that Britten displayed 'heartless wit' [...] resonated with this lack of seriousness and feeling associated with Bright Young People."[14] The Auden Group too shared similar attitudes: "the image of a post-war world as a 'chaos of values' [...], a preoccupation with youth and a sense of difference from 'Old Men'".[15] This came as a threat to the older and more conservative ranks, terrified by the sharp weapon of these youngsters: laughter. As one of these older critics, Ernest Newman, said in *The Sunday Times*, "To read what some of these young people have to say about themselves, and what some of their thurifers say about them, one could be forgiven for supposing that at last music had found humourists and wits and ironists willing to stand by the side of Aristophanes, Voltaire, Heine and heaven knows whom." He carries on, "For my part, however, I could see little in the bulk of Britten's [piano] concerto but some cheerful and obvious musical wisecracking of the type that has

[11] "Critic on the Hearth", *The Listener* (30 July 1942), 156.
[12] "Critic on the Hearth", *The Listener* (14 Oct. 1943), 452.
[13] "[A] technical attitudinising" (*ibid.*)
[14] Joanna Bullivant, *Musical Modernism and Left-wing Politics in 1930s Britain* (PhD, University of Oxford, 2009), 127.
[15] *Ibid.*, 129.

become familiar to us in recent years."[16] Aristophanes, Voltaire, Heine: this undergraduate humour became suddenly suspiciously continental.

Indeed, the fear of undergraduate wit merged in many of the critics' conservative minds with a suspicion of continental composers. This was the case of Prokofiev—"clever and accomplished" but "without much personality or definite convictions"[17]—or of Stravinsky and his "superficially clever tricks".[18] If 'clever' was a multi-faceted word with many denotations, it does not come as a surprise to see Britten himself using the word in his journals to describe his own appreciation of modernist composers like Bartók or Walton.[19] 'Clever' was definitely the term of the time: used by many, it echoed the contradictory issues of expression, stylistic evolutions, aesthetic forms, or political fears, and was derogatory as well as complimentary. 'Clever' may also have been tainted in some cases with sexual implications, especially allied to the reception of composers engaging, like Britten, with jazz. The clever individual was suspected to know too much, and in one review Britten was referred to as the "Playboy of Music".[20] 'Cleverness', in this regard, became the weapon of a manipulative seducer; a play of charm and deceit.[21] It is not unimaginable that, more than a playboy, the "queer little twists and turns of harmony" in Britten's music[22] may have been understood by such authors as a manifestation of a form of social and sexual 'deviance'.

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[16] Ernest Newman, "Steps to Parnassus", *The Sunday Times* (21 Aug. 1938), 5.
[17] Cecil Gray, quoted in Joseph Schultz, "Prokofiev's Reception in the United Kingdom: A Case Study", in Rita McAllister & Christina Guillaumier (eds.), *Rethinking Prokofiev* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 387.
[18] Vyacheslav Karatïgin, quoted in Stuart Campell, "Stravinsky and the Critics", in Jonathan Cross (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233.
[19] John Evans, John (ed.), *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten, 1928-1938* (Faber & Faber, 2009), 101-120. 4 March & 2 Nov 1932.
[20] "Playboy of Music", *Daily Telegraph* (19 Aug. 1938), 10.
[21] Prokofiev too was qualified in the 1920s as a "Russian Playboy" (Schultz, "Prokofiev's Reception in the United Kingdom", 392), an image with which Prokofiev himself played: "One critic gave me a particularly bad savaging," he recalls, "but I took my revenge on him by kissing his wife" (Sergei Prokofiev, quoted in *ibid.*, 386.)
[22] "Promenade Concerts", *The Times* (8 Sept. 1938).

To sum up, much is said about Britten's 'cleverness' in the 1930s; much is implied with it but not much is actually really said about the music itself. Taken at face value, i.e. as attempts to say that Britten's music does not express anything, these critiques are worthless (albeit elaborated) forms of conservative fearful ranting, using cleverness as a term to debunk emerging modernist styles, accusing them of not taking greatness seriously enough. If, however, according to the present hypothesis, Britten's music conveys elements of play and childlikeness, these critiques may well have been haphazard hunches at something else. The playful and childlike aspect of Britten's music in Dudley Moore's caricature may well have something to do with clever problem-solving, compositional puzzles, and forms of false-simplicity. This does not mean, unavoidably, that these playful mechanics (or poetics) have no semiotic outcome; that they express nothing. On the contrary, play and the childlike may well be Britten's own way to give a personal refashioning of musical semiotics. From that perspective, the interwar critics may well be direct reactions to the playful aspect of Britten's music, in forms of accusations. Britten's manipulation and tinkering with musical objects, can only be to their eyes a heartless lack of lyricism and sincerity. But in the end, these first critics are perhaps not as irrelevant as they are generally presented to be by Britten's scholars. They may be a negative image of Britten's playfulness. Unfortunately, by being mainly deprecatory, the accusers of Britten's 'cleverness' (who implied that his music lacks of seriousness) only provoked a strong reaction by the upcoming Britten scholars who opposed to that vision a new image of Britten, as a serious composer. Of course, the reception of 'clever Britten' was based on the composer's production of the 1930s and beginning of the 1940s, the production of a young man. With the appearance of *Peter Grimes*, and the progressive establishment of Britten as a central figure of music in Great Britain, a new form of discourse emerged.

3. Seriousness

A new wave of critical reception of Britten's music surfaced after World War II and after the tremendous success of *Peter Grimes* in 1945. New reviewers offered a positive defence of Britten's music in reaction to the dismissive downplaying of Britten's music as clever-but-not-much-else by pre-war critics. Such reviews were linked to Britten's new position as a central British composer, and as a representative of modernism in Britain. In such a context, *Peter Grimes* became a base-line for defining Britten's music after the war as a serious composer. In the 1960s, however, with the progressive voicing of Darmstadt-inspired avant-garde criticism in Britain, Britten's lack of radicalism started to be perceived as a shameful and lukewarm attempt to carry on with tradition. Insincere on one side, not progressive enough on the other, Britten's music was progressively caught in the cross-fire of modernist debates.[23] To rebut these 'not-romantic-enough' or these 'not-high-modernist-enough' accusations, the new wave of Britten critics and scholars turned to matters of seriousness: psychologising his work, revealing how much it deals with matters of pacifism or oppressed sexual identity. Such a strategy (a series of serious psycho-analytical, political, and sexual considerations) shaped the scholarship on Britten as it still is today. These serious approaches produced a colossal amount of literature on the serious aspects of Britten's music: its violence, its pacifism, its focus of the innocence lost, its social commitment, and so on.

Three critics in particular were at the centre of this strategy, and at the foundations of Britten studies. They were Hans Keller, Donald Mitchell, and Philip Brett. They turned the study of Britten's music towards profoundly serious matters, where play and cleverness found no place: psychology (Keller), politics (Mitchell), and sexuality (Brett)

[23] Philip Rupprecht, "Britten and the Avant-Garde in the 1950s", in his (ed.) *Rethinking Britten* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 131-155.

became the three pillars on which present scholarship still stands. *Peter Grimes* was a crucial turning point, as it is this opera which incited Keller, Mitchell, and Brett to dedicate a large part of their lives to the study of Britten's music. It was by discovering this opera that these three men reoriented their interest towards the analysis and promotion of a serious Britten. Brett, for example, described his discovery of *Grimes* in 1973 as an "epiphany", a "moment of transition in his scholarly priorities."[24] Fascinatingly, these foundational scholarships were hugely moulded on the personal histories of Keller, Mitchell, and Brett. Britten's music operated as a powerful projection of their lives. Perhaps Brett best encapsulated this idea, when he says that "[o]ur scholarship always reflects our selves however hard we try to objectify it."[25] In the three following accounts, I show how Keller, Mitchell, and Brett projected themselves onto Britten's oeuvre; how their re-descriptions of Britten's music shaped the scholarship as it still stands today; and how the combination of these three approaches explain the lack of interest for elements of play and childlikeness.

In the case of Keller, there is a striking parallel between his fascination for psychology and his approach to Britten. The writings of this Viennese émigré (who fled to London in the 1930s) show an early specialisation in group psychology.[26] *Peter Grimes* is for Keller a catalyst for an application of psychology concepts to opera. In "Three Psychological Notes on Peter Grimes", Keller identifies Peter as an "anal type" (orderly and obsessive). He also describes Peter's Oedipus complex towards Ellen, the sea, and the earth (as symbolic mothers), as well as towards Balstrode (as a symbolic father or

[24] Recollection of George E. Haggerty in Philip Brett (ed. by George Haggerty), *Music and Sexuality in Britten* (University of California Press, 2006), xi.
[25] Quoted in Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 234.
[26] Hans Keller, "Three Psychoanalytic Notes on 'Peter Grimes'", in Hans Keller & Christopher Wintle, *Music and Psychology: From Vienna to London, 1939-52*, (Plumbago, 2003), 121-156.

grand-father), and towards his own apprentices (symbolic fathers to kill). In Keller's words, "the storm outside Peter represents in part the storm inside Peter; and the storm inside Peter is in part a storm between him and his father (super-ego) whose external representative is again the stormy Balstrode."[27] However, Keller does not just stop at analysing Peter's relations to The Borough and its inhabitants but pursues a psychoanalytical reading of Britten (as a biographical subject himself) and of his critics. Keller draws on Flugel's 'polycrates complex' to psychologise the opposition to Britten's music as a typical rejection of too much success: "In a way, a very definite way, his exceptional brilliance and cleverness are his bad luck. For the surety and sparkle of his workmanship tend to hide, from many—even critics'—ears, the depth that lies beneath."[28] It is on this idea of a hidden depth beyond the surface of Britten's music that Keller inverts the accusations of 'cleverness'. Beyond the surface lies the psychology of Britten's music and the expression of a subconscious.

Keller's vision of psychology is of course Viennese, turned to Freud more than William James, and goes hand in hand with the many continental lenses he applies to Britten's music. Especially, Keller's comparisons of Britten with Schoenberg and Mozart links Britten to Vienna in multifarious ways. In the words of Christopher Wintle, "if Keller had remained loyal to Britten, Britten, it seems, had remained loyal to Austria."[29] For example, the connection to Mozart is particularly interesting for the present dissertation. Keller notes "an astounding number of similarities between these two composers",[30] like their ability to "manage anything";[31] the "strong drive of either

[27] *Ibid.*, 135.
[28] Hans Keller (ed. by Christopher Wintle & Alison Garnham), *Britten: Essays, Letters and Opera Guides* (Plumbago, 2013), 1.
[29] Christopher Wintle in *ibid.*, xi.
[30] *Ibid.*, 2.
[31] *Ibid.*, 65.

composer towards economy";[32] or their "youthful maturity".[33] By using the figure of Mozart, Keller finds his own answer to the accusations of 'cleverness': "Both composers are clever, supreme craftsmen, hence both are accused of trying to be clever and of lacking in the deeper emotions".[34] But, in the end, the same strategy applies: beyond Mozart and Britten's apparent youthfulness is a real mastery and the expression of profound psychological thoughts. By framing a Viennese Britten through Mozart, Schoenberg, Berg, or Freud, Keller paves the way for one major trend in the subsequent studies of Britten. Indeed, the following scholarship strikingly limits Britten's relation to the continent to Austro-German matters.[35] This is of a crucial importance for the current thesis, because by being blind to the French, Russian, and American influences (of Ravel, Poulenc, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, or on Copland for instance) it is harder to disentangle the ins and outs of Britten's playfulness and childlikeness. In short, positing Britten within an Austro-German sphere is a powerful way to emphasise the seriousness of his music, especially through the link between composer psychology and formal processes.

Like Hans Keller, Donald Mitchell followed Britten from the success of *Peter Grimes* to his last days. Keller and Mitchell collaborated on many publications about the composer. In particular, they co-edited in 1952 the first monograph on Britten's music, *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works From a Group of Specialists*.[36] By presenting themselves as 'specialists', Keller and Mitchell aimed to distance themselves from other press critics, and refute the accusations of the mere cleverness and insincerity

[32] *Ibid.*, 72.
[33] *Ibid.*, 64.
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] See, in the following chapters, the discussions on Arnold Whittall's or Christopher Mark's analyses.
[36] Donald Mitchell & Hans, Keller (eds.), *Benjamin Britten, A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists* (Rockliff, 1952).

of Britten's music. This 'expertise' of Mitchell, if debatable in 1952, is subsequently developed through a series of opportunities. Via 'Faber Music', he faced an incessant publication activity, especially of Britten's radio pieces, juvenilia, American music, or other pieces left untouched by Boosey & Hawkes.[37] Similarly, the gradual opening of Britten's archives offered Mitchell an opportunity for close-study of Britten's letters and journals. Mitchell's development as an academic symbolises the turn towards a critical reception of Britten based on seriousness (an academic seriousness which matches a musical one). Defending Britten as serious is for Mitchell a similar project that his defence of Mahler, another of his favourites: "to us in the 1950s, the battle to establish (serious) criteria by which Britten should be judged was part of the same battle to win Mahler a hearing and (serious) critical attention. In introducing Mahler into the argument one was saying something serious not only about Britten but about Mahler too."[38] Mitchell's interest in Mahler reinforced the Kellerian tradition of looking at Britten through a Viennese lens. Mitchell leaves his biggest mark, however, via the development of a political account (a definitely serious one) of Britten's music. If this music is political, it must be sincere and useful. In short, it must have depth, and this is what Mitchell endeavours to describe. Of course, the political Britten reveals itself quite close to the political Mitchell: a social-democrat pacifist and conscientious objector.[39]

Mitchell fashions his 'Political Britten' using three main concepts: pacifism, parable-art, and public/private dichotomies. The pacifist side of Britten is emphasised by Mitchell in his discussion of pieces like the *War Requiem, Owen Wingrave*, or *Our Hunting Fathers*, but also via incidental music of the 1930s.[40] Mitchell focuses in

[37] Like *Three Divertimenti*, the *Double Concerto for Violin and Viola*, or *The Rescue of Penelope*.
[38] Donald Mitchell, "What Do We Know About Britten Know?", in Christopher Palmer (ed.), *The Britten Companion* (Faber & Faber, 1984), 27; his brackets.
[39] Philip Reed, "Donald Mitchell Obituary", *The Guardian*, 20 Oct. 2017.
[40] Donald Mitchell (ed. by Mervyn Cooke), *Cradles of the New, Writings on Music, 1951-1991* (Faber & Faber, 1995), 338-344, or 419-438.

particular on Auden and Britten's encounter and of the political content of their collaboration. Moreover, Mitchell stretches the importance of "violent climates" and Britten's denunciation of cruelty as central to his oeuvre.[41] In Mitchell's writings, pacifism becomes the all-encompassing narrative of Britten's music. Fascination with the opposition between peace and violence makes Britten's music, according to Mitchell (who draws on Auden), parable-art. Thus, *Billy Budd* is a "Christian parable";[42] *Death in Venice* "a *parable* of the artist's relationship to the work of art";[43] *Our Hunting Fathers* "a parable of and for its time";[44] and *Grimes* "the first of Britten's parables about human behaviour in the twentieth century."[45] For Mitchell, "[i]s there an opera of Britten that is not a parable?"[46] These parable-bound conflicts are presented by Mitchell in the form of a public/private dichotomy, with many variations: external/internal, inside/outside, domestic/international, or intimate/public. For example, for Mitchell *Gloriana* has "two selves, the public and the private, which reflect the very constitution of the Queen herself."[47] Likewise, the haunted room in *Owen Wingrave* is for Mitchell "a symbol of that inner chamber in ourselves."[48] In the same way, *Our Hunting Fathers* offers an opposition between "domestic" issues (blood sport) and "international" ones (Nazism).[49] Via these dichotomies, Mitchell plays on Keller's psychologisation of Britten's works. Like Keller, he constructs depths of meaning under the surface of Britten's music. And of course, the public/private dichotomy opens the door for glancing inside Britten's closet. Mitchell was reluctant to go that far, but Philip Brett did not.

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[41] Donald Mitchell, "Violent Climates", in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 197.
[42] Mitchell, *Cradles of the New*, 381.
[43] *Ibid.*, 327; his emphasis.
[44] *Ibid.*, 340.
[45] Donald Mitchell, "Introduction: Happy Families?", his *Letters from a Life* (vol. 3), 9.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] Donald Mitchell, "The Paradox of Gloriana: Simple and Difficult", in Paul Banks (ed.), *Britten's Gloriana: Essays and Sources* (Boydell Press: 1993) 171.
[48] Mitchell, *Cradles of the New*, 433.
[49] Mitchell, "Violent Climates," 202-3.

Next to psychology, Viennese influences, and political implications, another major branch of Britten studies was developed in the 1970s by Philip Brett. Once again, as with Keller and Mitchell, Brett's approach to Britten is fundamentally driven by his own biography. Born in Britain, Brett found in California a safer place to live openly as a homosexual (albeit not without its own share of difficulties). But, in his own eyes, Britten's music manifests the covertness of a gay Britishman who *could have stayed* in the US but chose to go back in his provincial Suffolk. For Brett, Britten's music channels in sounds and operatic plots an oppression which cannot be plainly disclosed. In that way, Brett's analysis meet Mitchell's in their formal distinction between private and public elements in Britten's art and life.

Once again, it is *Peter Grimes* which triggered for Brett the consideration of those serious matters. Brett's ground-breaking article on *Grimes* posits issues of sexuality as central. This article is not only foundational for Britten studies, but also for queer studies in music more generally. Brett identifies Grimes as the outcast, the mob-lynched, the oppressed; in sum, as a symbol of the homosexual: "it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed."[50] There is a double move in Brett's analysis: if Grimes is the symbolic homosexual, so Britten can be identified with Grimes (hence the title of the article: "Britten and Grimes"). Brett theorises Britten's oppression on an Isherwood-Forster scale. On one side is Christopher Isherwood, the British gay man who left to the USA to be free, who stayed there, and developed a relatively freer British queer literary art. On the other side is E.M. Forster, the British homosexual who stayed in the UK, was bound to hide, and did not develop a more fully liberated gay literature. For Brett, Britten is to be understood on this Isherwood-Forster scale: he is the one who left to the USA to

[50] Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 20.

be free, but went back to the UK where he had to hide. *Peter Grimes* corresponds to that turning point, acting like a "catharsis" of the accepted oppression.[51] Brett surmises: "*Peter Grimes* was conceived at the very moment when Britten decided to exchange uncongenial freedom abroad for unknown peril at home, when he forswore the advantage of Isherwood for a life that might entail the Forsterian sacrifice."[52] Of course, in all these figures, one cannot help but see the personal journey of Philip Brett himself, a British homosexual who (like Isherwood), stayed in California to live a free life, and who was able to develop a more liberated queer musicology there. Brett's analyses, in their form, are strikingly close to Mitchell's accounts of Britten's music (in spite of their blatant disagreement on Britten's sexuality). This is because Brett's descriptions are organised around public/private dichotomies as expression of closeted issues, and because Britten's pieces, in Brett's writing, act as parables of those issues, as the expression of hidden depths to disclose. Therefore, Brett and Mitchell paid the same attention to public/private distinctions and to parable-art. Moreover, pacifism itself is for Brett a parable of suffering. As said by Paul Kildea, for Brett, "[p]acifism was a zealous commitment of Britten's, but it was also a cypher for other passions that Britten could not speak of—primarily his sexuality."[53] Once more, Britten's music expresses what cannot be expressed, and one needs to look behind the appearance if one wants to get closer to Britten's actual meaning. When commenting on *Albert Herring*, Brett describes the light tone of the opera in a similar fashion: "for an audience today the element of caricature, festooned with local color and tricked out with schoolboy jokes and language, is the thing likely to become most quickly tiresome."[54] Play and the childlike, when noticed by Brett, are therefore only superficial matters, far from the depths of the symbolic of oppressions that Britten's

[51] *Ibid.*, 24.
[52] *Ibid.*, 23.
[53] Paul Kildea, *Selling Britten: Music and the Market Place* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.
[54] Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 83.

music expresses. Keller, Mitchell, and Brett concur that the interest of Britten's music lies in what it hides behind, what the critics in 'cleverness' miss; may it be a rich subconscious, a political denunciation, or a parable for sexual liberation.

Of course, many attempts to diversify Britten studies have been made, extending the scholarship towards literary studies, archival works, cultural studies, or reception studies. However, most of these studies are premised on the idea that Britten's music has depth beyond the musical surface to be explored, and develop mostly the trends established by Keller, Mitchell, and Brett. For example, Paul Kildea's discussion on Britten's British expressionism expresses how much Britten is seen as embodying the values of the Second Viennese school: its individualism, its psychology-oriented thinking, its anti-totalitarianism.[55] Kildea makes of Britten a British Berg, and of *Grimes* a *Wozzeck*. At the same time, Kildea reads Britten as an antidote to Britishness, used to cure the Vaughan-Williams-led folk-song establishment. Britten, along with Grimes or Wozzeck, is cast as a paradoxical outsider, as in Brett's descriptions. Finally, Kildea closes his article on how "the careful distance Britten had maintained between his own life and art crumbles away", which articulates in a very Mitchell-like way the private and public spheres of Britten's artistry.[56] Thus, Kildea brings into play many elements elaborated by Keller, Mitchell, and Brett: psychology, Viennese influences, rebellious outcasts, and private/public articulation. Similarly, one may observe another way to combine Keller, Mitchell, and Brett, is J.P.E. Harper-Scott's work on Britten and ideology, which mixes continental psychology, politics, and queer studies into an Althusser-like reading.[57] Such a diversity of studies, however, do no challenge the basis that what should be found in Britten's music is something profound and sincere, and that

[55] Paul Kildea, "Benjamin Britten: Inventing English Expressionism?", *University of Toronto Quartely*, 74/2 (2005), 657-670.
[56] *Ibid.*, 670.
[57] J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Ideology in Britten's Operas*, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Britten's techniques actually express and articulate this seriousness. Reading Britten's music for its playfulness, however, problematize such claims. In this spirit, I present below four pieces of scholarship on Britten's music which pave the way for my claim. Their approaches are divergent—biographical (Bridcut), literary (Bullivant), analytical (Rupprecht), and aesthetical (Albright)—but this very divergence betrays the strong potential held in thinking Britten's music through play, games, and the childlike.

4. Playfulness

Between the biographical studies, one in particular stands out in relation to Britten's playfulness. John Bridcut's book (2006) and documentary (2004) *Britten's Children*, explores Britten's fascination with children and childhood.[58] Bridcut offers a powerful reading of Britten's relation to the symbol of the child, his relation to particular children and to his own childhood, as well as the manner these diverse elements gave shape to his music for children. The book and the documentary are brimming with anecdotes and recollections of acquaintances. If the nature of the relation between Britten and his child-friends is in itself sensitive, Bridcut's forte is to have given Britten's young friends the chance to speak for themselves on the subject. In that sense, as the title implies, *Britten's Children* is a biography of them as much as it is of Britten. By putting the children at the forefront, via their adult recollections, Bridcut explores the ins and outs of this collaboration of adult-like children with a child-like adult. Bridcut's introductory anecdote sets the tone.

> One evening, emboldened by rum before supper and sherry during it, and feeling 'completely lightheaded by halfway through the soup', [Imogen Holst] talked to him about the second scene of [*Gloriana*]'s third act. She told him how much she enjoyed the effect of the quaver rest he had written at the end of each line in the boy's song 'Now

[58] John Bridcut, *Britten's Children* [video] (Crux Production, 2004); John Bridcut, *Britten's Children* (Faber & Faber, 2006).

> Rose Up All the City'. In a revealing flash of self-knowledge, Britten replied; 'It's because I'm still thirteen'.[59]

Indeed, Britten's reclaiming of the childlike is manifest through his neat preservation of his juvenilia: "These boyhood manuscripts did not merely languish on the shelves. They meant enough to him that he always kept them in order and, in later life, he started to catalogue them" says Bridcut, who continues, "At the age of twenty, most artists are keen to strike out towards new horizons and disown (often destroy) their immature works along with other memories of childhood. But the Britten of that age boasted of going back to them."[60] Interestingly, Bridcut tries in few places to draw a parallel between Britten's playfulness and his compositions. He develops in one chapter ('Go play, boy, play') the importance of sport for Britten, and draws an analogy between the vivacity of his works with his fierce sportlike character. For example, he compares Britten's fascination with cars and speed to the quickness and tricky turns of 'This Little Babe' (*A Ceremony of Carols*). In another chapter ('The Coming of the Fludde'), Bridcut describes the ludic aesthetics of *Noye's Fludde* in terms of practical inspiration from child performers (slung mugs and chimes), and describes the childlike quality of the performance itself: "His extraordinary talent was to allow for some imprecision and errors, which somehow came to belong to the weft of the work."[61] For Bridcut, part of the pleasure we have in listening Britten's music, comes from this enjoyment of rediscovering our own childhood: "It was Britten's rare and peculiar gift, through his own daily reencounter with childhood, to transmit direct to the inner child in each of us, bypassing the jamming device that is so often interpolated by maturity."[62] If Bridcut's focus on Britten's playfulness dabbles in drawing comparisons with pieces like *A Ceremony of Carols* or *Noye's Fludde*, he never

[59] Bridcut, *Britten's Children*, 2006, 8.
[60] *Ibid.*, 35.
[61] *Ibid.*, 234.
[62] *Ibid.*, 239.

explores this potential fully. Bridcut shows the way for a fruitful analytical perspective on play and the childlike in Britten's music. But such a journey is still to be made. One other element raised by Bridcut is a comparison of Britten's language games. Here is how Bridcut describes them:

> [Britten] spoke a private language with Roger Duncan. This involved putting the letters *arp* before any vowel, which resulted in complete gobbledygook, so 'I want to play tennis' became '*arp*I w*arp*ant t*arp*o pl*arp*ay t*arp*enn*arp*is'. They had long conversations in the car in this language, which amused Britten both because of his childish absurdity and because of the challenge of speaking it at a speed without tripping up.[63]

This type of language-game raises the following question: what constitutes a game and how might music composition be envisaged as one? Bridcut, as said, stays far from any music-analytical project. To bridge the gap towards an analytical understanding of Britten's play and childlike aesthetics, the notion of game is the ineluctable start of our project to come. In the chapters to follow, I will show how much Britten's music is articulated around playful processes akin to the nonsensical language games he loved.

The false simplicity of *Noye's Fludde*, its naivety vs sophistication, the nonsense and language-games challenges, are an array of notions linked to play and the childlike ready to be explored for their theoretical potential in this dissertations's attempt to re-describe Britten's playful aesthetics. To do so, one must question the semiotic implications of considering composition and art-making as play.

The work of Joanna Bullivant is a stimulus for such a purpose. In a musical and textual analysis of Britten and Auden's *Our Hunting Fathers*, she draws on the concept of 'practical joke', i.e. "a technique for revealing truth by problematizing the relationship between expression and meaning."[64] Bullivant takes this concept from Auden himself for

[63] *Ibid.*, 21.
[64] Bullivant, Joanna "'Practical Jokes': Britten and Auden's 'Our Hunting Fathers' Revisited", in Kate Kennedy (ed.), *Literary Britten: Words and Music in Benjamin Britten's Vocal Works* (The Boydell Press, 2018) 207.

whom practical jokes are powerful tools for hidden forms of exposure, as paradoxical as it may sound:

> The practical joker must not only deceive but also, when he has succeeded, unmask and reveal the truth to his victims. The satisfaction of the practical joker is the look of astonishment on the faces of others when they learn that all the time they were convinced that they were thinking and acting on their own initiative, they were actually the puppets of another's will. Thus, though his jokes may be harmless in themselves and extremely funny, there is something slightly sinister about every practical joker, for they betray him as someone who likes to play God behind the scenes.[65]

Auden highlights thus the potential seriousness of the practical joke, which is at the same time light-hearted and emblematic of some crueller truths. The practical joke shares similar strategies than the interwar 'revealing masks' explored by Anthony Sheppard.[66] In *Our Hunting Fathers*, as Bullivant describes, Auden's practical jokes take the form of an endless substitution of meaning, a constant tinkering with moving associations which creates a playful relationship between signifiers and signified. Indeed, Auden aligns a series of revealing animal masks: rats as plague denotes anti-Semitism; Messalina's love for her monkey indexes debauchery; and hawking reveals sport as violence. Animals are presented simultaneously as predators, preys, pests, or pets. Furthermore, the juxtaposed animal/human relation offers a series of symmetrical links: the human as a predator, prey, pest, or pet too. For example, Auden's last line, "To hunger, work illegally, and be anonymous?" stacks simultaneous layers of understanding: is it a quote by Lenin, a communist statement, a homosexual coding, or the description of the daily life of an animal? Play with meaning appears then ambiguously autotelic and instrumental, and the barrier between play and non-play emerges as versatile. There is therefore a puzzling relation between rhetorical toying with meaning and artistic project, especially when it is about a denunciation of violence. The 'light-hearted' attitude of

[65] Auden, W.H. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (Faber & Faber, 1963), 255-256.
[66] See Anthony Sheppard, *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theatre* (University of California Press, 2001).

Auden seems to imply that after all this is just an amusement, an off-hand attitude which only emphasises further the violence of the subject matter. From Auden, and Bullivant's reading, appears a solution to this introduction's conundrum: play, by being simultaneously serious and non-serious seems to be a powerful rhetoric to exemplify how playing can lead to violence, how sport can steer to bloodshed, how harm can be performed for the sake of it. How the practical joker can hunt for pleasure.

Bullivant posits the following question: is this strategy of Auden the same for Britten? In other words, is Britten's music expressing the same semiotic playfulness as Auden's poetry? If this is the case, it calls into question the claim that Britten's music is unequivocally sincere, and "casts doubt on the assumption of an unproblematic relationship between Britten's musical language and his, undoubtedly sincere, feelings regarding his personal and political dilemmas of 1936."[67] In particular, Bullivant criticises Mitchell's reading of *Our Hunting Fathers* as a "passionate protest against the inhumanity of both fascist Europe and conservative Britain".[68] If Britten plays with musical meaning as Auden plays with the text, then his practical jokes create a constant slippage of sense[69] which has to be tackled for its complexity. This dissertation, then, will attempt to generalise Bullivant's sceptical attitude to the whole of Britten's oeuvre. One could reconsider for example the extent to which Britten is a 'political' composer if he plays with meaning in such a fashion, undermining meaning through nonsensical slippages and games of juxtaposition. What is Britten's message? Is there a message? Moreover, is Britten in control of a message, or does play become its own semiotic agent? Is signification becoming playfully out-of-control?

[67] Bullivant, "Practical Jokes," 207.
[68] *Ibid.*, 206.
[69] What Umberto Eco would call an 'hermetic' type of hermeneutics. See Umbert Eco, Richard Rorty, et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Bullivant's proposal to see Britten as a practical joker adds then new tools to the list I am gathering along those pages for building the case for a playful Britten. In addition to nonsense, game-like challenges, simplicity/complexity ambiguities seen in Bridcut, are now added semiotic tinkering, subversion of meaning, and an oscillation between autotelic (i.e., for its own sake) and instrumental (i.e., for the sake of something else) purposes of art. So far, then, Bridcut raised the importance of child-topics, sport-topics, or nonsense games in Britten's environment, which led me to ask how to assess such an environment in Britten's work. Then, discussing Bullivant, I have considered the semiotic implications of playing and the particular agency of the composer and interpreter created by play. I argued that, in play, meaning constantly slips through the hands of the actors of the musical experience. Now, time is to ponder how these elements raised in Bridcut and Bullivant may be linked to a musical analysis of the pitch-organisation of the music of Benjamin Britten.

To do so, let me now turn to the work of Philip Rupprecht, and in particular his theory of tonal stratification in Britten's music, which gives additional tools to the elaboration of our playful objective.[70] Via these strata analyses, Rupprecht tries to give a method to appraise the "atmosphere of uncertainty [which] complicates the definition of functional tonal relations in Britten's music".[71] Rupprecht describes Britten's music as a "tension among mutually contradictory elements"[72] where we find "an overt polarization of the texture, dividing the complete compass into two distinct and autonomous-sounding layers, or *strata*".[73] What is particularly interesting is the way that Rupprecht uses notions

[70] Philip Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music", *Journal of Music Theory*, 40/2 (1996), 311-346.
[71] *Ibid.*, 311.
[72] *Ibid*.
[73] *Ibid*.

of ‘congruency’ and ‘discrepancy’ instead of notions of consonance and dissonance linked to traditional counterpoint and ideas of tension and release. Thus, Rupprecht gives an idea of the interplay between strata, and presents any resultant tonality as a “residual presence”.[74] Stratification is the organising agent of the type of pitch-organisation Rupprecht describes in Britten’s music. Indeed, the organising agent is not tonality, as it could seem at first. Tonality is a residue of Britten’s interplay of layers; of his playful (word not used by Rupprecht) manipulation of autonomous strata. Moments of “harmonic integrations” point at certain keys *at one point* of the encounter between the strata. The succession of these serendipitous encounters creates the particular tonal ambiguity of Britten’s (the core issue which motivates Rupprecht’s analysis). Rupprecht describes how these stratifications drive most of Britten’s music, like in the first bars of *Billy Budd* which he dissects in great detail,[75] or in the relation between interplay of layers and symbolic conflicts in the *War Requiem*.[76]

The in-the-moment conception of interlocking strata gives insight into themes of simplicity vs. sophistication, challenge, nonsense, or autotelic/instrumental (i.e., for itself/or for other purposes) ambiguity. My opening analysis of Dudley Moore’s spoof highlighted a similar query into in strata superpositions and their puzzling semiotic outcomes. The simple/complex ambivalence, for example, finds its explication in the (complex) unfolding of (simple) strata superimposed. The limitation implied by this simplicity, especially with a complexity-oriented goal, offers game-like challenges in finding clever solutions within self-imposed sparseness. Similarly, the game of congruency and discrepancy (I prefer the terms ‘match’ and ‘mismatch’, for reasons that I explain in chapter 3) produces a series of unexpected combinations which relate

[74] *Ibid*.
[75] *Idem*.
[76] Philip Rupprecht, *Tonal Stratification and Conflict in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (PhD, Yale University), 1993.

nonsensically to one another. Britten's 'ambiguity' painted by Rupprecht is the result of unrelated keys which appear along the strata's interweaving. Rupprecht's strata analysis gives insight into how ideas of juxtaposition impact Britten's pitch-organisation. Rupprecht, however, does not link his analysis to elements of playfulness and childlikeness. Yet, his theory comes very close to the subject, and offer keys to analyse the momentary interactions in the surface of Britten's music, in all the almost-tonal complexity of its unfolding.

Rupprecht's tonal stratification theory has received too little attention in Britten studies. In this regard, it is fascinating to compare with Stravinsky studies where ideas of stratification, layering, and non-tonal analysis thrive.[77] Ideas of play and the ludic too has already been developed by Andrew Westerhaus, who has reviewed of the variety of metaphors of play used by critics to describe Stravinsky's music.[78] The difference between Stravinsky and Britten resides in the history of the development of Britten studies and its reliance on 'serious' matters. Talking about play seems to pave the way to a de-legitimisation of Britten's music, and Keller, Mitchel, or Brett would have none of that.[79] The difference relies also in Stravinsky's own use of play-related titles in his compositions: *Jeux de cartes*, "Jeux des cités rivales" (*The Rite of Spring*), or other *Agôn*. These titles are spurs for the imagination of critics and for their ongoing redescription of Stravinsky's music. However, Stravinsky scholars use play as a metaphor to describe Stravinsky's music, while I intend to show that *play and games are literal ways of composition in Britten's*. The influence of the ludic rhetorics of Stravinsky on Britten, however, must not be ignored, and this thesis endeavours to do so in chapter 2.

[77] See for example Gretchen Horlacher, *Building Blocks: Repetition and Continuity in the Music of Stravinsky* (Oxford University Press, 2011); or Pieter C Van der Toorn, & John McGinness, *Stravinsky and the Russian Period: Sound and Legacy of a Musical Idiom* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[78] Andrew Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor* (PhD, University of Chicago, 2012).
[79] I describe in chapters 2 and 3 the differences of strategies in Britten studies and Stravinsky studies, as being a result of different positioning towards a non-playful Schoenberg.

The last writer I would like to discuss is Daniel Albright, who provides further insight into elements of dismantling, childlikeness and nonsense in Britten's music. Given his education as a literary critic rather than a musicologist, and his interest in visual arts, Albright is not thwarted by the pre-conceptions of music scholars on topics of tonal vs atonal dichotomies, or by visions of modernism that centre predominantly on Second Viennese breakthroughs and post-tonalities (as best exemplified by Dahlhaus' studies). In painting, in particular, it is a trope that modernism is inspired by child-art (e.g. Picasso) whereas in music, such an idea does not even start to become acceptable.[80] In fact, Albright's analysis provides a refreshing view on Britten's art, which unfortunately, has too often been ignored.

Firstly, Albright's discussion on the notion of 'fancy' (free associations of disconnected ideas) is of a particular interest. Described as a central characteristic of Rimbaud's *Les Illuminations*, text set by Britten, the fancy is to be distinguished from imagination: "Imagination dissolves, dissipates, diffuses the external world in order to create a new one, whereas fancy, a much lower faculty to [Rimbaud's] way of thinking, plays with fixities and definites".[81] One can find in that concept an element close to Auden's practical jokes in the autotelic manipulation of words and semes, or to Rupprecht's interplay between semi-autonomous stratas. According to Albright, "From Rimbaud to the Surrealists, fancy, with its rigid mechanical re-combinations of the

[80] See for example the works of Jonathan Fineberg: *The Innocent Eye; Children's Art and the Modern Artists* (Princeton University Press, 1997); *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1998); or *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child* (University of California Press, 2006). Chapter 2 draws on more fully on that discussion.
[81] Daniel Albright, "Britten's Dismantlings: 'Les Illuminations' and the 'War Requiem'", in his *Music's Monisms, Disarticulating Modernism* (The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 121.

elements of experience, seems a dominant aesthetic mode."[82] And so, as Albright implies, is it to Britten.

Secondly, Albright explores the childlikeness of Britten's music, with the figure of the pseudo-child at its centre: "The childlikeness of the first half of the setting [of "Antique"] [...] is called into question by the lascivious text and the harmonic procedures—it seems a fake tonality for a pseudochild."[83] In particular, Albright draws a parallel between Britten and Picasso's child-art-inspired aesthetic:

> In some sense [Britten's] career path resembled Picasso's: Picasso could draw like an Old Master by the age of fifteen and then by his own admission, spend the rest of his life learning to paint like a child; Britten was composing grown-up music at the age of fourteen (*Quatre chansons françaises*), but seems to have decided, at the age of twenty-five, to see if he could find in himself the adolescent he hadn't yet been—his inner Rimbaud one might say.[84]

This inspiration from child art is the missing link between, on the one side, Britten's personal interest in play and children and, on the other, the playfulness of his music. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Albright questions "What are the characteristics of fairy music? [One is] delusive simplicity. Sometimes fairy music can sound like Orff Schulwerk for the limbo of unbaptized children, as in the music for the tongs and bones, the most rudimentary tootling and banging. [...] When sleepy, fairy music tends toward a disguised, unobtrusive pandiatonicism".[85] By comparing the *Dream*'s fairy music to music-educational material, Albright identifies a crucial element of Britten's music. Much could be said about the opera's intermingling of music-exercise material with military topics, lullabies, and fairyland sounds (and much will be in chapter 3 on the subject).

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[82] *Ibid.*, 122.
[83] *Ibid.*, 132.
[84] *Ibid.*, 130.
[85] Daniel Albright, "Britten's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'", in his *Musicking Shakespeare: A Conflict of Theatre* (University of Rochester Press, 2007), 279.

Thirdly, Britten's childlike art is not always for Albright deprived of violence. For him, Britten's work is double-faced. The archetypal pseudo-child is Peter Quint, described by Albright as "an adult parody of a jaunty little boy, bold to embark on any quest. Oberon, Puck, Peaseblossom all belong to a musical region that is simply Peter Quint's seduction-song writ large, a domain where the ludic discolors into the erotic."[86] Pseudo-children, in other words, give a new insight to the 'innocence-corrupted' theme: "What is frightening about Britten's many representations of abused children is the feeling that the composer sometimes seems as sympathetic to the child abuser as to the child: Britten's children are often knowing, brutal, beautiful, good to kiss, good to beat."[87] By describing adults as children and children as adult, Britten blurs the boundary between who the victim is and who is the bully, another type of Audenian ongoing subversions of meaning. In particular, these blurs highlight "a childish capacity to harm. [...] It is not that Innocence is violated by Experience, but that Innocence is itself the source of disease".[88] From Albright's argument one can understand the relation between children and violence at the centre of Britten's pacifism: "Britten was a peaceful man, but his most powerful images of peace can be found at the heart of his representations of war. There is a strangely Orwellian aspect to Britten's musical imagination: War Is Peace, Freedom Is Slavery. But music is always good at saying, in a thousand gross or subtle ways, that black is white and up is down."[89] What is Britten arguing for? Like Bullivant, Albright presents a more confusing Britten that the political Britten sold by Mitchell or Brett. Britten's art seems to argue for being a child, and yet, it presents children as violent.

[86] *Ibid*.
[87] Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 94.
[88] *Ibid.*
[89] Albright, "Britten's Dismantlings", 144.

Fourthly, the pseudo-child coincides with what could be called a pseudo-tonality (a 'fake tonality' in Albright's own words). Albright's analysis of that key element of Britten's music is developed in great length in his analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To start with, he connects the dismantling of tonality with aspects of erasure: the "fairyland's inability to provide a true tonic",[90] the "mechanically rigid melodies [which] cohabit with unintelligible sequences of chords—in an original and puzzling manner"[91]—presents a "Babel of musical languages [which] mirrors the fundamental property of Shakespeare's play: garbling."[92] Similarly, "the lovers' music is tonal, but dysfunctionally tonal. Britten gives us the appurtenances of tonality without the thing itself—as if tonality were simply a collection of local interpretive tricks instead of a system for imparting large scale design."[93] Bottom, the actor amateur tradesman transformed into a donkey, carries in particular a childlike tonal quality: he "is at once pre-tonal and post-tonal, a big babbling baby and a connoisseur of advanced noise. [...] The language of rule breaking can be construed as either an ignorance or an oversophistication."[94] Oberon, too, knows "far too many triads, far too many scales" and "[t]he fairy music is equally wrong—indeed, it is about wrongness. Fairy music may be elegant, or it may be childish, but for the most part it neither fits into earthly paradigms for the behaviour of tonal music nor flouts them conspicuously."[95] In these many descriptions, worth quoting extensively, Albright offers a vivid and varied vocabulary to question the dramatic functions of pseudo-tonality. In sum, Albright helps to include the key concept of childlikeness to our investigation, and gives ideas about how to articulate childlikeness with pitch-organisation, semiotic construction, or topical references.

[90] Albright, "Britten's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'", 284.
[91] *Ibid.*, 291.
[92] *Ibid.*, 267.
[93] *Ibid.*, 284
[94] *Ibid.*, 273-4.
[95] *Ibid.*, 280.

Altogether, Albright brings food for thought via many concepts: games, fancy associations, pseudo-child, fake tonality, child-art, and semiotic inversions (like black-is-white, up-is-down, or the-adult-is-a-child-and-the-child-is-an-adult). All these are in addition to the previous collection this Introduction amassed with Bridcut (nonsense, false simplicity), Bullivant (practical jokes), and Rupprecht (stratification theory). Thus, our theoretical toolbox now seems full enough to broaden the investigation on play, games, and the childlike in the music of Benjamin Britten.

To that purpose, the following chapters engage with the many theoretical, historical, and analytical problems raised by the consideration of playfulness in Britten's oeuvre. A first theoretical chapter questions the mechanics of play and games, its critical power, and its relation to the childlike. A second historical chapter contextualises Britten's playfulness in broader trends in modernism which engage with ludic rhetorics and the multifarious child-symbolic. In particular, the second chapter re-inscribes Britten in a Franco-Russian network which naturally puts forwards elements of play, games, and childlikeness. The third chapter is music-analytical, and proposes tools and methods with which to reappraise the playfulness of Britten's sounds, be it in terms of playful mechanics (with what I describe as semiotic toying), or with considerations of playful topics (like blurs between the child and the adult, elements sport, or ways to depict warfare as a childlike activity). The third chapter concludes that Britten's playful strategies offer the listeners and the analyst opportunities to play in turn with what Britten's music affords them. Playfulness, is in fact a two-way process, and a fascinating game of agency between the music and its interpretation unfolds. Chapters four and five explore two operas by Britten, and describe the particular rhetorical forms that playfulness takes in connection to their dramatic project. In chapter four, I depict how

playfulness boosts the enigma at the core of *The Turn of the Screw*, and how Britten's play echoes the playful art of Henry James, and the playful psychology of William James. The fifth and last chapter focuses on *Noye's Fludde*, where writing for children is key to the project. The child in that opera, far from the 'innocence-corrupted' cliché, drives the playful semiotic design of the piece, via articulations of cuteness vs casual violence, and of neat order vs boisterous chaos; these articulations being instances of a childlike behaviour made audible by the music and visible in the staging.

Such perspectives attempt to go beyond the traditional representations of 'serious Britten' as found in Keller, Mitchell, Brett, and the interpretative pathways they created. It is true that these investigations in seriousness inspired many rich readings of Britten's oeuvre and definitely opened boundaries for a broad and complex cultural appreciation of Britten's music. However, by being too much focused on hidden depths (oppression, psychology, and other cryptic meanings), such readings often miss the complexity of the sounds of Britten's music itself; a surface which needs urgently to be re-engaged with. In literary studies, a resurgence of surface reading tried to achieve similar goals. As rightly described by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, **"**Surface reading broadens the scope of critique to include the kinds of interpretive activity that seek to understand the complexity of literary surfaces—surfaces that have been rendered invisible by symptomatic reading."[96] After all, there is no one meaning 'deeper' than another in an art work. There is a piece of art and different ways to describe it which, already, is quite a challenge. In fact, this is perhaps *the* challenge of music criticism. The surface of Britten's music provokes a rich semiotics which may refer back to the many readings offered above. But, by focusing too much on 'depths', one misses the originality of the surface and its dynamic role in the aesthetics of Britten's art. One risks drowning Britten studies like

[96] Stephen Best, & Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction", *Representations*, 108/1 (2009), 1.

Peter Grimes in the depths of the sea, with the music hidden under systematic considerations disconnected with the actual sounds present. This amounts to saying that it is possible to link the mechanics of Britten's problem-solving musical 'cleverness' to the serious readings of his music, while putting aside illusions of depths of the meaning of a work of art. 'Depth' is not a property of a work of art itself, it is a space created by one's relation to such works of art, and that is what play theories will help to elucidate and emphasise. Play, and the childlike, are the breach in which to develop such an endeavour.

To go beyond such readings, however, does not mean to be opposed to them. Actually, Keller, Mitchell, and Brett, made such a mistake themselves when, by attempting to change the image of a 'clever' Britten, they have thrown play and the childlike out with the aesthetic bathwater. John Dewey would offer wise words of advice on such a matter, and would say that "[t]here is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively."[97] This reaction explains the lack of interest in the matters of play and of the childlike which at first glance seem to be connected to matters of unseriousness (which in fact they are not). Most importantly, within the context of this study, Dewey's quote suggests that a theory of play and the childlike should not be straightforwardly *opposed* to the readings of Keller, Mitchell, or Brett. It instead suggests that we must elucidate how cleverness, seriousness, and playfulness hold together in Britten's art.

In a nutshell, re-describing Britten's work through play, games, and childlikeness, opens many doors for reconsideration of his aesthetics. Such a study on Britten leads furthermore to broader theoretical conclusions about the activities of composing and

[97] John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (Free Press, 1938), 20.

interpreting, when conceived as forms of play. Indeed, the following pages cast doubt on the composer's intentions, and present composing as a strange agency of playing at being played. The creation of meaningful artistic content, similarly, is presented as a form of serendipitous discovery. Equally, the role of interpretation appears as a game played by critics and scholars alike, when confronted with what the musical object under their scrutiny affords them in terms of commentary. The commentator's activity, seen from this angle, intertwines imagination and interpretational reconstruction: a play on a composer's play.

More specifically, the following pages re-fashion the centrality of the symbols and functions of the child in Britten's aesthetics. The child and the childlike are not limited to the thematic content of Britten's music, but permeates its mechanics and stylistics too. It does so, however, differently from the 'innocence-corrupted' trope on which Britten studies relied on with excess. Taking the child seriously is taking Britten's music seriously. It is taking play seriously. In such a way, this thesis re-positions Britten's aesthetics within other sets of influences than the ones generally offered to think about; a more Franco-Russian stylistic and rhetoric in which the childlike takes its full scope.

By doing so, this dissertation puts on the table new words and a re-fashioned vocabulary to describe Britten's music. These depictions are intended to help scholars, music lovers, conductors, singers, performers, and composers, to reappraise Britten's work. By considering composition as play, and by conceiving the ambivalent agency on the composer's part that a playful attitude to composition creates, one is faced with new theoretical and practical thoughts to engage with; and of which Britten is the playful model.

Winner of school game ('Victor Ludorum'); fond of nursery food; passionate about cricket, tennis, and swimming; developing friendships with children; fascinated by

children's movies to the point of collecting journal clippings: many elements of Benjamin Britten's life testify of his playfulness and schoolboyishness. Since the first thorough biographical studies,[98] these aspects of Britten have been clear in the scholarship. If the biographical accounts develop ideas of playfulness and of childlikeness, the analysis of the music, on the other hand, does not seem to find ways to integrate the exploration of these features into the music itself. This thesis questions this image of Britten as a school-boy, cricket and tennis lover, enjoying cars and gobbledygook conversations with children; and draws full aesthetic consequences such a boyish picture offers for the understanding of Britten's music. The thesis embraces this side of Britten, but also his methodologies, in comparison to other playful aesthetics like Stravinsky's or Prokofiev's talked about in chapter 2. As such, the following studies point towards the significance of rethinking Britten as a playful composer. This Introduction established the framework for such a study by criticising the depth-surface distinction; by considering Dudley Moore's caricature as revealing salient playful traits in Britten's music; by challenging Britten's reception; but also by pointing at new analytical, semiotic, and historical possibilities offered by play. Therefore, it is time to take Britten's playfulness seriously.

[98] Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (Faber & Faber, 1992); or, before, Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: A Sketch of His Life and Works* (Boosey & Hawkes, 1954, 2nd ed).

Chapter 1:

Playful Aesthetics: Play, Games, and the Childlike

To understand how Britten's music partakes in play, games, and childlike activities, we must first understand what all these activities might mean, and understand how they can be expressed in music. What is play? What are games? What is playfulness? How can music be childlike? Is playfulness in music only a matter of comic and light-hearted modes of expression? Or does play point towards a broader picture where seriousness and light-heartedness may paradoxically be intertwined? How do play, games, and the childlike relate to the list of concepts raised in the Introduction: fanciful associations, pseudo-childishness, fake-tonality, semiotic inversions, motivic stratifications, nonsense, practical jokes, and so on? In seeking to answer these questions, the present chapter engages with the complex relation between play, games, and the childlike; it clarifies each of their conceptual boundaries to observe their practical overlap. I will argue, following the philosopher Bernard Suits, that play is a matter of autotelic reallocation, in the sense that it transforms a purposeful activity into an activity made for itself. However, I will push Suits' definition further, to consider play as a way of toying with (musical) material. Similarly, I will use Suits' work to describe games as challenges of self-imposed limitations. Equally, I will show the aesthetic relations between play-actions or game-attitudes in music with childlikeness. Altogether, I will employ the expression 'playful aesthetic' as a shorthand for an aesthetic discussion on the interrelation of play, games, and the childlike.

Much of this chapter will be about toys, playing, and childlike attitudes as models for understanding a composer's creativity in terms of self-limitations and repurposing of musical objects. At the centre of this attitude is the plaything, the musical object used as

a toy, whose physical and semiotic affordances are tinkered with by the artist. Play is therefore a matter of creativity. At the same time, play is criticism, but a very particular process of criticism. By fiddling with boundaries, play creates a leeway, a room for reconsidering playthings. That is to say, the playful artist joins the long list of tricksters who, from Hermes to Peter Pan, play-test the thresholds of culture: who create, by playing, new cultural and critical configurations for a society to take into account. There holds the critical power of play; and of play in music. The interrelation between the mechanics of play and its potential for criticism is crucial to understand Britten's music, as much as modernism more generally. Britten too is a trickster; and it is time to take his playfulness seriously. Play is not just a silly thing. Play has a transformative potential; a potential for emancipation.

1.1 Play, games, and music

Commonly, play is understood as a non-serious activity; a pastime opposed to work; the realm of unproductive individuals typified by children. This extremely narrow view on play and games has been criticised by many critics, scholars, and intellectuals from many fields, initiating a Sisyphean endeavour to understand what is common to the multifarious cultural forms that play and games may take. In fact, discussions on the meaning of play and games are endless, and provide to play scholars much pleasure to play with. An inexhaustible amount of scholarship flows in varied debates on the nature of these words and their manifold functions, ranging from the seminal study of Johan Huizinga (1938) who identifies play as a central element of ancient societies, to the latest trends in video game studies.[99] For the play-scholar Thomas Henricks, play is a tricky

[99] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949) [original in Dutch, 1938]; video-games study is often called 'ludology', and 'ludomusicology' is its video-musical counterpart.

subject indeed: "[s]tudents of play realize quickly that their chosen subject is exceedingly difficult to comprehend and investigate." He continues, "As behaviour, play expresses itself in many forms; it includes objects of innumerable variety. No setting for human activity escapes its reach."[100] Similarly, Roger Caillois, who produced a famous and practical taxonomy of play and games (1958), describes them as a "total phenomenon" which touches on "the whole of human activities and ambitions".[101] Hence the success of play and games in a broad range of studies: child studies, child psychology, education, psychiatry, anthropology and ethology (its animal corollary), sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, neuro-sciences, mathematics, and economics; among others. For Caillois, "The facts studied in the name of play are so heterogeneous that one is led to speculate that the word 'play' [and 'game'] is perhaps merely a trap, encouraging by its seeming generality tenacious illusions as to the supposed kinship between disparate forms of behaviour."[102] So varied is this scholarship that a thorough review would be unhelpfully broad. Some authors have already produced such summaries.[103] Among them, Brian Sutton-Smith offers a brilliant mind-map of the diversity of play studies by categorising them in different rhetorics.[104] In other words, for Sutton-Smith, to talk about play fulfils diverse functions, and follows different rhetorical lines: progress, fate, power, identity, imaginary, self-expression, and frivolity. Consequently, Sutton-Smith points to an inherent ambiguity of the descriptive utilisations of the word play. Play must be

[100] Thomas S. Henricks, "Play Studies, A Brief History", *American Journal of Play*, 12/2 (2020), 117.
[101] Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les hommes* (Gallimard/Folio, 1967, 1st ed. 1958), 337; my translation.
[102] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (University of Illinois Press, 2001) [original in French, 1958], 162. The French 'jeu' is particularly ambiguous as it refers to 'play' and 'games' at the same time. Roger Caillois' theory may be seen as an attempt to clarify this semantic confusion. In Dutch, Johann Huizinga's *Spelelement* offers the same linguistic issue. Hence, the two founding fathers of play studies had to deal with a special linguistic confusion between the concepts of play and games; confusion which is still a main problem in more contemporary play and games studies.
[103] See Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (MIT Press, 2005); Henricks, "Play Studies, A Brief History"; or much of the extensive publications by Henricks.
[104] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

assessed as a pragmatic tool used for projects often in contradiction with one another. That way, play becomes a theoretically dangerous as much as an extraordinary instrument in the hands of philosophers (in the broadest sense of the word), because philosophy and theory have the propensity to use concepts as toys (to manipulate them, distort them, clash and combine them with other concepts). Theory, in short, is the realm of tinkering with the meaning of words, which is one definition of play defended by many authors, and the sense of play on which the present thesis is developed. Theory, in sum, is an activity centred on conceptual play.

There is thus room for confusion as much as extraordinary conceptual flexibility in the concept of play. There is some 'play' in the meaning of play which creates a world of confusing semiotics (which are the special flavour, as described later, of Britten's music). Its corollary, 'game', offers the same potential for conceptual slippage. However, both refer to activities which are often easy to call 'games' (like marbles, card games, or dollhouse playing). Even if the characteristics of what makes these activities plays and games is open to debate, these are clear instances of it. In addition, there is also room for confusion between the literal and the metaphorical uses of play. This is especially true in the applications of play studies to the study of art and aesthetics. Are painting, dancing, or music-making forms of playing or gaming? If so, are they described as analogies to processes of play and games, or as play and games in a literal sense? Andrew Westerhaus shows the varied attempts to label Stravinsky's music as ludic through ways of comparisons of his music with play. This is the case when, for example, critics elaborate analogies between Stravinsky's block-constructions and rules of games.[105] Why does one talk about play or games when describing art and especially music; for what purpose? This is the question which runs through this whole dissertation on Britten's music. But

[105] Andrew Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor*, 11.

before tackling this issue, let me build a case for a conception of music as playing and gaming, in a literal sense.

Among the first attempts to consider music as a game is Johan Huizinga's work (1938). In *Homo Ludens*, he understands play as an element in ancient societies derived into rituals and competitions, in which music is a typical example. For him, what makes music play-driven is exactly because it relies on these aspects of ritual and competition. Huizinga describes music as a contest via examples of Greenlandic drumming-songs[106] or through the myth of Marsyas and Apollo.[107] Similarly, Huizinga stresses the sociological function of music as a ritual.[108] For him, "the 'music' arts live and thrive in an atmosphere of common rejoicing; the plastic arts do not."[109] Indeed, plastic arts are for Huizinga further from competition and the ritual than music is, and are therefore devoid of play-element. As it appears, Huizinga's definition of play (conflated with games as '*spelelement*') relies extensively on the idea of performance, and in particular on the ritualistic and agonistic one. Music is the epitome of the art of performance, and therefore inherits the archaic play-element of culture. This vision is of course limited. It is so, firstly, because Huizinga restricts his understanding of play and games to rituals and competition. But it is also limited, secondly, because it narrows music to performance and ignores processes of composition, aesthetic signification, and listening. Significantly, Huizinga presents the plastic arts as devoid of a play-element for the very fact of "their being bound to matter and to the limitations of form inherent in it."[110] Similarly, dance steps aside from play because "its execution depends on the human body with its limited

[106] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 85-86.
[107] *Ibid.*, 163.
[108] *Ibid.*, 158.
[109] *Ibid.*, 167.
[110] *Ibid.*, 168

manoeuvrability."[111] Strangely, these descriptions give play as 'playing with' a complete miss. Because, in fact, these manipulations within the boundaries of what a gesture or a plastic material imposes is exactly what toying is about.

Following Huizinga, Thomas Clifton explores the play-element in music through ideas of ritual and competition:

> The [...] characteristics of ritual can easily be seen as constituents of play: the absorption in an activity for its own sake, the designation of a special place in which the activity is to be played out (the football field, the chess board, etc.), the recombination and sublimation of certain 'real-life' activities (competition, tension, relaxation, achievement, decision making, etc.), and the specification of certain bodily motions regarded as necessary to the successful performance of the play activity.[112]

Though he takes Huizinga's work as the basis of his discussion, Clifton overcomes many of the earlier discussion's limitations. Interestingly, he uses the idea of play as ritual/performance to consider compositional processes. This is so because of Clifton's emphasis on phenomenology. For Clifton, the music-experience and the play-experience are comparable phenomena. But Clifton's phenomenological method lures him towards searches in "ontological cores" of the play and musical reality.[113] This attitude which tries to fix play as an essence misses much of the appeal of play, of its fleeting quality and of its pragmatic consequences. This point is better tackled by Gabor Csepregi:

> it is possible to adopt a play attitude even while conforming to the rules of a reality that plays with us and invites us to play: a musical piece, a form of dance, or a communal masquerade. And we may take up another form of play attitude by modifying the rules and, by doing so, changing our ways of making music, dancing, or masquerading.[114]

Next to this transformational feature of play, Csepergi stresses the gestural aspect of the musical motive, and how these emanate from instrumental playing. For him, "When we *play* on a musical instrument, we perform a great variety of bodily movements" and "our

[111] *Ibid.*
[112] Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (Yale University Press, 1983), 207.
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] Gabor Csepregi, *Attitudes of Play* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 34.

body is lived as an expressive 'medium'".[115] Consequently, there is a physical aspect of playing with sounds which bring music closer to sport because it relies on physicality, practicing, and performing. The limitation of bodily gestures, which made Huizinga prone to envisage discarding dance towards the side of non-play activities, is in fact for Csepregi a central aspect of music considered as a sport-like activity, because "artists perceive their body as an instrument to control and mould, and even to manipulate, or simply as a resistance to overcome."[116] In consequence, Csepergi articulates the gestural aspect of playing musical instruments, with the critical attitude of play in listeners, who "relate to auditory and visual forms with an altered attitude and discover new aspects of things".[117] Once more, the transformational quality of play is brought to the fore.

In addition to Csepregi, another description of music as play is proposed by Roger Moseley in *Keys to Play*.[118] He too relies on music conceived as a practice (a "*ludomusical* praxis"),[119] and on play as emerging from musical performance. However, Moseley develops further the idea of the musical instrument as a playful interface. For him, the piano keyboard is akin to a computer keyboard, in the sense that it allows for "generating, processing, relaying, storing, and accessing information."[120] Like sportlike gestures and their limitations to be explored, the keyboard medium is an interface whose boundaries are engaged with in terms of creativity. The very limitations of the medium are a spur for the imagination. This kind of reciprocity (limitation which incites ways to overcome limitations) is what Moseley has in mind when he quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer saying that "all playing is a being-played."[121] There is in fact an inherent competition

[115] Gabor Csepregi, "On Musial Performance as Play", *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 46 (2013), 96. His emphasis.
[116] *Ibid.*, 110.
[117] Csepregi, *Attitudes of Play*, 47.
[118] Roger Moseley, *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo* (University of California Press, 2016).
[119] *Ibid.*, 1.
[120] *Ibid.*
[121] In *ibid.*, 4.

between a playful medium and its player; a game of agency where the player is always pushed further to test new solutions. After all, Huizinga missed there a point he would have himself enjoyed: the limitation of a medium, far from limiting the "free play"[122] of a cultural element, is in reality a stimulus for playful competition. Moseley locates this conception in the performer's relation to the keyboard, Csepregi to the performer's relation to the body. But, this interaction may equally be located between the composer and the listener, as well as between the composer and their activity of composition. Play is then a type of relation which may potentially creeps into many corners of music-making.

In such a perspective, this brief overview of applications of play studies to music gives a complex picture of what is at work when one talks about music as play, and exemplifies how much theory and cultural descriptions are a matter of toying with concepts. Strikingly, some authors identify play in performance, while others stress its importance in composition or hermeneutics, or even in terms of its relation to a medium. The following graph offers a summary of the different possibilities in considering music as play or as a game (fig. 1.1).

[122] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 166.

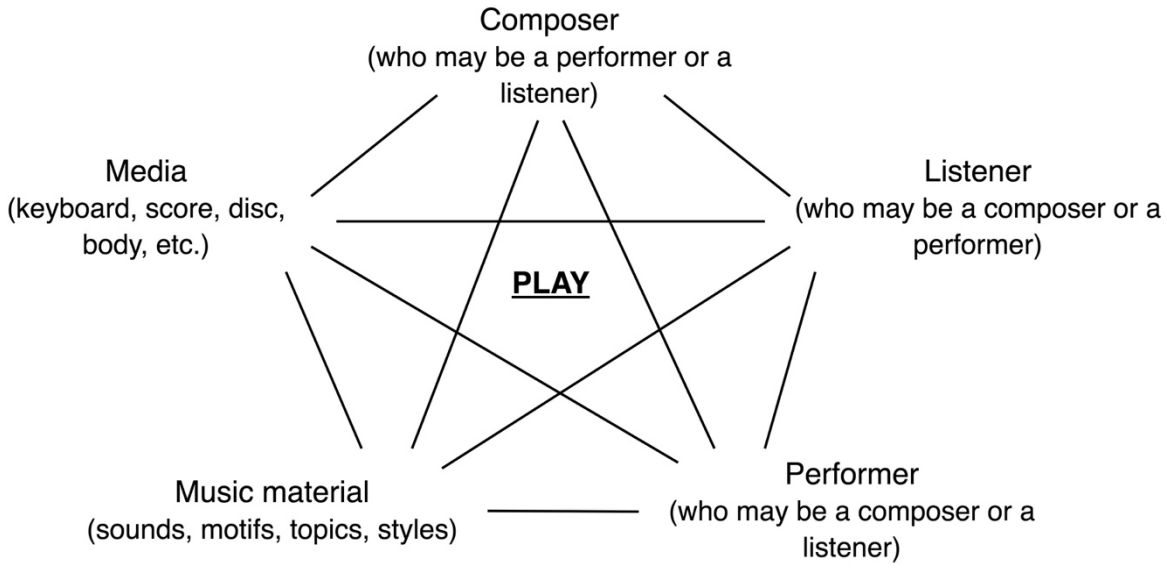


Figure 1.1 Playful relations in the musical experience

Figure 1.1 theorises many potential locations where play may develop in the multifarious relations between composer, listener, and performer. Such a set of relations is in constant rotation because each player may swap sides at will: the composer can be the performer; the performer is also a listener; as is composer; the listener is involved in an activity of anticipation which puts themselves in the same situation in which the composer has been, and so on. At the same time, these 'players' may develop playful types of relations to media (in its broad sense, including musical instruments, electronic devices, scores, discs, images, texts, or the very body of the aforementioned actors) and to the musical material in its diversity (motifs, topics, styles, and so on). Play appears as a range of possibilities. The multiplicity of actors, media and musical material give many opportunities for such relations to become playful. All these relations at the core of the musical experience offer, then room-for-play for playful relations themselves. Room, and that is the theoretical challenge, with constant room-for-play. Play is a slippery fish to catch. Such a theoretical cartography of the possibilities of play (figure 1.1) emphasises how much play may infiltrate any component of the musical *socius*. In sum, the notion of

play is itself a playful tool. But now, in what consist those relations of limitations and of playing at being played that seems so central to the notions of play and games? To develop such a quest further, let me expose in the next sections the mechanics and semiotics of play, and their conection to the childlike.

1.2 Toying

Mechanics of play are a creative dynamic process. Playing, in spite of the great bulk of meanings the word offers, is in definitive a matter of 'playing with':

> 12a *intr. play with*: To amuse oneself with, sport with; to touch or finger lightly, or move slightly, with the hand (a material object) by way of frivolous amusement; to treat (anything) lightly or frivolously; to dally, trifle, or toy with. (*OED*, 2nd ed.)

To 'play with', is to 'fiddle', i.e. "to move things about or touch things with no particular purpose" (Cambridge Dictionary Online). It implies some parameters: a movement, an object, a 'player', and autotelic purpose. An autotelic activity does not imply a lack of seriousness. Yet, like 'play with', phrasal verbs like 'idle with' or 'toy with' may ambivalently denote aspects of unseriousness in their description of a manipulation by someone of an object for its own sake. To 'fiddle' is also used informally to refer to violin playing: as a manipulation of an instrument to produce sounds and music. The parallel between the polysemy of 'to play' (with something or with an instrument) and the polysemy of 'to fiddle' (with something, or with a violin) invites to question further musical play and the manipulation of an object. For that purpose, let us consider the great variety of meanings of 'play' and 'to play' as found in diverse dictionaries:[123]

[123] The definitions presented here are a summary of the following dictionary entries: "Play", *The Oxford English Dictionary* (ed. J.A. Simpson & E.S.C. Weiner), second edition, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 1011 to 1021; "Play", *Middle English Dictionary* (ed. Sherman M. Kuhn), The University of Michigan Press, 1981, pp. 1022-1034; *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (ed. Jonathan Green), Chambers, 2010, pp. 207-214; "Play", Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar*, vol. II; Stahan, 1755; "jeu", *Trésor de la langue française, Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)*, Éditions du Centre

Exercise for amusement and diversion	Playing a game, practicing a sport
Theatre play	Playing a character (mimic)
Playing an instrument, a record	Oscillating freely (leaves, light, boiling water)
Having room for motion	Sexual metaphor
Brisk action, to move oneself with energy	To trick, to deceive

Figure 1.2 Meanings of 'play' and 'to play' in dictionaries

In this list, the noun ('play') and the verb ('to play') have been combined to facilitate the reading. All these definitions have in common the idea of movement, which links back to the notion of *Spielraum* or scope for play. Samuel Johnson offers, in that regard, a fascinating definition of play in his 1755 dictionary and presents play as a "Room for motion". Johnson completes his dictionary acceptation by the following example: "The joints are let exactly into one another, that they have no *play* between them, lest they shake upwards or downwards".[124] Next to 'motion' and its idea of movement, 'room' specifies that this movement operates in a *limited space*. 'Play' is about movement in a limited mechanical situation, as in one of the examples given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "The two Buckets... have about three feet play, rising and falling." The French word *jeu* (which combines its English equivalents 'play' and 'games') can be employed in the same way: "Aisance dans le fonctionnement d'une chose ou de plusieurs choses entre elles" (Easiness in the way something or many things operate).[125] So 'play' in that meaning is about a movement which operates in a constrained place. It is a repetitive action, a variational displacement of a plaything (i.e. the object played with) within a 'room'. A similar idea can be found in Eric Zimmerman's

National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1983; "Play", *Origins, An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (ed. Eric Partridge), Routledge: London, 1966, p. 502.
[124] Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.
[125] *Trésor de la langue française*, p. 703.

analysis of play as a "free movement within a more rigid structure".[126] For Zimmerman, "Like a loose gear, the wiggling movement of play happens because of but also in opposition to, the logical systems on which it depends."[127] In other words, play occurs in the interaction between two playthings (or with the different parts of a plaything). Play is thus a relational concept whose unsteadiness makes it tricky to pin down. In this fashion, the rigid structure is a room; a limited space in which play proceeds. Consequently, 'movement' and 'space limitation' encompass the other meanings of play listed above. These diverse meanings may now be presented in a new configuration (Fig. 1.3):



Figure 1.3 Meanings of play subsumed to 'room for motion' as a common denominator

Indeed, from the mechanical definition (limited room for motion) can be derived the diversity of meanings of 'play' as forms of 'playing with'. Repetitive actions drive playing as in exercising for enjoyment. A player who moves moves playthings with rules

[126] Eric Zimmerman, *The Rules We Break: Lessons in Play, Thinking, and Design* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2022), 22.
[127] *Ibid.*

i.e. limitations is what is central to playing a game of sport. To play a musical instrument implies that the player makes repetitive actions on an object in order to produce sounds. Similarly, when one is played, a second character takes the place of the plaything and is toyed with. In addition, to play is a sexual metaphor particularly profuse in slang, and is built on the idea that bodies are playthings in interaction through repeated or teasing movements. In theatrical performance, active characters are moving on a scene, i.e. a limited 'room' for action; and their impersonating (playing as mimicking) explores the room for considering one's own body as a plaything for the imitation of another body. All these meanings find common ground in Samuel Johnson's succinct definition (play as 'room for motion'). By extension, 'to play' is to move an object in a 'room' i.e. a limited space. 'Room for motion', in the end, is another formulation of 'playing with', with much more emphasis, however, on the presence of players as manipulators of a plaything.

'Playing an instrument' is in that regard a revealing use of the word 'play'. One plays *the* violin, and not *on* the violin (even if older usages may be found as such). For Johan Huizinga, "the connecting link between play and instrumental skill is to be sought in the nimble and orderly movements of the fingers."[128] It is not music which is played according to the grammatical structure (one could play music *on* the violin indeed) but what is played is the instrument itself. And by 'play' is understood a whole series of parameters: repetitive movements, leeway, imaginative overcoming of obstacles. There is then in some cases the will to go beyond the limitations of a plaything and to practice hard to master those limitations. Playing a musical instrument through practising, becomes thus akin to sport. Therefore, two types of limitations appear: on the one hand the limited room for motion implied by the physical features and design of a plaything;

[128] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 42.

on the other hand, the attitude of the player who chooses on purpose a plaything *for* its limitation and tries to achieve their goal nonetheless. As I will show below, this is exactly what the Canadian philosopher Bernard Suits calls respectively play and games.

'Playing with' implies the presence of a plaything, deviated from its original purposes and manipulated playfully for its own sake. Play happens in relation to the inherent limitation of the playthings themselves. If one plays with a dictionary, its rigid properties are the limitations within which one's playful manipulation can operate. One can also play with a tie, i.e. reallocate the instrumental purpose of the tie (worn to attend a friend's wedding for instance) into an autotelic manipulation. In this case, the physical properties of the tie are very different from the dictionary, and are a lot more flexible and slack. The tie affords one a greater room for motion than a dictionary. The notion of affordance is here central. Defined by James J. Gibson, an affordance is what the physical qualities of an 'object' has to offer to someone, in relation to what this someone can do.[129] Eric Clarke illustrates this concept with much acuity: "affordances are primarily understood as the *action* consequences of encountering perceptual information in the world. A chair affords sitting, a stick affords throwing, raspberries afford eating, a sharp pencil affords writing."[130] My tie then, affords many manipulations (whirling, flapping, lassoing, and so on), as does the dictionary (opening, closing, hanging, fly-trapping, or else).

But then, and this is a crucial turn, I can create a polysemy out of the play with the tie or the dictionary. Both offer many semiotic affordances and offer a range of associations with other objects. With the tie, I can create a snake, a handkerchief, a violin, a self-flogging whip; with the dictionary a stone, a flying bird, a hat, a house, a boat, etc.

[129] James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Bloomsbury, 1966.
[130] Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 38. Clarke's emphasis.

This is where, paradoxically, play can not just divert an object from its first instrumentality, but reallocate that object in new, imaginative instrumentalities. In my imagination, the plaything can become many fictional objects in turns. There is then a key semiotic process at work in play, strangely bounded on one side to the limitation of the plaything, and unbounded on the other by the fact that this limitation is a creativity-trigger. As mentioned by Thomas Henricks, "when play's objects are capable of responding to us directly (instead of merely resisting), the interaction acquires a back-and-forth character. We push; the plaything pushes back."[131] Thus, there are, on top of the physical affordances, semiotic affordances of an object. The "dynamic qualities"[132] of the plaything are to be tackled in terms of peculiar semiotic dynamic processes.

There is, thus, a peculiar back-and-forth semiotic relation between the player and the plaything. The following analysis of toys underpins the nature of that relation. Indeed, imagination and polysemy are central to the plaything. In other words, *the plaything is a toy*. As described by Gilles Brougère, the toy is "an open-ended object that does not predetermine a use (you can do a thousand different things with a miniature car or a doll that do not amount to following the rules of a game, but rather to inserting an object into an imaginary universe that is more or less faithful to the real world)."[133] This non-predetermined use of the toy, its playful semiotic openness is at the core of 'Hix', a set of 'Convertible Construction Cones' designed in 2017 by Alex Hochstrasser and manufactured by the Swiss company *Moluk* (which specialises in multifunctional educational toys). As shown on the following collection of promotional images (see fig. 1.4), 'Hix' is an object foldable in four different positions. The different children on those

[131] Thomas S. Henricks, *Play and the Human Condition* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 45.
[132] Csepregi, *Attitudes of Play*, 44.
[133] "Le jouet "est un objet ouvert qui ne prédétermine pas un usage (on peut faire avec une voiture miniature ou une poupée mille choses différentes qui ne reviennent pas à suivre les règles d'un jeu, mais plutôt à insérer un objet dans un univers imaginaire plus ou moins fidèle au monde réel)." Gilles Brougère (ed.), *Le Jouet: valeurs et paradoxes d'un petit object secret* (Autrement, 1992), 12. My translation

images use Hix in the many various ways afforded by its flexibility: as a phone, as a hat, as binoculars, as a mouth, etc.



Figure 1.4 Toying with 'Hix'
(©2000-2022 Alex Hochstrasser / Moluk GmbH)

According to its promotional description:

> Hix is a *versatile* new construction toy consisting of four *convertible* cones made of elastic silicone rubber. Each cone *transforms* into four basic shapes which can be stacked and nested in *a myriad of different configurations*. Hix is a delight *to fidget with* and makes geometry *accessible and fun for all ages*. It *playfully trains* visual-spatial ability, hand-eye coordination, and fine motor skills.[134]

In italics, I highlighted some significant words conveyed by the text. Firstly, Hix is 'versatile'; 'convertible' in 'a myriad of different configurations'. Secondly, Hix is 'accessible', easy to 'fidget with' and 'playfully trains' as many educational toys do. The versatility of Hix emulates its playfulness and accessibility for all. 'Accessible' does not mean that Hix has no potential to afford. From the images shown above, it is rich in combinational possibilities and polysemous uses. Toying, therefore, creates a false-simplicity. There is a constant relation in Hix between the form manipulated and the

[134] See promotional website: [https://www.moluk.com/hix.php] (My emphasis; accessed on June 2024).

iconic evocation it conveys. The hat, the phone, the mouth, however, are the result of a trial-and-error process, of a 'fidget[ing] with' the object. The sign appears as a surprise, in the play between the limitation of the object and the imagination of the player. In other occasions, however, like in the top picture of figure 1.6, a child can engage with 'Hix' in purely combinatorial ways, exploring the movements for themselves, testing what combinations 'Hix' affords. That way, toying may be 'abstract' in the sense that it does not aim at mimicking any external reality; and the shapes emanating from this 'abstract' semiotic associations, but unexpectedly. Toying, therefore, creates the potentiality of chance semiotics; another instance of a playing at being played. The term 'abstract', however, is misleading because play is immersed into the materiality and reality and handling toys. Hix is the typical example of the plaything; of a toy. Hix is about movement, limitation, and imagination, three aspects at the centre of the plaything quality and toying is an activity where intellectual and material manipulation enter into a playful paradoxical dance.

Indeed, conceiving 'play as toying' leads to the notion of manipulation. A talented player is a player who is nimble in the manipulation of a plaything; a player who is, etymologically, 'clever':

> 'Clever'. [...] relation to Middle English *clivers* 'claws, talons, clutches', in the sense 'nimble of claws, sharp to seize', and the 16–17th cent. examples (also of *cleverly*) show it connected with the use of the hands, a notion which still remains in the general sense of *adroit*, *dexterous*, having 'the brain in the hand'. [...] The sense-development has analogies with that of *nimble*, *adroit*, *handy*, *handsome*, *nice*, *neat*, *clean*. (*OED*).

To be clever, is to be skilled at manipulating objects, to have 'the brain in the hand'. By extension, to be clever or witty, is to be skilled in the manipulation of conceptual objects. The French emphasises it even more strongly: the *jeu d'esprit* (mind-play) plays sport with the gap between concepts, find the room for their motion, their interaction, and *presents a clever conceptual solution to a problem*. Cleverness is also central to

competing games. One player has to "outthink the opponent's move".[135] It is also strongly linked, in play, to imagination. For Sutton-Smith, "because play involves the transformation of persons into agents, of objects (or toys) into agencies, of acts into representations, of places into scenes, and of time into plots, creativity is inherent in the character of toy play."[136] Similarly, as stated by Zimmerman, "If play always plays with something, it can also make that something into something else. We learn rules but only so that they can be understood, analysed, questioned, bent, broken, discarded, and refashioned into something new."[137] Toying bears thus a playful criticality discussed earlier. 'Hix' develops in children what is sometimes called the "Alternate Uses Task" (AUT), which help to measure divergent thinking. Here are the terms in which Bateson & Martin define AUT: "when asked what can be done with, say, a brick, the convergent thinker says it is used for building a wall. The divergent thinker suggests many different uses, such as a doorstop, a hammer, breaking windows, repelling an attacker, grinding up to make red paste, and so forth."[138] Thus, there is in toying and in the toyification of one's surroundings (turning something into a toy) a dynamic process where manipulation and imagination are intertwined and where both act as catalysts for each others.

How, then, can toying, which fosters problem-solving cleverness, be considered in art, and especially in music? As so eloquently put by Sicart, "the toy is a gate to the world understood through play."[139] Which means that interacting with the world through play, through the manipulation of an object for manipulation's sake, presents a strong potential for aesthetic contemplation, and artistic performance. In *Dark Toys, Surrealism*

[135] Zimmerman, *The Rules We Break*, 24.
[136] Brian Sutton-Smith, "The Role of Toys in the Investigation of Playful Creativity", *Creativity Research Journal*, 5/1 (1992), 3.
[137] Zimmerman, *The Rules We Break*, 30.
[138] Bateson & Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation*, 55.
[139] Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (MIT Press, 2014), 36.

and the Culture of Childhood, David Hopkins questions the toy-like quality of art, in connection to Surrealist aesthetics. For him, "It is a truism that works of art are, on some level, toylike. Like toys, art objects lie outside the sphere of utility, and invite us to indulge in the sensuous free play of our faculties."[140] The same toylike reallocation can be observed with sounds. Indeed, music and sounds, as any resource, can be 'toyified' (turned into toys) into play. In itself, music can have many functions: sounds can be produced for dance (music which calls for movement), rituals (sounds creating a state of trance), intimidation (the horn frightening the fox, the drum terrorising the enemy), marching (synchronised sounds to organise the movements of the troop), aesthetic appreciation (art-music), and so on. This plurality of functions reveals more an openness in affordances than designed instrumentalities of sounds and music *per se*. Similarly, visual colours may take on many functions: signals, symbols, aesthetics, camouflage, and so on. These are not instrumentalities but affordances of the colour, its rerouting towards instrumental uses. In short, sounds and colours are like toys. They are open media on which play can thrive. It does not mean that sounds and colours are always toyed with (see all the non-play related uses made above) but they offer a strong affordance for it.

In particular, musical motifs, for their brevity and propensity for easy transformation present an ideal toylike aspect, as "the essential in playthings is that they should be comparatively small, and should be separate units."[141] Therefore, a conception of the 'sound-plaything' is different from the 'sound-object' of a Pierre Schaeffer who describes a relationship between the structure of sound and its perception by the listener (i.e. when the sound-object becomes a linguistic).[142] Contrastingly, musical motifs offer a 'playful design' for being, like toys, "objects that by design allow users to toy around

[140] David Hopkins, *Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood* (Yale University Press, 2021), 6.
[141] Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) [1st ed. 1952], 28.
[142] Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux* (Seuil, 1966).

with them."[143] Besides, as mentioned above when commenting on Csepregi, there is a gestural aspect to the musical motive, an almost sport-like one. Motivic toying, sport-like handling of music material, smallness of motives: all in all, this toylike conception of music sounds fairly close to the music of Benjamin Britten.

Indeed, the many tools gleaned in the Introduction from the diverse studies of Bridcut, Bullivant, Rupprecht, and Albright, are in fact different applications of musical toying (fig. 1.7). Fancy associations are dynamic processes akin to toying, because fancy "plays with fixities and definites".[144] Fancy playtests the formal and semiotic limitations of the elements it combines, in order to reveal new curious, uncanny, or original mingling. Similarly, practical jokes play on a constant slippage of meaning. A practical joke toys with textual or musical playthings and with the variety of meanings these playthings may hint to. Thus, it develops a semi-veiled criticality. Likewise, stratification is the exploration of a room for play in the interlocking between two or more musical playthings, leading to a series of congruencies and discrepancies between layers. Musical strata, like toys, are matched or mismatched with one another. In the process, the error (the discrepancy, the mismatch) provokes a playful aesthetic enjoyment, like when two toys are assembled together in a facetious way. The musical materials are play-tested against each other, and nonsensical relations are explored and relished. Altogether, fancy, practical jokes, and stratification, have the propensity to move on a scale between meaningful integration and nonsense. This peculiar semiotic process, whose aesthetic outcomes are crucial to understand Britten's music, are developed more fully below. In a similar fashion, false-simplicity is linked to music-toying because what makes an artistic material a great toy is the openness afforded by its simplicity.

[143] Sicart, *Play Matters*, 40.
[144] Daniel Albright, *Music's Monisms*, 121.

Toyifing implies simplifying. But, the handling of the musical toy triggers creativity and imagination, and the fruitful toy is the toy which affords a great variety of uses. If the toy is simple, the meaning created by its manipulation can reach a high level of complexity, hence the paradox of being simple and complex at the same time. Ultimately, toying refers to the child for because toying is a typical childlike activity. Toyification, in particular, is central to childlikeness. The propensity to turn any surrounding object into a toy and engage with it in creative terms is connoted as a typically childlike attitude to the world. This attitude, furthermore, is similar to the attitude of the trickster, culturally linked extensively to child figures as in the above discussion on Peter Pan. Childlike toying is then critical play. In Britten's music, musical toyification goes hand in hand with a rhetoric of the childlike, and both hold the ambivalent potential of critical play.

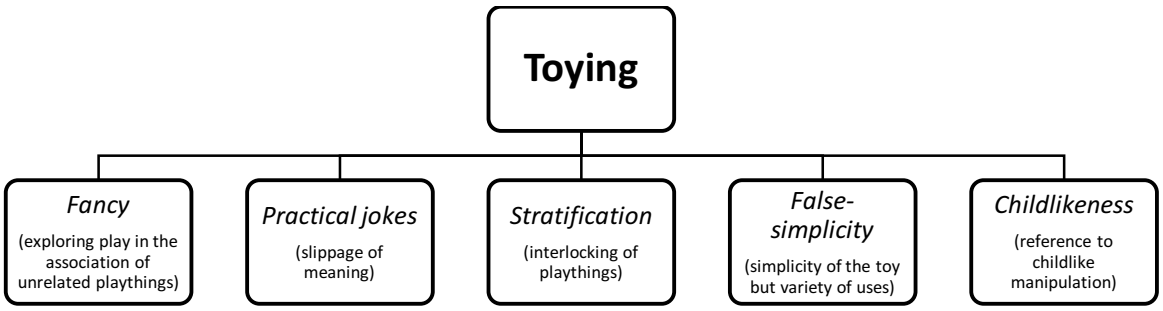


Figure 1.5 Few declinations of toying in Britten's aesthetic

The mechanics of toying, with its paradoxical limitation which unleashes imagination, thus has a further potential as a tool for criticism. There is a childlike aspect of play, in its potential for deriving any element, activity, or object, into toys. This childlikeness, in short, is a form a deconstructionism. Indeed, Sutton-Smith noted the importance of play in deconstructionist thought: "[Derrida] suggested that there is a space between the sign and its meaning, and a space between meaning and reality. These are the spaces of

interpretation, and the mind can play in these interstitial areas."[145] But then, the deconstruction itself can take on a new meaning (and therefore become instrumental). This is the paradox of play. By turning anything into a toy, it produces a radically critical relation to the world. Yet, it is the very autotelic aspect of play which creates the strength of this critical power: "one can attribute the view to the deconstructionists with their notions of radical play upsetting the orderly structures of the world with none but aesthetic or random outcomes."[146] Once more, this deconstructionism is to be linked to the figure of the child and the figure of the trickster. These attitudes are central to understanding the link between Britten's mechanics of play and its critical perspectives.

1.3 Autotelic play and lusory games

The meanings of play used so far bring my discussion to a definition provided by Bernard Suits. For Suits, 'play' is a process of manipulation, a playing *with*. It is a "temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes."[147] The instrumentality of an 'object' (i.e. the purpose for which this object has been designed, its external goal) is reoriented into an autotelic use (for its own purpose). A bowl, for example, has an instrumental quality as a container. If I put the bowl on my head like a hat, I divert its instrumentality and reallocate it. If I really use it as my hat, I'm giving a new instrumentality to the bowl: to protect and cover my head. Or, more realistically, I can use the bowl on the head of someone to cut their hair (in a pudding basin style). This is no play, as I diverted the primary instrumentality (the one for which the object has been designed) towards a secondary one. This is what has been theorised, after Levi-Strauss, as bricolage. But, if I turn the bowl, throw it in the air and

[145] Sutton-Smith, "The Role of Toys", 8.
[146] *Ibid.*, 6.
[147] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Broadview, 2014) [1st ed. 1979], 225.

catch it back, balance it on a spoon, or spin it reversed around my finger, I am manipulating this object for manipulation's sake. The bowl loses temporarily its instrumentality and the activity (play) becomes autotelic.

> Thus, in saying that Johnny is playing *with* his supper, and that the beard stroker is playing *with* his beard, we are implying that these objects normally have, or are involved in, purposes that are foreign to, and perhaps on occasion inconsistent with, the purposes to which Johnny and the beard stroker are putting them. [...] [P]laying always means playing *with* some x or other, although this prepositional addition is not always, and perhaps not even usually, expressed.[148]

Suits' definition of games takes a different path: "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles".[149] A deliberate self-limitation defines games at their core. Suits calls this challenge '*lusory*', and he gives the example of a golf game. The goal in golf (putting the ball in the hole in as few strikes as possible) is not the only aspect of the game that makes golf what it is. If the *only* objective was to fulfil that goal, one might instead simply carry the ball to the green by hand, or invent a clever set of very long tubes to reach the hole in one each single time. Rather, what drives the game (and defines it) is one's *lusory attitude*, in which one seeks to accomplish the goal with deliberately limited means. In this instance, a player uses a golf club to hit the ball, a very unsuitable apparatus for the purpose. By training hard and practicing frequently, however, one may slowly master this limitation to approach the original goal as closely as possible, but with all the uncertainties and looming failure it keeps in store (especially if one starts to compete with other players bound to the same self-limitation). To clarify, Suits also gives a fuller definition of games, which includes the subtle difference between goals, rules, and lusory limitations:

> To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].[150]

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[148] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 222; Suits' Emphasis.
[149] *Ibid.*, 43.
[150] *Ibid.*; Suits' brackets.

A rowing race has a specific state of affairs (to row a defined distance quicker than the other boats, or to bump the boat in front: the prelusory goal), using only means permitted by rules (a boat, a selected number of rowers, blades, etc.: the lusory means), where rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means (blades and no motor: the constitutive rules), and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such an activity (the lusory attitude). According to the prelusory goal (to win the race), a motorised boat would be an efficient means, but the game itself imposes to do the best of less efficient means (blades used in the most synchronised way possible). This limitation imposes the development of skills on the rowers' part, with intense practicing and early morning wake-ups (to the dismay of the rowers' partners). In brief, if a motorised boat can be manoeuvred quickly, rowing, as a sport, implies dedication to do the best one can with limited means.

Hence, there is a curious relation between playing and gaming. To start with, both playing and gaming are activities *and* attitudes. Playing is an activity: an autotelic manipulation of an object or a resource reallocated into a plaything. Playing is also an attitude: an exploratory and imagination-driven mind-set which is provoked by the ongoing autotelic manipulation. Gaming is an attitude too: towards self-limitations to overcome. And gaming is an activity: in the actual way to overcome self-imposed obstacles.To the activities of playing and gaming are bounded the corresponding playful and gameful attitudes. More accurately, it is these attitudes which trigger those activities. The term 'playful' therefore cannot be conflated with the term 'light-hearted'. Instead, it has to been understood as the attitude which is linked to play, as play is defined by Suits.

'Gameful', an old word which went out of fashion has been resuscitated in ludology is used in the present dissertation to designate the similar link to games.[151]

In this respect, the concepts of play and games converge upon the notion of limitation. On the one hand, a plaything is limited: the object manipulated has a design, a form, i.e. a certain affordance which orientates the manipulation. On the other hand, a game is *defined* through its limitations to overcome. In that regard, a playing activity (a playful manipulation on the affordances of a plaything) can easily become a game as soon as a goal is set up. Let us take a card example. If I start fiddling with cards with no other purpose than fiddling with them, I am playing: I am limited in the manipulations I can make with these thin pieces of cardboard, and I explore the room of their possibilities through manipulation and playtesting. But now, let us imagine that a new goal emerges in my mind: I want to build a house of cards. In that case, the physical limitation of my plaything (thin, flimsy), my manipulation of it, and my restriction to its use (no glue allowed), become auxiliary to the fulfilment of my goal. The physical limitation of the card, not at all adapted to build a miniature castle, is my lusory self-imposed obstacle I mean to overcome. I'm suddenly playing a game.

There is thus an easy overlap between play and games, but the two activities (with attitudes attached) cannot be conflated.[152] One should then distinguish between play, games, and their potential cohabitation (see fig. 1.6). As in my determination to build a house of cards, *when play and games do overlap*, *it is because play becomes the lusory means of a game*. My manipulation becomes the obstacle to overcome; my playing becomes a game when I start to allocate goals to an activity of manipulation.

[151] Steffen P. Walz & Sebastian Deterding (eds.), *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (MIT Press, 2014).
[152] Suits goes further and add sport into the equation in: Bernard Suits, "Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1988), 1-9.

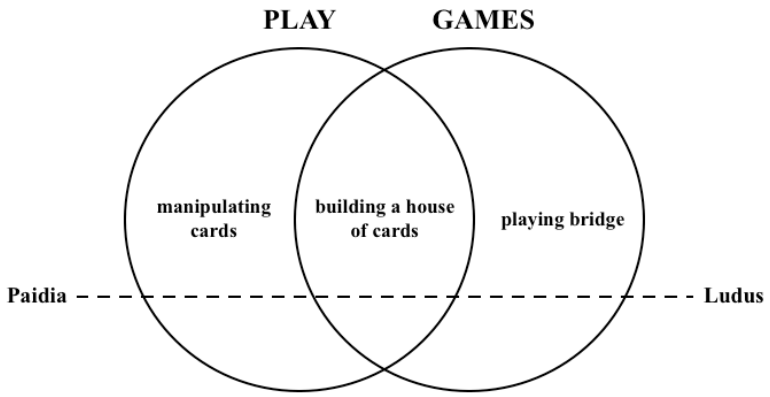


Figure 1.6 Overlap between Suitsian play and games

Another helpful way to look at this overlap, is through Roger Caillois' taxonomy of ruled and unruled play and games. At one end of the axis is *paidia*, the anarchical, frolicsome and uncontrolled activity. At the other end is *ludus*—the disciplined, ruled, and conventionalised game.[153] *Paidia* and *ludus* complement play and games, in their interaction with attitudes of self-limitation (towards *ludus*) and autotelic toying with objects (towards *paidia*). I added on fig. 1.8 Caillois' *paidia/ludis* axis, to show its relation with Suits' overlap of play and games.

Let us push the distinction of play and games further, and follow Suits' theory of play as autotelic reallocation and games as lusory. In the previous example, I was playing with cards. But, from which instrumentality was I reallocating them? A business card is designed to communicate contact details, but 'playing card' (here, the word playing is misleading) is designed to be used in a card game. Therefore, I was reallocating into play an object designed to be used in a game: i.e. diverting a gamething into a plaything. Similarly, I can use a baseball bat for a baseball game, but I can also reallocate it into an autotelic playing. For Emily Ryall, "Since a baseball bat [...] is *instrumentally* designed

[153] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

to hit baseballs, it is under Suits' definition, not an instance of playing."[154] Therefore, if I use a bat for a game of baseball, I am not 'playing' in the Suitstian sense of the term (even if, in common language, I am indeed 'playing a game of baseball'). If I start, however, to fiddle with the bat for the sake of fiddling it (i.e. if I reallocate it from the goal of the game) I am then playing. The instrumentality of the bat (to engage in a game) is diverted into play. In consequence one can play with an object designed for games.

There is, though, one problem with this theory. What about toys? If I play with a toy, what am I reallocating it from? The toy has been designed for play (even when it presents a play-version of an instrumental object). Therefore, its instrumentality is to be used in an activity of play. At this stage, then, we have probably reached the limit of Suits' definition.[155] What I propose then, is to amend Suits' definition in the following way:

> Play is a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes (i.e. when these activities are used as toys). To play is to engage in an autotelic activity through toys.

In other words, playing is toying, and using any element (with instrumental means) as a toy (i.e. to reallocate it for autotelic purposes) creates an activity of play. By moving slightly higher in signification through the concept of toy, this definition allows us to keep the core of Suits' definition, while including in it most of its critics. It thus sharpens Occam's razor.[156]

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[154] Emily Ryall, "Playing with Words: Further Comment on Suits' Definition", in her, et al. (eds.), *The Philosophy of Play* (Taylor & Francis, 2013), 46. Her emphasis.

[155] Suits' himself would have responded that what is reallocated in that situation is 'time': I play because I could use my time more fruitfully (Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 227-8). Yet, this approach has been criticised by several scholars, on the grounds that reallocating time more or less concerns any activity. (See Ryall, "Playing with Words").

[156] One could answer that sometimes toys can be used instrumentally to do other things than playing. But in that case, someone would have reallocated the autotelic qualities of the toy *for instrumental purposes*. This person would not be playing, but engaging in an activity of bricolage.

In musical terms, how do lusory self-limitations (i.e. games) and autotelic toying (i.e. play) come to the fore? In response to this question, I suggest that musical games are developed as soon as one opts, to reach a goal, for a sound-related self-limitation (for lusory musical means). To start with, there are different options for self-limitation in the music experience. The composer may decide to opt for self-limited means (lusory aesthetics) for achieving their goal (goal = composing). The listener may engage with an aesthetic experience as a game, i.e. find ways to overcome the limitation of the object they hear to find new ways to interpret it (goal = interpretation). This is often a game scholars play. Likewise, the performer's relation to the score can be seen as a surmounting of a self-imposed limitation (the limitation = the score; the goal = performing it). Lastly, one can have a gameful relation to a musical medium: a keyboard, a computer, a score, and so on.

Likewise, if music or sounds can be played, what are they reallocated from? I propose two types of reallocations of music into toying. Firstly, music and sounds can be rerouted from their social functions (for example from being marches, lullabies, prayers, and so on). Secondly, and more crucially, music and sounds may be *deviated away from their stylistic functions*. A triad may be decontextualised from tonal progressions and played for the plastic and semiotic interactions it affords. Similarly, a fragment of a gamelan scale may be used as a pathway between styles that seldom meet, all because of the manipulations its design affords. These two examples hint at elements typical of Britten's music. Altogether, Suits' autotelic play will be used in this thesis to its full extent as a powerful concept for analysing Britten's music.

Identically, I will describe Benjamin Britten as using lusory tactics in composition (playing games), i.e. imposing restrictions on himself to achieve compositional goals. Of course, this attraction for creative limitation is observable in many artists. For Pablo

Picasso, "forcing yourself to use restricted means is the sort of restraint that liberates invention. It obliges you to make a kind of progress that you can't even imagine in advance."[157] Igor Stravinsky similarly said: "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles."[158] Both quotations establish a parallel between limitation and creativity. They promote less artistic freedom for greater artistic freedom, no matter their artistic media (painting, sculpting, composing, or else), arguing that the very fact of limiting oneself provokes creativity. New ideas, innovations, and revolutionary aesthetics can be created out of a lusory attitude—out of a game.

There is a small caveat to make at this point of the discussion. It may seem easy to drift with this conception to the idea that all music composition may be a game. This is not my intention. I argue in this dissertation that music composition is playing a game as soon as the stylistic limitations are self-prescribed. When Bach composes counterpoint out of the musical schemas and rhetorical theories of his time, he is not playing a game. These limitations are the limitations imposed on him by the craft of music composition of his time and place. However, as soon as Bach tries to challenge himself by including numerological goals or challenges of proportion, Bach enters into a gameful attitude, as he tries to achieve such goals out of the restricted means of counterpoint. Britten's techniques of composition, as much as their aesthetic outcome are heavily led by such an attitude towards challenging self-limitation. There is no obligation for Britten to do so, and many other of his contemporaries do not engage with such games: for instance, Tippett was not driven by such self-restrictions. Tippett's music is joyful, energetic, and

[157] Picasso, quoted in Françoise Gilot & Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), 57.
[158] Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music, In the Form of Six Lessons* (Harvard University Press, 1942), 65.

flamboyant in many ways, but his jubilatory style does not partake in composition in a lusory way.[159]

It should equally be noted, conversely, that not all economy and restrictions of means are games, if they are not thought of in terms of *obstacles to overcome*; that is to say, if they do not posit a compositional problem. Suits' conception of the lusory attitude of the game player is rooted in banning easier means to achieve a goal (here composition) in place of more efficient means. That is to say that if the means used by a composer (even if economical, let us say like Beethoven's motivic economy of the first movement of his *Fifth Symphony*) are conceived as progressive tools towards a more efficient manner to create music (as Beethoven's dramatic quality of his motivic succinctness), then, these means are not forms of self-restriction. They do not ban more efficient means for the purpose of a game; they are the more efficient means (albeit economical). Contrary to Beethoven, Britten's motivic economy is a matter of playful aesthetics. In addition, the music of Britten embraces ideas of the childlike, which cannot be said as such of the music of Beethoven. Beethoven is not a child at heart; he is not 'still thirteen' like Britten claimed for himself; his teleological heroic constructions are not a series of masks and practical jokes. In consequence, in the same fashion that games and play overlap in Bernard Suits diagram (see fig. 1.8 above), play and games intersect in Britten's compositional strategies. *When play and games do overlap in Britten's music, it is because his toying becomes the lusory mean of a compositional game*. This dissertation questions the aesthetic consequences of such an attitude.

More generally, the idea of music as play invites questions about the autotelic qualities of art. There is indeed an autotelic paradox to any activity of play (as potentially instrumental because autotelic), and to its ambiguous criticality. When I take a pen and

[159] On Tippett's flamboyance, see Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett*, 51-57.

play with it, i.e. when I relocate its instrumental purpose (writing) for a manipulation for its own sake, I create, via this manipulation, a meaningful event. There are two paths that this event can take. On one side, the play-manipulation gives a new aesthetic novelty to the object which has been reallocated into a plaything: the leaps, oscillations, or juggling of my pen share a new aesthetic design which can be appreciated for itself. On the other side, there is a disruptive element in this manipulation. The more culturally significant the object is, the more trivial it can be transformed through play. For example, if I start to play with an important piece of paper, let us say a diploma or a banknote, there may be a radical and critical aspect in my playing, because I handle like a plaything an instrumental object of a high cultural significance. These two paths (the aesthetic one and the radical critical one) are creating a paradox with play's autotelic qualities, fully exposed in art.

This paradox is clear in the case of the radical aspect of the reallocation of an important object into a plaything. The autotelic playing discloses a strong potential for instrumental purpose on a meta-play level. Playing with a diploma is an autotelic activity which presents a critique of the importance we give to this paper. In the case of the second meaningful potential content of play, what I called a renewed aesthetic, the paradox might seem less clear on a first approach. This is because the concept of aesthetic appreciation is often associated with autotelic features too. On one side, play is autotelic (it is a manipulation for manipulation's sake); and on the other the aesthetic experience *can* be autotelic (with no instrumentality, as in art for art's sake). The paradox resides here: the autotelic quality of play becomes instrumental in designing an artful experience (no matter if this aesthetic experience is itself autotelic or not).

To summarise: by playing, i.e. de-instrumentalising an object into a plaything (a toy), I can give to my activity a new instrumentality by stressing its aesthetic aspects (and

create art); or I can create a situation where the meaninglessness of my activity becomes meaningful because it debases an object of value into a plaything. And of course, I can do both at the same time and create critical art through play. In addition, the limitation of the plaything one is toying with may be used as the restricted means one imposes oneself (the lusory means) to achieve a goal (i.e. playing a game). In art, this combined attitude creates a lusory aesthetic, typical of an artist like Britten. This lusory aesthetic, in other words, is an art-game.

1.4 Art-games, sense, nonsense, and the childlike

Take two playthings. A circle and a triangle. Play with them (i.e. toy with them and explore their limitations in interaction). You are creating a series of moments, a series of connections between the playthings. Let us contemplate three play-combinations you might have created by making the circle and the triangle interact (by displacing the triangle upwards). Suddenly, you create a succession of potential references: a person, a road-sign, a person with a pointy hat.

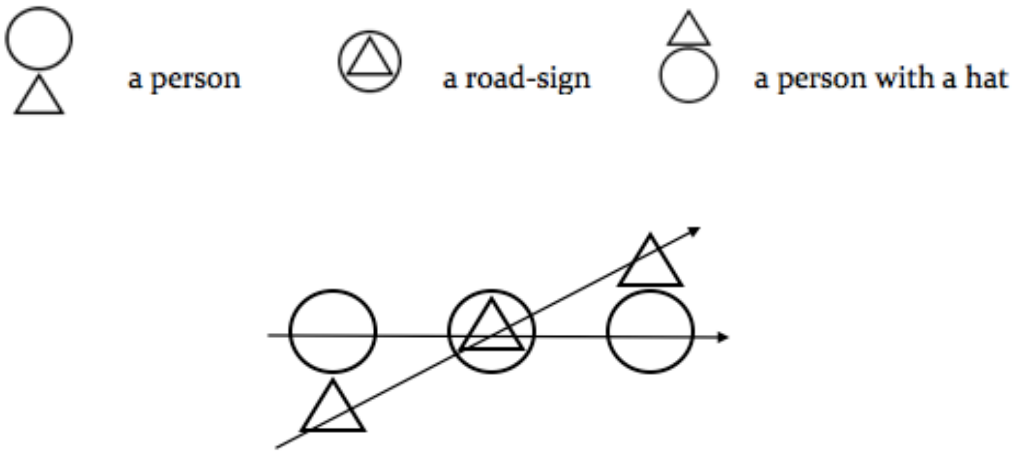
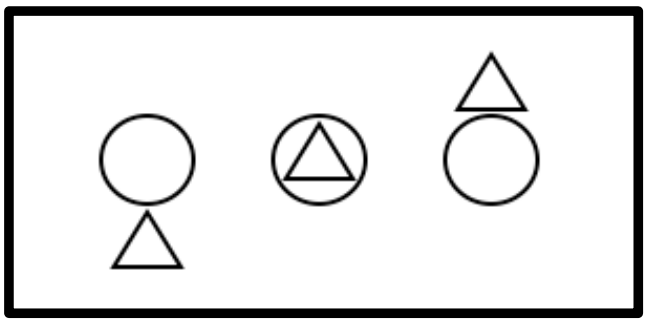


Figure 1.7 Your play

By playing, you created three autonomous semiotic items. These are related to each other only because of their formal similarities (i.e. a combination of a circle and a triangle). Yet, the juxtaposition of these moments, their coexistence, creates a semiotic series which can be encompassed together (you might perhaps invent a story out of the three emerging elements). The meaning of these items is then a chance result from your playtesting. You created those three semiotic elements, if you do not mind me saying, 'by mistake'. You first created a person with a hat by a happy coincidence. You liked it, and tried then to put the triangle in the circle. You are perhaps not aware yet that this second combination has created a 'road-sign' icon, and you process further. As you noticed the logic in the moving upward of the triangle, you put it now on top of the circle. That way, by playing you are constantly creating semiotic content, but content you are not fully mastering. You are played by the semiotics of your activity as much as you are playing with them (in Gadamer's words: 'all playing is a being played').

Now, you want to frame the result, put it on a wall, and call it art.



ART

Figure 1.8 Your art-game

What did you want to say? As we have seen, you *played by* the rules afforded by your playthings, as much as you *played with* them and created unexpected content. You played at being played. But now, you choose to present the result of your play as a piece of art.

In other words, you do not play for yourself anymore, but for others. In that manner you convey to them the chance semiotics of your play, for their aesthetic enjoyment. But, this is perhaps not your first attempt, and you may have had in mind all along our discussion that art-making prospect. Thus, your play was oriented towards a *goal*, viz. art making; in which case you have not been just playing all along, but playing *a game*.

As the game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles in the realisation of a goal, you chose to create art (your goal) out of a circle and a triangle (your limited means). Correspondingly, you made the paradoxical choice of going through a process of playing-and-being-played to create semiotic content.

But now, in the final aesthetic object (the piece of art), we see the *trace* of playing. This type of games produces an art where realism cannot be fully embraced, a trick-apparent art. One can contemplate the three items, but one also sees their playful relations (the variation of triangles and circles). This type of aesthetic, at the boundary of representation and abstraction, is particularly popular in childlike art.

Indeed, there is a childlike aspect in this aesthetic process of engaging in an art-game through the limited means of play. Many children's books use these playful ways of combining forms that echo each other. And your 'person'-and-'person-with-a-hat' combination recalls, for instance, the 'man with a beard but no hair' and the 'women with hair but no beard' in Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Figure 1.9 below present their visual adaptation in a 2017-19 TV series. There is a strange impression coming out of this picture. Play breaks the realistic convention, and creates nonsense.



Figure 1.9 Your play compared with Lemony Snicket's man-with-bead-and-no-hair and woman-with-hair-but-no-beard (© Netflix, 2017-2019)

Because, after all, nonsense is what play-games are about. Playing is engaging in a process of nonsensical semiotics, i.e. the production of successive items derived formally from each other (through variation) but which sense does not relate other than accidentally.

In her analysis of the nonsense literature of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, Elizabeth Sewell describes this process as a 'one and one and one and one and one'.[160] Play does not relate to an ontological entity (a 'big One'), but relates to oneness in a succession of moments.

> Nonsense will presumably have to organize its language according to the principles of order, i.e. it will have to concentrate on the divisibility of its material into ones, units from which a universe can be built. This universe, however, must never be more than the sum of its parts, and must never fuse into some all-embracing whole which cannot be broken down again into original ones. It must try to create with words a universe that consist of bits. [...] The point is that the sum-total is unimportant; it is the composition of it that matters, for this is to be the composition of the universe of Nonsense, a collection of ones which can be summed together into a while but which can always fall back into separate ones again.[161]

The approach of that process, then, has to be considered through pragmatism, i.e. the philosophical method (see the discussion on William James in chapter 4) which contemplates the succession of experiences in their ambulatory process (i.e. the way to

[160] Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, chapter 5.
[161] *Ibid.*, 54.

constitute meaning via the accumulation of patches of experiences). For Jean-Jacques Lecercle, pragmatism (or its linguistic equivalent, pragmatics) is a fruitful way to appraise nonsense literature. For, in such literature,

> The reading is no longer systematic and rational, but desultory and playful. There is no fixed and unique meaning or interpretation, but a proliferation of variously ambiguous partial structures. By focusing on the semantic gaps, this [pragmatic approach] lets language play on its own—it lets language speak.[162]

Nonsense shares with play this fundamentally paradoxical semiotic process: "a nonsense text requires to be read on two levels at once—two incompatible levels: not 'x means A' but 'x is both A and, incoherently, B'. In other words, nonsense deals not in symbolism but in paradox."[163] Furthermore, nonsense (like play) is both unbound and ruled: "Nonsense [...] is a kind of textual doublebind, or paradox. It is both free and constrained. It tells the reader to abide, and not to abide, by the rules of language."[164] That way, the succession of bits out of an orderly process creates an overall chaotic potential. Vide Sewell, "the game of Nonsense may, then, consist in the mind's employing its tendency towards order to engage its contrary tendency towards disorder, keeping the later perpetually in play and so in check."[165]

As a result, there is a peculiar ontology of the plaything in play and games. What matters is not what the plaything is but, in pragmatic terms, how they are moved, folded, and used. For David Myers, "An in-game object labelled 'Queen' might equally be labelled 'Dog' or 'X' insofar as the rules governing its movement are not changed. In this way, the semiotics of toys and games operates similarly in divorcing values and meanings

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[162] Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (Routledge, 1994), 24.
[163] *Ibid.*, 20.
[164] *Ibid.*, 25.
[165] Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, 48. A note of importance: Sewell's understanding of 'game' in fact correspond closely to the Suitsian definition of 'play': For Sewell, a game is "the active manipulation, serving no useful purpose, of a certain object or class of objects, concrete or mental, within a limited field or space and time according to fixed rules, with the aim of producing a given result despite the opposition of chance and/or opponents." (Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense*, 27).

from out-of-games cultural contexts and references."[166] Via these different descriptions linking literature (nonsense) and psychology (pragmatism), many clues are offered to appraise the puzzling link between the mechanics of art-games and their creation of chance signification.

Consequently, play may lead to the notion of the absurd (related to nonsense), i.e. of something incongruous and illogical. Pretending to smoke a pen (so, reallocating the instrumentality of the pen into play) hints at an absurd way of using a pen (fully absurd if it were truly my goal). There is an inclination of play to match and mismatch playthings. If I mismatch words in a playing *on* words, I create a joke (a witty connection of heterogeneous elements, of unexpected juxtapositions of unrelated items suddenly linked together) as in the condensation of words translated from Freud: "anecdotage"; "alcoholidays".[167] Playing with words, then, naturally leads to the production of jokes. At the same time, the mismatching of words in a playing *with* words can lead to poetry: an aesthetic appreciation of the new combinations of worded playthings.

Moreover, the facets of play presented in this chapter, have a lot to do with a childlike attitude. As formulated by Csepregi, "an attitude of play also allows us to perceive new forms and new meanings in our everyday world." He continues: "When that takes place, we become like children who see a picture, a vase, a bookshelf, or a silver of carpet from an entirely fresh angle as they glimpse though the crack of a door from their hiding place in a closet."[168] If play and games are not defined as being exclusively childish activities, it nonetheless remains the case that children are staple actors of plays and games. Culturally, the child is the ideal-type of the player. Therefore, describing plays

[166] David Myers, "A Toy Semiotics, Revisited", in Luísa Magalhães & Jeffrey Goldstein, *Toys and Communication* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 51.
[167] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, (Vintage Books, 2001 [tr. James Strachey; 1st ed. 1905]), 21-22.
[168] Csepregi, *Attitudes of Play*, 38.

and games often overlaps with describing activities symbolically ascribed to children. Children live in a world of materiality where anything can be turned into toys to manipulate (i.e to play with), and where these children's relation to the world is often mediated through self-imposed challenges (i.e. games). In other words, the child is a pragmatist philosopher. This is at least the thesis of Jane Thrailkill, for whom "the pragmatist [...] is plunged in the midst of experience-with-constraints, a state most vivid during youth. Accordingly, the child in William James emerges as an indigenous, curiosity-driven and object-oriented philosopher, what we might call [...] a 'pragmatiser in the wild'."[169] Playing and gaming renew with the pragmatic attitude of the child (a universe of consequences; and of thoughts experienced through their consequences). In terms of aesthetics, there are then two aspects to consider: the aesthetic aspect *in* the play and games of children; and the aesthetic of *looking like* a child, of being childlike.

Childlikeness may be defined by several characteristics. The "tendency of an adult to think, feel, and act like a child would do"[170] may offer a wide range of strategies: *like* the behaviour of a child, *like* the art of children, *like* the sounds they create, *like* their point of view/hearing, or *like* their pragmatic and imaginary relation to the world. When an artist toys, this activity has a lot in common with the activity of the child. Similarly, when one challenges themselves through self-limitations, a child-mind is at work. Children see the world as an endless opportunity for challenges. They interact with the objects of their surroundings as if these objects were toys to manipulate and opportunities for games. This naïve attitude, which ignores the history, function, and importance of the object played (a child would play with a notebook or a passport alike), makes the child

[169] Jane F. Thrailkill, *Philosophical Siblings: Varieties of Playful Experience in Alice, William, and Henry James* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 163.
[170] Mathieu Alemany Oliver & Russell W. Belk (eds.), *Like a Child Would Do: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Childlikeness in Past and Current Societies* (Universitas Press: 2021), 13.

paradoxically a potential vector of innovative ideas. As in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the child is the one who says 'the king is naked'.

This apparent rawness of the aesthetic which surrounds children (of nonsense, of debasing manipulations, of anthropomorphic simplifications into toys) can be reproduced as a childlike aesthetic. Wes Anderson's movies, for instance, are a staple example of such doing. His movies present many model buildings, dollhouses, or toy trains. The constant symmetry of his shots manifests a toylike simplification of the world. In Anderson's art, realism is mediated through the toy; the convention is made to be seen; the play is apparent. Like toys, the characters too undergo events in passive and dispassionate ways. After all, if the model Grand Budapest Hotel looks like a cake (echoing the colours of the Mendl bakery), the characters do too in their pastry-like costumes (mirroring the anthropomorphic aspect of Agatha's "Courtesan au Chocolat").

If Wes Anderson's movies illustrate the play-apparent style of childlike aesthetics, his movies also epitomize the *cuteness* of this aesthetic. For Sianne Ngai, who explored the cute as an aesthetic category central to the twentieth century, "the formal properties associated with cuteness—smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy—call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency."[171] The list of attributes given by Ngai to the cute shows how easily it can be used with toys. They too are small, compact, and simple (sometimes soft or pliant). Therefore, transforming a resource into a toy ('toyifying' it) offers the possibility to 'cutify' it. The cute is then one of the semiotic potential which may be expressed in play. Altogether, the cute epitomises the child: "As an aestheticization of the small, vulnerable, and helpless, cuteness, not surprisingly, is a taste quality first and foremost aligned with products designed for children."[172]

[171] Sianna Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde", *Critical Inquiry*, 31/4 (2005), 816.
[172] *Ibid.*, 817.

Next to play-visible stylisation and cuteness, there is a third feature of childlike aesthetics. This aspect resides in the use of optimism and liveliness as typifying children's attitude. It gathers sport, energy, speed, runs, tricks, resourcefulness, or jokes into a childlike epiphany, as in another movie by Wes Anderson, *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), where these qualities are epitomised by the boy scouts. This movie is analysed in the conclusion of chapter 5, which shows how the movie uses Britten's childlike art to drive its own. These scouts, however, blur the line between the adult and the child. This is the central reversal at the heart of childlike aesthetics: it brings together figures of adultlike children, and childlike adults. After all, it is found in arts which are addressed to both. Of course, such aesthetics of inversion are typically Brittenian, and the following chapters offer new thoughts about how to articulate an analysis of art-games with facets of the childlike in Britten's music.

For music, in particular, is an ideal candidate for an art-game based on play (toying with sounds and their referentiality). Two crucial aspects make music an ideal playground for play and lusory aesthetics: its temporality, and its ongoing ambiguity between abstraction and representation. Indeed, like play, music unfolds through time; and the variation-driven process of play finds an equivalent in music. Equally, the referential paradox of music (at the same time referring to the world and referring to itself) enhances the natural semiotic paradox of play. Specifically, the play, in music, can be endlessly replayed (kept in a score, played out by musicians, recorded and re-played). Music can re-enact a process of play, an ongoing transformation of a musical plaything. One can access the whole unfolding of the game, of its trace, contrary to some visual arts like painting. The same temporality is appreciated in other arts like cinema (see the following discussion on Walter Benjamin), the novel (see the previous examples of nonsense

literature discussed) or dance. They all carry a temporality on which play can unfold. Music is thus an ideal ground for play and games.

In consequence, two aspects may be explored analytically in art-game playing. Firstly, the *trace* of play, which can be re-enacted in each performance. That way, the objective of an analysis of play in art must attempt to reconstruct the potential process of play, the experimental trial-and-error procedure which gave to the art-form its possibility. In fact, it must explore the playful aspect of imagination. Secondly, a pragmatic approach (in-the-moment) is more adapted than a holistic one (panoramic), as play creates of succession of semiotic morsels explored through variation. Studying play supposes to study music in its unfolding and to scrutinise play through the ambulatory process of its experience.

Play, then, offers not only an object of study, but also a method. "Play is a way of thinking about [...] transformational change."[173] If play is about transformation and metamorphoses, it gives tools for an analysing of unfolding processes in a choreographical manner. It considers the movements, displacements, interlocks, and metamorphoses of the plaything(s). Play, like music, is constantly in motion. A musical analysis, must therefore adopt playful ways to render music's transformative potential (potential fully exploited by Britten). This rhythm of play resists to fixed approaches and holistic conceptions. This leads to consider in music analysis and aesthetic descriptions similar issues to what François Laplatine engages with in anthropology. Laplantine distinguishes indeed between topological approaches and choreographical approaches.[174] For him, topology is about fixity, a snapshot of the structural relation about the elements. Drawing on Marcel Mauss, Laplantine argues for a re-inclusion of rhythm by stepping aside from structural attitudes and engaging with modalities. That is to say that one should

[173] Zimmerman, *The Rules We Break*, 22.
[174] François Laplatine, *Le Social et le sensible: introduction à une anthropologie modale* (Téraèdre, 2005).

not just consider topological questions (where are things, what they are, and how they are related) but also choreographical relations (how are things moving, how they transform, and how their motions interact). Play invites a choreographical model of music analysis.

1.5 Betwixt-and-between: critical play

Such a playful method also encourages one to question this transformative power of play and games with matters of criticality. The varied mechanics presented above (toying, nonsensical semiotics, transformative processes) are to be linked with the potential critical functions that play may assume. For Zimmerman, "play goes way beyond just wiggling between fixed structures. Play has transformational potential: the free movement actually changes the foundational structures themselves."[175] Zimmerman is right, and he is not. The full swirl of play's power is in this ambiguity: play is autotelic and play is critical; play is a nimbling for its own sake and play presents new-fangled ways of considering reality. This is why play posits a problem raised by Joanna Bullivant in her analysis of Benjamin Britten's *Our Hunting Fathers* (see Introduction): when the player stays silent, it is difficult to disentangle their true intentions. After all, however, the importance is perhaps more in the potentiality for *using Britten's music for its critical capability*. One can enjoy Britten's music for its playful mechanics, or see in these mechanics a use for a personal critical project. In particular, when music tackles 'serious' issues like war or violence via art-game manipulations of music material (as Britten does), one is drawn to consider Britten's playing as a model for the serious subjects he engages with. That is to say that treating a serious issue with compositional play creates an analogy between both activities. Playing with war becomes a denouncing of war as play. Play becomes a critic; a critic of play itself. What some call seriousness is in fact revealed as

[175] Zimmerman, *The Rules We Break*, 22.

an elaborated disguise of an activity fundamentally play-driven: may it be war, human relations, or art itself. Music-games have, therefore, the potential for presenting seriousness as unserious, or war as a mere playground.

For example, another understanding of play in music is found in Kofi Agawu's musical semiotics.[176] He elaborates an idea of play as a 'region' between different kinds of sign processes, which recalls strongly my previous discussion on the concept of 'room for play'. Within Agawu's 'region for play' is an "interaction between topical signs and structural signs".[177] There is a zone of interaction, a leeway, where the two concepts meet; and the play between them is the area on which a musical analyst must focus on. For Agawu, semiotic analysis is the exploration and the comprehension of that region of play. "Play denotes the interaction among constituent processes both within a single domain and between different domains."[178] The nature of this interaction, however, is an interlocking where both processes are re-defined through their encounter: "The notion of play describes not the broad and inevitable interaction between topic and harmony but, more specifically, the activity at the moment of break and rupture in each mode's process of self-definition."[179] Moreover, this region of play is a space between *semiotic* processes, which leads Agawu to consider the essential part played by the listener (the addressee) in the perception of the play. For him, 'play' thus becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutical process more generally. In a later study, he reaffirms that: "The power of analysis lies precisely in this open-ended pursuit of understanding through empathy, speculation, and

[176] Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton University Press, 1991).
[177] *Ibid.*, 23.
[178] *Ibid.*, 133.
[179] *Ibid.*, 133-4.

play."[180] The following graph represents the room for play conceptualised by Agawu (fig. 1.10).

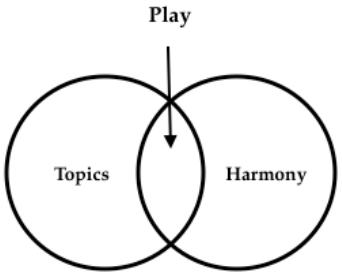


Figure 1.10 Kofi Agawu's region of play

In other words, Agawu helps to grasp the interaction between semiotic and topic components. In this dissertation's case, he helps to emphasise the room for play in the semiotic and topic sides of play itself, i.e. the interaction between toying and the childlike. Agawu's use of the concept of play as a dynamic process, as interspace where there is scope for motion, recalls other uses of the term. For example, Jacques Derrida, in "La Structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines" sees play within the elements of a structure.[181] Via play, Derrida restores a notion of rhythm in structural systems: if structure has a history, it evolves through time; if it changes, its elements reposition themselves one to another. 'Play' is thus a space for movement which gives flexibility to a structure. For Derrida, the structuralist attitude, and the fixity implied by the definition of a centre, limits the possibilities of the play of the elements which compose the structure. Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer presents play as a 'to-and-fro', as the "play-movement of the game itself and by extension the play-movement of the work of art."[182] Obviously, such a movement recalls the mechanics of toying explored in

[180] Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 320.
[181] Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la différence* (Seuil, 1967).
[182] Cynthia Nielsen, "Gadamer on Play and the Play of Art", in Theodore George & Gert-Jan van der Heiden (eds.), *The Gadamerian Mind* (Routledge, 2021), 143.

this chapter. In this movement, according to Gadamer, the plaything is played by the player as much as the player is played by the plaything. In his words, as already quoted, "all playing is a being-played"; "the game masters the players"; "Whoever 'tries' is in fact the one who is tried"; "the real subject of the game [...] is not the player but instead the game itself."[183] This paradoxical agency is a crucial element of playful aesthetics, as explored in the following chapters of this thesis.

However, this leeway in art, contemplated by Gadamer, becomes critically powerful with Walter Benjamin's concept of *Spielraum* (space or room for play). Found in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (discarded 2nd version), *Spielraum* describes for Miriam Hansen a "scope or field of action, leeway, margin, room to move or manoeuver." She stresses that "It names [for Benjamin] an intermediary zone not yet fully determined in which things oscillate among different meanings, functions, and possible directions." In consequence, she carries on, "it harbors an open-ended, dynamic temporality, and interval for chance, imagination, and agency.[184] Play is then a form of "experimental repetition",[185] and Benjamin himself links *Spielraum* with the withering of the aura in a reproduced work of art (the time and space thwarted by reproduction). For Benjamin, cinema is the archetypal media in which play is best experimented, as emphasised by Surti Singh:

> Benjamin discusses how the equipment-free reality presented in cinema is the height of artifice and inaccessible in our everyday lives. The techniques of film, such as the close-ups or the microscopic details that can be revealed through the camera, 'assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]'. This 'room for play' is the capacity of film to create a new experience of reality off limits to human vision.[186]

[183] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Bloomsbury, 2013 [1st ed. 1960]), 106.
[184] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (University of California Press, 2012) 192.
[185] *Ibid.*, 191.
[186] Surti Singh, "Dark play: aesthetics of resistance in Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 46/10 (2019), 1192.

The *Spielraum* is therefore a mirror; a place for rehearsal. In the words of Dana Cooley, "In mimicry, we do not merely imitate, we become the object of imitation."[187] This mirroring is for Benjamin a terrain for revolution. Freed from drudgery by technology, human beings can now rehearse their relation to the world through the mimetic aspect of art. The revolution comes from the variational element implied by this repetition: "each repetition is *new* as much as it is *anew*."[188] On the whole, Benjamin's *Spielraum* describes the leeway within art's mimetic reproduction of the world. It is by rehearsing this 'intermediary zone' that humans can practice their relation to the world via art and discover revolutionary possibilities (fig. 1.11). Like Derrida, Benjamin goes beyond the quasi-religious conceptions of Gadamer (typical of phenomenologists) and shows the high potential of play for radical critique. In the room for play resides the possibility to show alternatives, to create doubt, hope, and to free the imagination beyond the established cultural boundaries.

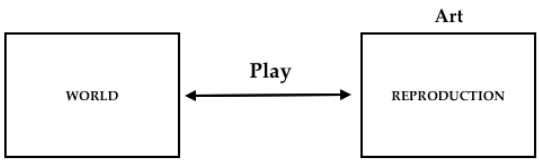


Figure 1.11 Walter Benjamin's *Spielraum*

All these authors, and their diverse discussions, provide several theoretical levels of room for play: a physical space for place (e.g., a stage) and a virtual one (e.g., a semiotic play), of which I would like to emphasise the interaction. "All the world's a

[187] Dana Cooley, "Walter Benjamin's Play Room: Where the Future So Eloquently Nests, or: What is Cinema Again?", in Santiago Hildago (ed.), *Technology and Film Scholarship: Experience, Study, Theory* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 110.
[188] Michael Powers, "The Smallest Remainder: Benjamin and Freud on Play," *MLN*, 133/3 (2018), 733.

stage" famously said Shakespeare. For critical play, a similar attitude applies: all the world's a potential room for play.

Consequently, play holds its critical power through transformative repetition. By doing so, the player shows what the plaything could be, and opens to imaginary worlds of alternative possibilities. In fact, this critical power of play is the power of creativity, the capacity to "generating novel actions or ideas, particularly by recombining existing actions, ideas, or thoughts in new ways or applying them in new situations."[189] Indeed, for Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin, "play involves breaking rules" and "having fun while doing so." "From play" they carry on, "may emerge a new perspective or cognitive tool that might be used at a later date, possibly in combination with other perspectives or tools, to solve a new challenge."[190] For these authors, this process defines the playful attitude, or playfulness. Therefore, critical play is the realm of the trickster, whose cultural function is to test the cultural boundaries and brings them into question (and I showed in the Introduction with Bullivant's discussion on Auden and Britten, how much this notion is paramount to our subject matter). As maintained by Eva Valentova, the trickster is an "agent of entropy" which "*reveals* the world to be, like themselves, ambiguous, polyvalent, changeable, and unpredictable."[191] Play is the sphere of the "betwixt-and-between"[192] epitomised by Peter Pan, whose social role is developed further by Valentova: "One can see how a society like [Victorian England] could benefit from the trickster, who would violate the social constraints which stifled the natural liveliness, spontaneity, and creativity of children and rooted out signs of individuality."[193] Peter

[189] Patrick Bateson & Paul Martin, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity, and Innovation* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5.
[190] *Ibid.*, 57.
[191] Eva Valentova, "The Betwixt-and-Between: Peter Pan as a Trickster Figure", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 51/3 (2018), 737.
[192] *Ibid.*, 751.
[193] *Ibid.*, 743.

Pan's playfulness, his forever-child imagination, has a great deal in common with Benjamin Britten, whose music, like Peter Pan, is betwixt-and-between. Like Peter Pan, Britten is a "deft shape-shifter, a creative imitator and a bricoleur, often finding a clever solution in a seemingly hopeless situation."[194] Like a trickster, he is, as a "boundary crosser", a "god of the threshold in all its form."[195] Benjamin Britten, like Peter Pan, is clever ("Oh! Cleverness of me!"), because he confronts compositional problem-solving with a tricksting attitude; with critical play. And such an attitude that was dreaded by early critics, as exposed in the Introduction.

In summary, playfulness articulates three modalities, as explored throughout this chapter: toying as a creation of art-games; childlikeness; and critical play. In some art, and this is the case with Britten's music, the presence of child-related themes, children performers, or the inclusion of children as ideal audience, goes hand in hand with the mechanics and critical process of play and games. The aesthetic of the childlike adds a new angle to the ambiguity of play (summarised on fig. 1.12). Typically, the plasticity of Britten's aesthetic resides in the to-and-fro movement between the varied modalities of the playful; between the childlike, the critical, and the autotelic tinkering as process of art-making.

[194] *Ibid.*, 750.
[195] Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (Canongate Books, 2017) [1st ed. 1998], 7-8.

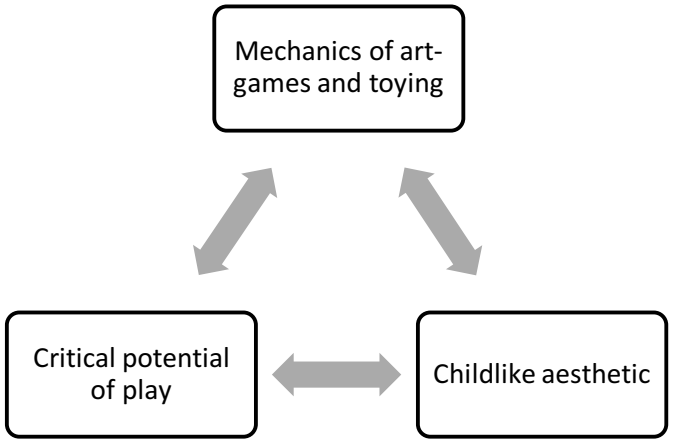


Figure 1.12 Modalities of the playful and their interaction

Britten's music offers a fascinating opportunity to observe such tricks at work, and the following discussions elaborate ways and vocabularies to re-describe Britten's playful art in terms of art-game, childlikeness, and critical play. But first, let me present how those three modalities of play interact with the ludic qualities that run through a large part of modernism, and consider a series of styles from which Britten's playful aesthetics took inspiration.

Chapter 2:

Britten and the Ludic Modernism

> "I believe that we can actually trust Stravinsky at his word when he joked, 'My music is best understood by children and animals'. The reason for this, as the composer no doubt fully recognized, is that children and animals are the ones who know best what it means to play."[196]

This new chapter gets one step closer to Benjamin Britten, and moves from the philosophy of playfulness to observe it in action in modernist art. As such, the following pages connect Britten's playfulness to discourses around modernism: questioning how Britten has been understood as being modernist and pondering which models influenced his playful aesthetic. In the Introduction, I mentioned how Britten studies have been dominated by ideas of seriousness and depth. These ideas have also been dominant in many readings of modernism, as characteristic of Viennese modernism.[197] This chapter offers a different perspective, more Franco-Russian and centred in particular on Paris, revolving not around ideas of depth and comprehensiveness, but around notions of play and the ludic. It argues for a Paris fundamentally defined by play; for a Paris as an important and overlooked source for Britten's techniques and aesthetics. Thus, I explore how forms of ludic modernism had an impact on the development of Britten's playful aesthetics. The concept of 'ludic modernism' that I propose here explores how a large sector of modernist art used elements of fun, play, and games, for their aesthetical, semiotic, or rhetorical function. In particular, the child stood in modernism as a powerful and multifarious symbol. The chapter gives some ideas of such matters in visual arts and literature, in order to show how music comes into the ludic-modernist equation. Several

[196] Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor*, 360.
[197] See Albright's discussion on Dahlhaus in *Modernism and Music*, 5-7.

composers are scrutinised, for their particular ludic influence on Benjamin Britten: Ravel and his human toys; Stravinsky and his toy-like humans; Prokofiev as an *enfant terrible*; Copland and his youthful freshness; Shostakovich and the Russian grotesque. This collection of studies is twofold. On the one hand, it indicates the extraordinary variety of ludic attitudes in musical modernism, and suggests that this topic should be considered more seriously. On the other hand, it shows how ludic-modernist music is articulated around a Franco-Russian axis with Paris at its core. Thus, this chapter corrects the many studies of the influences of Berg, Mahler, or Schoenberg on Britten's music. The importance of these Austro-German composers has indeed been overplayed in Britten's studies, and has now become an automatic discourse triggered whenever there is discussion of Britten's influences. I do not deny that the Viennese fashioning of Britten has its importance. However, I argue that this is only half of the story, that many other continental influences are to be accounted for, and that these other influences are important to understand Britten's playful aesthetics. This chapter argues therefore for a more Franco-Russian ludic-model for interpreting Britten, which counterbalances the routine Viennese model.

2.1 The Austro-German model and its limitations

In his *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, Mervyn Cooke summarises the wide-ranging influences on Britten as a young man:

> From the influences of French impressionism and the Second Viennese School evident in the *Quatre chansons françaises* [...] to the emulations of Mahler, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Shostakovich and Prokofiev in works dating from his time as a composition scholar at the Royal College of Music (1930-3), the range of music absorbed by Britten was phenomenally broad. During his working apprenticeship as a composer for the GPO Film Unit (1936-8) [...] Britten's ability to assimilate any musical idiom required of him grew

> still more pronounced. His stylistic boundaries broadened to the extent of absorbing jazz elements [...].[198]

If Cooke offers a varied picture, which starts with a two-pronged Parisian/Viennese discovery, one may ask why most of the French side of the equation is mysteriously absent from much of the scholarly discussions. Indeed, Britten studies mainly focus on the Austro-German side of the influence, with much enterprise. This leads to a profusion of fascinating comments which, however, overlook a number of other continental influences, especially from France and Russia. This produces quite an unbalanced discourse on Britten's music. The mention of French influences, for example, is limited to Britten's pieces setting French poetry, that is the *Quatre chansons françaises* (1928) and *Les Illuminations* (1940), with reference to Debussy and Ravel. In comparison, the French folksong arrangements (1946) are presented by Eric Roseberry in the *Cambridge Companion* as a "world of legend and romance—a world akin to that of Mahler's *Knabenwunderhorn* [sic] songs."[199] If the reference to Mahler helps to get at aspects of the childlike in Britten's piece, a reference to French music may also be very fruitful to engage as discussed later in regard to Timothy Coombes's work. Similarly, Christopher Wintle's analysis of *Night-Piece* (1963), a work where obvious links to the piano-writing of Debussy or Ravel are to be found, is mostly based on an analysis of Austro-German influences and through an Austro-German music-analytical toolkit.[200]

At the centre of this Germanic focus on Britten's influence is Hans Keller. For example, when discussing Britten's operatic character, Keller employs an impressive list of Germanic references, drawing on Schiller's 'naïve' vs 'sentimentalic' expression and framing Britten in the first 'naïve' category via a list of rhetorical pairings. In Keller's

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198 Mervyn Cooke, "Introduction", in his *Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-2.
199 Eric Roseberry, "Old Songs in New Contexts: Britten as Arranger", in Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 295.
200 Christopher Wintle, *All the Gods: Benjamin Britten's 'Night-Piece' in Context* (Plumbago, 2006).

words, "Schiller's theory [clarifies] the fundamental characterological contrast between Mozart and Haydn, or Mozart and Beethoven, between Bruckner and Mahler, Britten and Wagner, or, of course, between Britten and Schoenberg".[201] After such a panorama, one may wonder if Britten was really born in Suffolk after all.

Comparisons to Schoenberg are often triggered when mention is made of Britten's use of the twelve-tone technique. Again, as fascinating as such a comparison is, its over-use turns into a cliché, and the fact of leaving aside other ways to look at twelve-tone techniques prevents the emergence of new takes on Britten's handing of it. In comparison, Anna Schmidtmann's re-take on Stravinsky's dodecaphonism shows how much twelve-tone techniques are not bound to Viennese models. The Stravinsky she paints uses a more "informal, and playful way in which Stravinsky was actively exploring formal intricacies and possible mechanisms within as well as their melodic possibilities of the twelve-tone writing."[202] Arnold Whittall similarly notes that Britten's twelve-tone writing in *The Turn of the Screw* cannot be conflated with others. However, he then proceeds to discuss Berg's influence on the opera's form, and talks about "a formal design, like that of *Wozzeck*, in which orchestral interludes are crucial to the character of the whole, bringing an element of abstract, even symphonic structuring to the work."[203] Whittall's comment betrays a curious underlying frame of mind when he says that Britten's *Screw* "by no means suffers from comparison with Berg's great drama of inexorable advance to catastrophe."[204] Berg is 'great', and comparing Britten's music to Berg is a matter of justifying his greatness, and a greatness that consists in matters of catastrophe, drama, redemption, and all the lists

[201] Hans Keller (ed. by Christopher Wintle & Alison Garnham), *Britten: Essays, Letters and Opera Guides* (Plumbago, 2013), 156.
[202] Anna Schmidtmann, *Recontextualising Late Stravinsky* (PhD, University of Oxford, 2022), 182.
[203] Arnold Whittall, "The Chamber Operas", in Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 106.
[204] *Ibid.*

of 'depths' which transpire from German thought.[205] From Keller to Whittall, the Germanic model is used as a validation of Britten's music; as a way to uplift the English composer into the heroic spheres of German canonicity.

Schoenberg is mentioned as a source for Britten's early *Sinfonietta* (1932).[206] Berg is a main model offered for *Peter Grimes*[207] or Britten's *Violin Concerto*.[208] Finally, due especially to the influence of Donald Mitchell, Mahler is alluded to in abundance whenever mention is made of orchestration or symphonic traits (almost systematically for the *Spring Symphony*). And sometimes, these associations seem to be pushed to strange extremes:

> The question as to why Britten did not write more 'symphonies' then begins to sound like the old question of why Mahler wrote no operas. If there is an answer to both queries, it can be found in Britten's indebtedness to Mahler and Mahler's conciliation of a symphonic posture with an operatic inclusiveness.[209]

To be understood, logically: Britten's operas are quite Mahlerian after all.

Of course, other non-Germanic influences are to be found in the colossal amount of writing published (and still intrepidly produced) on Benjamin Britten. For instance, Mervyn Cooke's essential study of Far Eastern styles and practices,[210] or his references to Verdi and Italian traditions in the *War Requiem*,[211] have been fertile routes away from the Germanic frame. Similarly, rare studies engage with Britten's admiration for Tchaikovsky.[212] In particular, unpicking the influence of Tchaikovsky on Britten, Anya Vlasenkova elaborates a fascinating description of their relation to the childlike:

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[205] Holly Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought: From E.T.A Hoffman to Arnold Schoenberg* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[206] See for example Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 8-9.
[207] See, among others, John Cordingly, *Disordered Heroes in Opera: A Psychiatric Report* (Plumbago, 2015), 63-86.
[208] Eric Roseberry, "The Concertos and Early Orchestral Scores: Aspects of Style and Aesthetic", in Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 239.
[209] Arved Ashby, "Britten as Symphonist", in Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 232.
[210] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (Boydell Press, 1998).
[211] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten: 'War Requiem'* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
[212] See Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia* (Boydell & Brewer, 2016); or Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 223-224.

> It seems Britten took on Tchaikovsky's romanticised depiction of childhood as the world of dreams, imagination, and magic but also acknowledged the sheer variety of genuine emotions and memorable experiences one encounters as a child. However, Britten's children do not appear to display the nostalgic melancholic gaze that characterises Tchaikovsky's view on childhood: in comparison with Tchaikovsky's depiction of gentle and calm children, in Britten's depiction children appear more playful and active. Britten's children exist now, not in the past, and they are not observed by a nostalgic grown-up.[213]

By reading Britten's childlike via Tchaikovsky, Vlasenkova engages with a fruitful material, far from the hackneyed conceptions of a 'corrupted innocence' and its religious undertones, which proliferate in Britten studies.

Lastly, if the appealing Germanic frame seems to occlude other non-Germanic understandings of Britten, it seems also quite reductive in its conception of Germanic music. For instance, Mervyn Cooke's allusion to jazz influences, as quoted above, makes one wonder if Britten's music should not also be compoared to Eisler or Brecht.[214] Similarly, if a Germanic frame is to be adopted, why leave Hindemith behind? Hindemith was in the 1920s and 1930s a central composer of the German avant-garde, surely as influential as Schoenberg.[215] Indeed, the construction of the Schoenbergian subject was in many ways the downplaying of the Hindemithian one. Hindemith, too, may be seen as a model for pedagogical works and music for children. There is, in Britten studies, almost nothing to be found on Hindemith, except for a page presented as a "footnote".[216] This seems quite extraordinary for an artist who has been so central to many composers whose styles revolve around Britten: Walton, Tippett, or Shostakovich. On that note, engaging with Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk* is in many respects to engage with the style of Hindemith. Tchaikovsky, jazz, or Hindemith: those quick forays into other influences

[213] Anna Vlasenkova, *Britten's Music for Children: A Holistic Approach* (MPhil, University of Oxford, 2023), 16.
[214] As sketched by Donald Mitchell in *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* (Faber & Faber, 1981).
[215] Simon Desbruslais, Simon, *The Music and Music Theory of Paul Hindemith* (Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 267-8.
[216] David Drew, "Britten and His Fellow Composers: Six Footnotes for a Seventieth Birthday", in Philip Reed (ed.), *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on His Seventieth Birthday* (Boydell Press, 1995), 146 & 155-6.

reveal suddenly many playful tones to consider. It shows also how Berlin may be seen as a mash-up of Parisian and Viennese modernisms. One can understand the need for many scholars and critics to parade modernist credentials for Britten when he was perceived to be too conservative and Schoenberg was understood as the modernist king. Yet, the time is now to move on from this pretence seriousness and to unlock the many treasures that ludic influences have in store. But, in what exactly consists this ludic aspect of modernism?

2.2 Ludic modernism and the 'century of the child'

> Spitzer suggests that during the Baroque era, metaphors of harmony/painting were associated with the music of Bach and Schütz; in the Classical era, metaphors of rhythm/language were tied to the music of Mozart and his contemporaries; while in the nineteenth century, metaphors of melody/life were connected with the music of Beethoven and those who followed. [...] Yet, Spitzer stops short of proposing a systemic metaphor for music of the twentieth century, most likely due to the broad diversity of musical styles and techniques in this complicated period.[217]

In this review of Michael Spitzer's *Metaphor and Musical Thought*,[218] Andrew Westerhaus proposes a bold idea: could the modernist metaphor in music be a ludic one? At the source of Westerhaus's hunch is the mention by Brian Sutton-Smith in *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) to describe a literary ludic turn (in Sutton-Smith's mind, for the late twentieth century). Can Westerhaus's proposition be pushed further? How could some trends in musical modernism be analysed as ludic?

One reason for this to be a plausible idea, is the importance given to the symbol of the child in the twentieth century. Indeed, Ellen Key's *The Century of the Child*, published on New Year's Eve 1900, had an air of prophecy.[219] Key's book was wide-ranging and explored many social issues to be addressed in the new century, and the

[217] Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor*, 120.
[218] Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[219] Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909) [original in Swedish, 1900].

driving element of these concerns is the emergence of a real consideration of the child. The subjects surveyed by Key are multifarious and include banning child labour, softening rigid forms of schooling, promoting pacifism, ecology, and well-manufactured goods for children, as well as advocating for extending suffrage to women.[220] In all these fights, the child emerges as a symbolic figure which comes to question and challenge the coming century. Many commented on Key's assumptions or followed her educational project (most notably Maria Montessori).[221] Others acquiesced with Key's premonition, only to present it as a symptom of de-civilisation such as the philosopher George Boas for whom "Confusion, brutality, pessimism, fear, all translate into terms of cuteness—these are the marks of the modern man."[222] Helpless creature to defend, carrier of progress, or totalitarian menace; the child crystallises many fears and hopes which surfaced with the new twentieth-century.

'Child' is indeed an "elastic and powerful" "mercurial term" which encompasses many definitions and projections.[223] To speak about the child uses in fact a wide range of rhetorics, sometimes overlapping, often contradictory. Juliet Kinchin gives a concise summary of some of these rhetorics, which is worth quoting at length:

> creative play as a paradigm of learning and creativity not only for children but for adults; children as a source of social and aesthetic renewal and as citizens of tomorrow; concern about protecting and nurturing some of the most vulnerable individuals in society as the impetus to create critical design interventions, new pedagogies, and social policies; children as consumers of an ever-widening range of products and environments, both physical and virtual; and children as viewers and subjects of new forms of advertising and ideological persuasion.[224]

Kinchin describes how these concerns find their way in a series of designing strategies of various elements ranging from architecture to material culture: school design, toys,

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[220] Juliet Kinchin, & Aidan O'Connor (eds.), *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000* (The Museum of Modern Art New York, 2012), 11.
[221] Maria Montessori, *Il Segreto dell'Infancia*, (Garzanti, 1950), 4.
[222] George Boas, "The Century of the Child", *The American Scholar*, 7/3, (1938) 276.
[223] Kinchin, *Century of the Child*, 12.
[224] *Ibid.*, 15.

furniture, as well as modernist art. In visual art, as much as in literature (as soon discussed below), similar rhetorical strategies are observable. In fact, a non-trivial amount of scholarship exists on matters of 'ludic' rhetorics in modernism. These studies, however, focus quasi-entirely on the visual arts and literature. I offer to bring together these different pieces of scholarship (which has not yet met), in order to paint a broad picture of ludic modernism, and observe the forms taken by ludic modernist rhetorics (i.e. the overlap of ludic rhetorics and modernist rhetorics). Such rhetorics evolve on the similar conceptual triangle presented in the previous chapter (see fig. 1.12), that is between play as playing with; play as a critical tactic; and symbols of the child.

In visual arts of the 1910s and 1920s, the assumption that ludic rhetorics pervade many trends of modernism is now supported by a substantial amount of scholarship. To start with, in Italian and Russian Futurism, the youth was heralded as a model for progress. Youth, and its aggressiveness, was a metaphor for the political revolution to perform and stylistic model to copy. Sara Pankenier investigates how Russian avant-garde artists found inspiration in children's language and drawing in order to develop what she describes as an "infantilist aesthetic".[225] Her argument is backed by Margaret Higonnet, who shows how these 'infantilist' strategies of innovation respond "to the models of spontaneity, sincerity, and stylization they found in children's drawings."[226] For the Futurists, the child builds the future.

[225] Sara Pankenier Weld, *Voiceless Vanguard: The Infantilist Aesthetic of the Russian Avant-Garde* (Northwestern University Press, 2014).
[226] Margaret R. Higonnet, "Modernism and Childhood: Violence and Renovation", *The Comparatist*, 33 (2009), 87. This aggressiveness, and its totalitarian undertones, are what motivated George Boas to denounce forms of infantilism and of childlikeness in art (Boas, "The Century of the Child"). As presented further in this chapter, Jonathan Cross shows how much of Theodor Adorno's anti-infantilist rhetorics are based on a similar fear. See Jonathan Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 229-231.

In contrast, Primitivism was driven by a radically different strategy: the child becomes the testimony of a pre-civilisational past. There are evident Romantic roots in this nostalgic attitude, as described by Brian Sutton-Smith:

> What develops in the twentieth century is a complex of ideas in which the child's play and art are brought together with ideas about the imagination, about the child as a primitive, an innocent, an original, and, in effect, the true romantic, because he or she is untouched by the world and still capable of representing things in terms of an unfettered imagination.[227]

Therefore, some parts of modernism found in the child a symbolic continuation from the Schillerian play-drive (as described in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*), nostalgic depictions of childhood, and Christian understandings of the child as a model of purity.

On a different register, the child was also used to highlight forms of foolishness and renewed creativity, as in the Dada movement[228] which typically displayed a "topsy-turvy aesthetic".[229] Indeed, "Concepts associated with childhood as a model thus included naiveté, irrationality, and exuberant associative play".[230] According to this rhetoric, play and games are the tools of the child to transform the present anew. In sum, bringer of the future, the past, or symbol of the player embedded in the present, the child crystallises contradictory rhetorics. "Such ambiguities in the concept of the child" says Higonnet "points towards ambiguities in Modernism itself."[231] Future, past, or present; progressive, nostalgic, or playful: the child is a conceptual pivot which holds many trends of ludic modernism together.

Through several edited books, Jonathan Fineberg endeavours to scrutinise the direct influence between child art (art actually produced by children, typically children's

[227] Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 133.
[228] Philip Prager, "Play and the Avant-Garde: Aren't We all a Little Dada?", *American Journal of Play*, 5/2 (2013), 239-256.
[229] Higonnet, "Modernism and Childhood", 88.
[230] *Ibid.*
[231] Higonnet, "Modernism and Childhood", 90.

drawings) and the developing styles of such modernist painters as Picasso, Kandinsky, Dubuffet, Klee, Larionov, or Miró.[232] Fineberg describes how Klee found inspiration in his own childhood works, how Kandinsky was stimulated by the drawing of other children, and how Picasso took a keen interest in the process of children's drawing.[233] Similarly, Werner Spies investigates the symbol of the child in Picasso's oeuvre; how he endeavoured to give a childlike point of view through his paintings, how he represented children (especially his own), or how his own style was influenced by children's drawing. In Spies' words, "Picasso not only depicted childhood, but attempted to transform it into an instrument of artistic production".[234] For many modern artists, the child's perception of the world was a way to look with fresh eyes and put sophistication aside.[235] And this childlike vision was frequently mediated via play and games:

> Twentieth-century art does more than passively reflect the world of childhood: children have entered art in a sense that goes beyond considerations of subject matter. An identification with childlike forms of thought and behavior has clearly played a key part in modern artists' definition of their role. Spontaneous action has served as a strategy to break the fetters of tradition and academic convention. This strange and foreign element has employed numerous disguises, masking itself as aestheticism, or as techniques borrowed from the realm of games and pastimes, using tools and materials in deliberately inappropriate ways.[236]

In a movement like Cubism, for instance, play of forms and childlike perspectives are among the spurs for a radical new representation of space.[237] Consequently, next to the child as a pivotal symbol, the child*like* became a renewed inspiration for the aesthetics of many modernist visual arts.

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[232] Jonathan Fineberg, *The Innocent Eye; Children's Art and the Modern Artists* (Princeton University Press, 1997); Jonathan Fineberg (ed.), *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1998); Jonathan Fineberg (ed.), *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child* (University of California Press, 2006). See also: Claire Golomb, *Child Art in Context: A Cultural and Comparative Perspective* (American Psychological Association, 2002).
[233] Jonathan Fineberg, "Modernism and the Art of Children", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 44 (1998), B8-B9.
[234] Werner Spies, *Picasso's World of Children* (Prestel, 1994), 11.
[235] *Ibid.*
[236] *Ibid.*
[237] Nancy Olson, "Cubism, Freud, and the Image of Wit", *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 52/1 (1997) 301-331.

If some artists consider the child's point of view as a modernist rhetoric of renewal, others use a similar strategy considering the child's mind. This is the case of the Surrealists (painters and poets), for whom the child's unrepressed behaviour met their "desire to draw on the springs of consciousness."[238] As for the Surrealists, language was for the Dada movement a key to access the child's mind, especially in all its nonsensical dimensions: "Dada artists adapted the nonsense sounds and rhymes of children, like the word 'dada' itself, to attack the hobbyhorses of an ossified society that fed on this carnage."[239] Children's reasoning, then, was an attack on logic as much as the research for a new form of logic, in which "primal drives lie close to the surface."[240] Thus, play was a central element in Surrealism and Dada.[241] For example, Claudia Mesch describes how some Surrealist artists used games as a form of resistance to the rise of fascism, and how some others (especially Duchamp and his chess-games) brought games and play to the realm of autonomous high art.[242] Similarly, Susan Laxton links the surrealists' ludic rhetorics of play and games to the political disruptive force of play described by Walter Benjamin:

> For Benjamin, as for the surrealists, rendering technology useless through play opened it to infinite and unforeseen possibilities—and to new, critically engaged paths for perception and consciousness. Refusing to be dismissed as mere "antic" or "whimsy," surrealism's ludic strategies not only provided a counter-narrative to modernization's increasingly pervasive means–ends rationality, they also militated against the very notion of stability as an ideal experience.[243]

Therefore, the ludic trends in modernism articulated play, critical attitudes, and the childlike as presented in chapter 1 (fig. 1.12)

[238] Higonnet, "Modernism and Childhood", 88.
[239] *Ibid., 92.*
[240] *Ibid.*
[241] And Surrealism is conversely at the roots of Play studies, because Claudia Mesch describes how much Roger Caillois' theory of play and games is a consequence of his temporary affiliation with the surrealist movement. See Claudia Mesch, "Serious Play: Games in Twentieth-Century Modernism", *The Space Between*, 1/1 (2006), 11.
[242] *Ibid.*
[243] Susan Laxton, *Surrealism at Play* (Duke University Press, 2019), 10.

While visual-art studies mainly focus on the rhetorics of play, games, and the childlike in modernist and contemporary movements, literary theories of these rhetorics present a far broader perspective.[244] This is because literary scholars often focus on *reading* as a form of game, not restricted to modernism. This is the case for Michel Picard in *La Lecture comme jeu*,[245] who argues that readers engage with novels in a different fashion than with a handbook or a newspaper. Reading as engaging with a form of literary art, for Picard, is to participate in pretence and identifications, in "giving play to the real".[246] Conversely, Robert Rawdon Wilson describes the writer engaged in a "Godgame", i.e. "a gamelike situation in which a *magister ludi* knows the rules (because he has invented them) and the character-player does not."[247] The emerging symbol of that relation is the labyrinth,[248] where the authors gamefully create an intricate world in which the reader playfully wanders.

These aspects have also been investigated in the modernist novel, as discussed by many monographs which question 'play' in the works of specific authors.[249] Helen Tyson, for example, examines how modernist writers incite us to read "childishly", i.e. to take as a reader a childlike point of view.[250] Similarly, Michael Opest uses the term 'ludic modernism' to describe what he calls a "ludic playground" which developed in modernist literature. This idea is similar to the labyrinthine image: there is a virtual place where the writer and the reader can engage in ludic activities. Opest describes labyrinths, toys,

[244] Gerald Guinness, & Andrew Hurley (eds.), *Auctor Ludens: Essays on Play in Literature* (J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 1986).
[245] Michel Picard, *La Lecture comme jeu* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1986).
[246] *Ibid.*, 9.
[247] Robert Rawdon Wilson, *In Palmedes' Shadow: Explorations in Play, Game, and Narrative Theory* (Northeastern University Press, 1990), 123-124.
[248] *Ibid.*, 150.
[249] See for example Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford University Press, 2011); Marie Sorel, *Le jeu dans l'œuvre d'Henry de Montherlant* (Honoré Champion, 2015).; or John Coates, *Kipling the Trickster: Knowingness, Practical Jokes and the Use of Superior Knowledge in Kipling's Short Stories* (Peter Lang, 2021).
[250] Helen Tyson, "Reading Childishly? Learning to Read Modernism: Reading the Child Reader in Modernism and Psychoanalysis", *Textual Practice*, 31/7 (2017), 1435-1457.

masks, and puppets in the works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. He draws conclusions to this playground-like vision of writing and reading in terms of autonomy of the reading experience, an autonomy which offers a room to rehearse one's relation to the world (which paradoxically may have consequences on one's life). In Opest's words: "Ludic modernism can help us begin to imagine freedom from instrumental utility; freedom from the rhetoric—and dimly, the reality—of winners and losers; freedom from games like the stock market, and thus freedom from the need to distinguish fair play from foul; freedom to roam, finally, in the open air of free play."[251] There is something paradoxical in Opest's using of the rhetoric of play to denounce rhetorics generally. But, in truth, Ludic modernism makes use of such a critical rhetoric (and Opests' attitude joins the very authors he describes) in engaging with the real, tearing it apart, while "keeping the game going."[252]

In fact, literary theorists seem to use in their rhetorics on writing-and-reading as play, parallel rhetorics to the ones used by modernist authors. Picard's and Opest's use of the concepts of play and games are very broad and head in many directions at the same time.[253] They use a varied amount of meanings and make the concepts of play and games extremely fluid and ever-changing. This conceptualising attitude *from the scholars* ensues on top of the already complex rhetoric of play, games, and the childlike, *of the artists* as observed in the many visual-art examples proposed above. In sum, play is the instrument for a 'postmodern' reading of literature by literary theorists.[254] But, as it appears, their postmodern rhetoric (which engages with matters of complexity, thresholds, collages, and

[251] Michael, Opest, Michael, *The Modernist Playground: Ludic Gestures, Literary Games* (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2016), 15.
[252] *Ibid.*, 31.
[253] Once more, the French '*jeu*', in Michel Picard's case, conflates 'play' and 'game' into a same word.
[254] Brian Edwards, *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction* (Garland, 1998).

fluidity), is in fact very close to the ludic rhetorics of early twentieth-century modernist artists.

Therefore, visual arts and literature offer different takes on what a ludic modernism may be. Ludic readings of visual art focus mainly on the 1910s-1920s Franco-Russian culture and describe it as ludic. In particular, Paris is the playground of ludic modernism, with Picasso, Cocteau, Dada, or the Moulin Rouge being strong cultural symbols of the playful. Modernism, according to that idea, is not a Viennese room in which one is allowed to scream, as a Dahlhausian reading would imply, but a Parisian room in which one is allowed to play. Ludic understandings of literature, differently, see the act of reading as a ludic interface, and therefore extend literature to a broader chronological and geographical range of studies. Typically, British authors like Woolf or Orwell are brought to the fore by Michael Opest. This invites a next stage of thinking which, once more, gets us one step closer to Britten. The next section explores the British case of Ludic Modernism: its home-grown ludic aspects already present in the Victorian culture, and its modernist reception of the Parisian ludic culture.

2.3 British ludic-modernism: dandyism, nonsense, and sport

There are two crucial aspects of British ludic modernism to consider. The first is the presence of ludic trends in the Victorian culture which modernism inherits, from nonsense literature, dandy-like attitude, and the importance given to childhood. The second is the influence of a Parisian modernism of the 1910s to 1930s, from Picasso to Stravinsky, on figures like the Sitwells, Nancy Mitford, Lord Berners, or Edward James, who were fascinated with French culture and played a central role in its importation to the UK.

Certainly, many of English young critical groups of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century are infused by dandyism, may it be the 'Bright Young People', the 'Auden Generation', or the 'Brideshead Generation'. All take pleasure in playing the social game, and disrupting it. This dandy behaviour is common to what Martin Green calls the 'Children of the Sun'. According to Green, "In order really to understand the idea of the Children of the Sun, [...] we need to associate the dandy with two other types, seemingly unrelated, the *rogue* and the *naïf*, and to see that temperamentally the three types are all first cousins. All three go in defiance of the 'mature' modes of seriousness that our culture sponsors; all are 'young men's styles of being".[255] The dandy attitude (and its roguish and naïve counterpart) is therefore a youthful attitude. Green psychologises and simplifies surely too much the picture, notably through ideas of sexual narcissism, and by relying too much on similarities between authors and the characters from their books.[256] It gives, however, an idea of the relation between the childlike (or youth-like) and typically British dandy attitudes, in which ludic-modernism breaks into. For example, I evoked in the Introduction the importance of Auden in the development of Britten's toying with meaning.[257] I discussed the evasive semiotics of the Auden group, and their playful radical critique while ambivalently hiding these critiques through confusing webs of references and cryptic images. In other words, via play, the Auden group found a powerful weapon to practice 'practical jokes' as social criticism towards British traditions and institutions.

Next to the various figures of the dandy, the naïve, or the rogue, there is in British ludic-modernism, and in Britten's in particular, a strong legacy of Victorian children

[255] Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of 'decadence' in England After 1918* (Pimlico, 1992), 26-27; his italics.
[256] See in particular Humphrey Carpenter's critique of Martin Green in *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends* (Faber & Faber, 1989).
[257] Following Joanna Bullivant, "'Practical Jokes".

literature. The Victorians' fascination for childhood is indeed particularly visible in its mammoth production of books for children:

> Propelled by rising literacy rates and ever-cheaper print technology, children's literature boomed, both in quantity and in quality, across the nineteenth-century. Adapting to fit an evolving adult notion of what children's reading, and childhood itself, should be, such texts mixed an increasingly large proportion of delight into the inevitable instruction, so that children's literature became newly pleasurable for adult consumers.[258]

Claudia Nelson explores how adults as much as children were fond of such a literature. She studies in particular the widespread attitudes of childish adults and precocious children; attitudes found as much in the reader's than in the characters depicted in these books.[259]

Next to dandyism, children literature, and nonsense, sport encapsulates important aspects of British ludic modernism. First of all, a worldwide modernist interest in sport emerged in the 1900s. Bernard Vere addresses this relationship between sport and modernism in visual art.[260] Similarly, this link is questioned in music by Anthony Bateman, according to whom modernist composers "also absorbed novel musical influences, including sport, as they attempted to engage with the new clamour and dissonance of modern life. [...] Sport provided [modernist composers] with a suitably contemporary and impertinently anti-Romantic subject matter."[261] Such an anti-Romantic modernism turned towards sports as an expression not of sentiments but of physical and tactical displays. In the UK, however, the modernist interest in sport followed an important nineteenth-century flourishing of the cultural significance of sport, from cricket to rugby, especially noticeable in Victorians. In particular, what is typical of sport in

[258] Claudia Nelson, *Precocious Children & Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 163.
[259] *Ibid*.
[260] Bernard Vere, *Sport and Modernism in the Visual Arts in Europe, c.1909-39* (Manchester University Press, 2018).
[261] Anthony Bateman, "Ludus Tonalis. Sport and Musical Modernisms, 1910-1938", in *Sporting Sounds, Relationships Between Sport and Music*, ed. Jonathan Bateman, John Bale (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 146.

Victorian culture is its strong relation to school, and more precisely public schools. During the Victorian period, they were developed in order to inculcate character in the minds of the students.[262] Sports organised student's free time (in order to avoid debauchery), controlled their violent passions, and were raised as a way of developing self-organisation and autonomy.[263] There attitude of schools vis-à-vis sport wanders between bringing the child into compliance and making of it a decision-maker, a paradox which explains, according to Gideon Dishon, the ambivalent status of sports in nineteenth-century public schools[264]. Similarly, Dishon describes how the attitudes of the sports players themselves wanders between two opposite directions:

> On the one hand, character was tied to the aristocratic ideal of the "gentleman amateur" according to which conduct was to be characterised by self-control, fairness, respect for rules, and effortless participation. [...] Concurrently, as the [nineteenth] century progressed, character became more strongly associated with an ethos of rugged manliness which centred on the capacity to endure and overcome challenges, prioritising determination in place of detachment. This model of character as to be expressed in attributes such as toughness, resilience, courage, and independence.[265]

Britten's attitude definitely follows the second direction, in which sport is played for its physicality and for the challenge of it. Britten's music does the same, as attested by his predilection for *moto perpetui*. If Frank Bridge showed Britten alternative models to criticise British musical conservatism for stylistic reasons, Britten found in his master's ambivalence with the pastoral school a source for his own rebuffing. Via a ludic-modernist interest in sport, Britten turns his back to what he perceives to be the languor and nonchalance of contemporary British music, even if such music, as with Vaughan Williams' study with Ravel, is not devoid of Parisian modernism itself. Britten manifests a sportsmanliness akin to what Dishon presents as typically opposed to the 'gentleman

[262] See Gideon Dishon, "Games of Character: Team Sports, Games, and Character Development in Victorian Public Schools, 1850-1900", *Paedagogica Historica*, 53/4 (2017) 364-380.
[263] *Ibid.*; and Joe Maguire, "Images of Manliness and Competing Ways of Living in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain", *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 3/3 (1986), 265-287.
[264] Dishon, "Games of Character".
[265] *Ibid.*, 368.

amateur' when Britten says that "[Parry and his followers] are inclined to suspect technical brilliance of being superficial and insincere." and that "Parry's national ideal, was, in fact, the English Gentleman (who generally thinks it rather vulgar to take too much trouble)."[266] Britten's ever-growing attention to sport finds in Bridge's anti-pastoralism a way to bring sport-like characteristics to music. *Holiday Diary*, or *Go Play, Boy, Play*, are staple examples of the new physicality explored by Britten during his twenties. As attested by his detailed diaries and letters, tennis, swimming, cricket, and ping-pong were among his favourites. In the 1930s, many pieces by Britten refer to physical activities, like physical training (*Three Divertimenti*), swimming (*Holiday Diaries*), cycling ("Going Down Hill on a Bicycle"), or hunting games ("Sport"; *Our Hunting Fathers*), among others. In many respects, Britten's interest in sport exemplifies the special overlap of the Victorian and modernist ludic; and the next chapter will develop further an analysis of Britten's aesthetic through analogies with sport.

Additionally, the modernist interest in the childlike, on the one hand, and the legacy of Victorian literature for children, on the other, are crucial to Britten's development. The ambivalence between childlike adults and adultlike children, which takes its roots in Victorian culture, is part and parcel of Britten's aesthetic. The intention of writing art for children (even also to be appreciated by adults) is typical of Britten. Britten's interest in writing for children is then to be understood at the crossroads of a Victorian inheritance and of a modernist engagement with the childlike. Britten himself was passionate about children books, far beyond his own childhood as with the many anthologies he possessed of poetry for children, or as with his documented fascination for *Emil and the Detectives* in his twenties.[267] Among these anthologies figure nonsense literature from Edward Lear. Kevin Salfen explored the anthologising habit of Britten and

[266] Britten, "England and the Folk-Art Problem" (1941), in *Britten on Music*, 31.
[267] Bridcut, *Britten's Children*, 2006, 26.

linked it to the emergence of the anthology as Victorian and Edwardian reader practices. For Salfen, Britten's literary anthology cycles are "an exploration and an explanation of the link between the young reader that Britten remembered and the adult composer he understood himself to be." Salfen continues: "More tangibly, the importance of various subgenres— gift book, reader, tome—for Britten's anthology cycles situates these compositions in classrooms and in a bygone marketplace for poetry that the young composer physically inhabited."[268] There is, then, a childhood connection hidden in the anthologising attitude of Britten, which emphasises his use of poems as textual games. Anthologising, and the putting together of disparate elements, links back to Auden's practice of *Our Hunting Fathers*. More, playing on words and making use of warped senses of logic are both elements in common to Auden and to nonsense literature. Auden, Britten, or nonsense literature, are therefore different takes at the nonsensical properties of toying, as explores in chapter 1. In addition, as evoked in the same chapter, this nonsensical semiotics evolve on a large scale between logic manipulations for their own sake, evocations of a childlike mindscape, or a critical and deconstructionist project.

The figure of the dandy, too, resonates with Britten. Britten was not a dandy himself, but the artistic strategies of the dandy are part and parcel of his music. As analysed in the Introduction, a piece like *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936), Britten starts to display in music similar strategies than Auden.[269] Britten, like Auden, offers in such a piece a web of slipping semiotics, where conflicting and overlapping images intermesh into a confusing web left to the listener/reader to unravel (a 'god-game' in the literary terms discussed earlier). In this piece arises a profound ambiguity. Does *Our Hunting Fathers* denounce stealthily violent traditions (hunting), or is it, in the end, just the pleasure of playing for the sake of playing, a pleasure in the disruptive manipulation of

[268] Kevin Salfen, "Britten the Anthologist", *19th-Century Music*, 38/1 (2014), 93.
[269] Bullivant, "Practical Jokes".

signifiers, a dandy-like delectation in shocking while not constructing any real critique out of the muddle created by play? The work leaves us with an unanswered (and unanswerable) question. Following Green's argument, Britten may take also the robes of the *naïf* and the *rogue*. Rogue, in his attitude towards playing with signifiers to create a chaotic tangle. Naïf, in its heralding of the childlike and of elements of cuteness (see the analysis of *Noye's Fludde* in chapter 5). In particular, one comment from Green resonates with some of Britten's homoerotic figures. "The cult of the *naïf* at the core of Thirties' Marxism—the image of the sun-bronzed young man with his shirt open, bringing the radiant candour of his gaze to bear on the mess the fathers have made of the world."[270] In such a description, one could easily picture the radiant naivety of a Billy Budd, for instance and its homoerotic appeal in Britten's opera, as a coalescing of different trends in British ludic-modernism.

Therefore, Britten's playful aesthetics developed from a peculiar British ludo-cultural background, consisting of the overlap of ludic trends from Victorian culture and from Parisian modernism. From such a perspective, Britten is worth considering alongside the Sitwells, Nancy Mitford, or William Walton, as inspired like them by a more continental form of ludic. A ludic-modernist British aesthetic is thus to be pondered in Britten's oeuvre: via Dandyism, for its use of play as a verbal game and as a critical attitude; nonsense literature, for its interest in playful logics and the childlike; sport, for its lusory challenges and school-bound boyishness.

So far, I barely hinted at music, even if more has been said on Britten in the last paragraphs. As shown, the focus of scholars studying ideas of play and the childlike in art is mostly on visual arts and literature. Such an interest in literature appeared at the end of the 1980s and found its peak in the 1990s. In comparison, the interest in ludic

[270] Green, *Children of the Sun*, 28.

modernism in visual arts took over from the end of the 1990s and is ever-growing since. To understand these later developments, Mesch describes how these ideas of games, play, and childlikeness in modern visual art have been repressed by "high modernists"[271] from Clement Greenberg to the Frankfurt School philosophers. The ideas, however, made their way *in fine* through a quite substantial scholarship in visual arts and literature. The time is now for music to do the same, and put aside its high-modernist fears to observe the ludic rhetorics and aesthetics of the child, the toy, and the absurd in modernist music. It is now time to question the flourishing in music of modernist ludic trends in surrealism, nonsense, polytonality, Russian grotesque, child-inspired French aesthetics, or puppet-like symbolic, down to the playful aesthetics of Benjamin Britten. How does this ludic modernism manifest in music? How did it influence Britten? The following sections of the chapter tackle these two questions with the exploration of a series of composers evolving in a French or Russian cultural environment.

2.4 Ravel and human-like toys

Considering Britten's early fascination with Ravel and Britten's own development of a playful aesthetic, its seems difficult to deny that the ludic aspect of Ravel's music influenced Britten. In 1998, Mervyn Cooke deplored that "the influence of Ravel on Britten has long remained a neglected topic of inquiry, in spite of obvious superficial correspondences".[272] Unfortunately, this is still mostly the case, apart from the few references I discuss hereafter. In the first place, Cooke himself demonstrates how Britten and Ravel both use Oriental borrowings to refer to the childlike.[273] Almost all other reference to Ravel in Britten studies, however, focus on the former's influence on

[271] Mesch, "Serious Play", 12.
[272] Cooke, *Britten and the Far East*, 10.
[273] *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Britten's *Quatre Chansons françaises* (1928). For Apolline Gouzi, this is far too restrictive an approach:

> Maurice Ravel's influence on Britten - more pervasive than that of Claude Debussy - was not confined to the 'French Summer' of 1928, but permeated his entire oeuvre. Britten owned very few records before the mid-1930s, and their acquisition often followed concert performances. In 1930 he bought a version of Ravel's *Bolero* and *Introduction and Allegro*. Listening to the record every day to the point of developing a kind of obsession with it, the composer admitted in 1931 that he was 'blocked' in composing his ballet *Plymouth Town* because his mind was 'saturated with Ravel's music'.[274]

To understand the ludic influence of Ravel on Britten, let me first expose the ludic tenants of Ravel's aesthetic. At the centre of Ravel's ludic rhetorics, there is the toy, with all its attributes: miniature, mechanical, manipulable, but also human-like and linked to a corporeal quality. For Adorno, Ravel's music represents the "aesthetic of the sophisticated toy, the impossible stunt, the tour de force."[275] Ravel's collection of small objects and his passion for clockwork are often highlighted to stress out the miniaturist aesthetic of his music. His childlike spirit—a child at heart who likes to play with children[276]—is also often put forward. This attention to the small, the clocklike, toylike, or childlike, is however not deprived of humanness, as summarised by Daniel Albright: "For Ravel, the dry sound of machines seems not an escape from human feelings but an excitement of them."[277] There is a form of animism in Ravel' music, best characterised by *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925) where the house furniture magically becomes alive.[278]

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[274] "L'influence de Maurice Ravel sur Britten — plus prégnante que celle de Claude Debussy — ne reste pas circonscrite à « l'été français » de 1928 mais traverse toute son œuvre. Britten ne possède qu'un nombre très réduit de disques avant le milieu des années 1930 et leur acquisition suit souvent les auditions au concert. En 1930, il se procure une version du *Boléro* et de l'*Introduction et Allegro* de Ravel. Écoutant quotidiennement le disque au point de développer une sorte d'obsession pour celui-ci, le compositeur avoue en 1931 être 'bloqué' dans la composition de son ballet *Plymouth Town* parce que son esprit est 'saturé par la musique de Ravel.'" Apolline Gouzi, "'Une liberté qui n'existait pas dans mon propre langage,' Les melodies françaises de Benjamin Britten," *La Revue du Conservatoire*, (Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, forthcoming), 11; my translation.

[275] Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor) [1st ed. 1949], 136.

[276] See Misia Godebska's recollection in Roger Nichols, *Ravel Remembered* (Faber & Faber, 1987), 19.

[277] Daniel Albright (ed.), *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of sources* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 307.

[278] Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (Schirmer, 1988), 281-2; Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton University Press), 2001, 228-239.

In fact, Ravel's ludic rhetoric takes a very different path from Stravinsky's. While the first looks at the liveliness of music boxes, clocks, machines, teacups and armchairs, the second searches the puppet-like in the human. The aesthetic of the first is animist; the aesthetic of the second is fetishist. When the first is interested in human-like toys, the second focuses on toy-like humans.

For Timothy Coombes, Ravel's music offers the "toylike as a corporeal quality".[279] He argues that Ravel's music proposes that we should see the world like a child, to adopt a 'miniature thinking' which "absorb[s] the listener into the diminutive universe of a toy nativity scene."[280] In a similar fashion, through child's play, Ravel expresses "imaginary worlds, where physical objects take on their own life and agency",[281] which questions the boundary between the animate and the inanimate.[282] More broadly, Coombes inscribes this rhetoric of childhood into a French reaction against "highly wrought, 'maximalist' forms for *fin-de-siècle* rhetoric, whether German or French",[283] and typical of French turn-of-the-century ideas of "moderation, *clarté*, and the rejection of sentimental grandiloquence"[284] in which childhood finds a significant place. That way, Coombes helps to understand in Ravel the articulation between clarity, the toylike, and a particular French fascination for childhood.

Combined, a childlike perspective and interest in mechanical miniatures are translated in musical terms by the variational use of small units.[285] For Coombes, this is linked to a childlike style, because a "material produced for children was generally distinguished by its qualities of simplicity, directness, concision, brevity, naivety and

[279] Timothy Coombes, *Music and Childhood in French Culture, 1880-1914* (PhD, University of Oxford, 2017), 192.
[280] *Ibid.*, 200.
[281] *Ibid.*, 191.
[282] *Ibid.*, 200-205.
[283] *Ibid.*, 8.
[284] *Ibid.*, 9. His italics.
[285] Daphen Leong & David Korevaar, "Repetition as Musical Motion in Ravel's Piano Writing", in Peter Kaminsky (ed.), *Unmasking Ravel: New Perspectives on the Music* (Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 138.

(usually) humour".[286] On the one hand, the reduction to small musical motifs represents a miniaturisation. On the other hand, variational repetition is for Ravel the way to give motion (to give life) to these toyified musical motifs. In the words of Leong & Korevaar, "mechanical and dance-like motion shade into one another in Ravel's works, and the combination often results in naturalistic descriptions of water, creatures and anthropomorphic beings."[287] Ravel's motivic toying, then, is an aesthetic of the miniature as much as it is a transformative process through which life is put in motion.

Furthermore, Ravel's toying with small motifs and his reliance on childlike perspectives lead him to play with genres and topics, via the exploration of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. This is the case with his characteristic mix of clock mechanics and Spanish dances (where the castanets in particular becomes a polysemous element). It is also the case with the toylike description of animals like crickets or frogs. There is indeed a certain "fluidity of genre" in Ravel's dealing with topics,[288] like in "La Pintade" ("The Guineafowl" from *Histoires Naturelles*) where he merges poultry and military sounds. All in all, there is a case to be made for a ludic aesthetic in Ravel's music, which starts with his fascination with toys, in relation to French aesthetics of clarity and interest in the childlike. This ludic Ravelian aesthetic finds its formulation in miniature-like motivic toying, which brings forward the possibility of playing with genres and of fashioning topical admixtures.

Gouzi provides an interesting description of the ways Ravel was mediated to Britten, through Audrey Alston, Frank Bridge, concerts, and radio broadcasts. She traces Ravel's influence on Britten's song-writing in particular, making interesting melodic connections between Ravel's "Le Paon" (*Histoires Naturelles*) and Britten's last

[286] Coombes, *Music and Childhood in French Culture*, 8.
[287] Leong & Korevaar, "Repetition as Musical Motion", 137.
[288] Deborah Mawer, "Musical Objects and Machines", in her (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to the Music of Maurice Ravel*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 56.

Michelangelo sonnet.[289] More references may be added. Britten's *Piano Concerto*, for example, displays an interesting mix of Ravelian and Prokofievian styles. Indeed, a close look at Britten's juvenilia shows that the infusion of Ravel's style was a lengthy process. While the orchestral colours of Ravel made their ways into Britten's *Quatre Chansons françaises*, the Frenchman's economy of means, apparent simplicity, post-tonality, and shortening/repetition of phrases does not emerge fully in Britten's style until a few years later. In fact, most of the rhythmical writing and the pitch-organisation of the *Quatre Chansons françaises* follows Romantic chromatic voice-leading. For example, Britten's *Introduction and Allegro* for viola and strings, composed in October 1929, sounds as if Britten was still unaware of Ravel's style (we know, however, that he encountered in 1928 Ravel's own *Introduction and Allegro*).[290] Similarly, the 'Novelette' from the *Miniature Suite* for string quartet from February 1929 clearly turns towards Elgar more than Ravel. The piece is inspired by Elgar's eighth 'Enigma' variation, while presaging the main theme of *The Turn of the Screw* (fig. 2.1).[291] It seems that some genres in Britten's juvenilia have a greater affinity with Ravel's aesthetics than others: typically, Ravel's style is quicker to perfuse Britten's song writing, while Britten's piano and chamber music carries on in Brahmsian or lyric-chromatic experiments. There may actually be something about song writing which fosters more toying in the piano accompaniment, in a Ravelian fashion.

[289] *Ibid*.
[290] Britten Pears Arts Archives: Juvenilia C8/64 (21-31 Oct. 1929).
[291] Britten Pears Arts Archives: Juvenilia C8/60 (Febr. 1929).



Figure 2.1 "Novelette" from *Miniature Suite* for string quartet, C8/60, draft, Feb. 1929 (© Britten Pears Arts archives)

The ludic components of Ravel's aesthetic (toys, child-perspective, variational use of small units, and playing with genres) are found equally in Britten's music. The next paragraphs review some of these influences, and the forms they take, with emphasis on miniaturisation (toylike and childlike), play with topics, knocking dyads, quartal harmony, and a pervasive instance on musical physicality.

Some song drafts from Britten's juvenilia, like his two attempts at setting Walter de la Mare's "Fool's song" ("Never no never listen too long") around 1929 offers interesting insights into Britten's trials and experiments in Ravelian clarity.[292] One of these attempts (C8/43, see fig. 2.2) displays an unfinished attempt at thread-bare textures, harmonic simplification on the verge of tonality, and a general reduction in means. There is a form of miniaturisation in this piece when compared to other more abundant and overflowing instrumental writings of Britten's juvenilia. This miniaturisation is expressed in particular in small motivic cell writing, with motivic cells being continuously varied,

[292] Britten Pears Arts Archives: Juvenilia C8/42 & C8/45.

and layered on each other. The hiccupy staccato in the right-hand adds to the impression of miniaturisation, as it betrays a form of topical fluidity between a march, an organum-like counterpoint, and an insect-like hopping (amplified by the buzzing trills of the left hand). Altogether, this draft song shows a departure on Britten's part from the playful aesthetic grounds of Ravel, and a probing into false simplification, motivic economy, miniaturisation, and topical fluidity. Britten's juvenilia, in this regard, is an amazing source through which to observe the slow infusing of the new styles Britten discovered as a teenager. A source, unfortunately, still too under-explored.



Figure 2.2 Britten's "Never no never listen too long" C8/42, draft, c. 1929 (15 years old) (© Britten Pears Arts archives)

Next to miniaturisation, Ravel's play with topics (as observed in "The Guineafowl", mixing poultry sounds with military references), correlates with Britten's exploration of the thresholds between genres. To their shared passion for childhood corresponds a use of ludic rhetorics of the child to create ambiguities between the childlike and the adultlike, the toy and the human, the cute and the mischievous. Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which mixes militarism with magic, recalls these aspects of "The Guineafowl" or *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*.

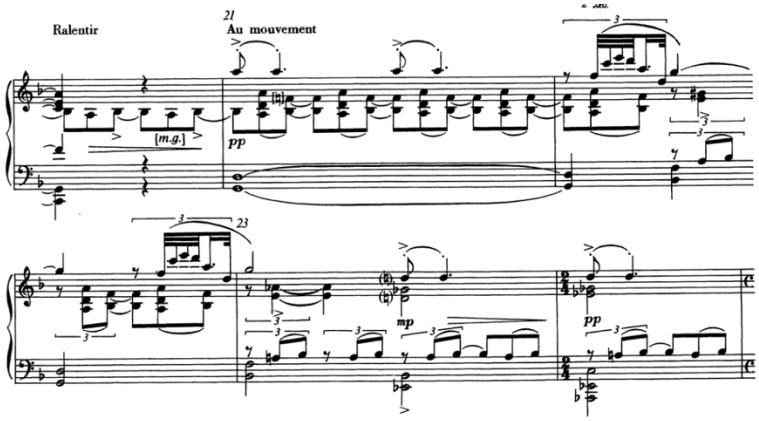
Britten's music is also greatly infused by Ravel's distinctive "knocking dyads",[293] i.e. toylike and/or animal-like second-interval clashes (see fig. 2.3). This superficial correspondence (to use Cooke's term), did not escape Dudley Moore in his parody of Britten, in which major-second clashes are predominant (see Introduction). These dyads take in Britten some of the toylike or cricket-like qualities of Ravel's music, as with the grasshopper-like sounds of Britten's early oboe pieces (*Two Insect Pieces*, 1935), or the toy-wooden quality of "You Spotted Snakes" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960). In particular, however, the Ravelian knocking dyad finds in Britten's music a sportlike property when associated with the vivacity and the racket-like snaps pieces such as *Go Play, Boy, Play* (1933) or *Holiday Diary* (1934). Ravel's animalism and animism is transposed with Britten on a tennis court or a cricket field. In Britten's music, the Ravelian knocking-dyad becomes akin to the sound of leather on willow.

[293] Emily Kilpatrick, *The Operas of Maurice Ravel* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 221-223.



Figure 2.3 Ravelian 'knocking dyads' in Britten's music (© Faber Music 1980 / Boosey & Hawkes, 1949, 1960, 1946)

Quartal harmony is also one of the stylistic traits that Ravel (among others) mediated to Britten.[294] The following example from "Oiseaux tristes" (*Miroirs*) shows how Ravel uses quartal counterpoint in a similar fashion to Debussy but linked in Ravel's case to a mechanical toylike aspect (fig. 2.4a). The toying with small motifs (see last bars, fig. 2.3b) produces the same kind of faux-tonal pitch-organisation found in Britten.



(a) bars 20-24

[294] *Ibid.*, 229.



(b) bars 29-32

Figure 2.4 Ravel's "Oiseaux Tristes" (© Eschig, 1906)

The physicality of Ravel's music also had a crucial influence on Britten, through the many instances of vivace pizzicato playing, or various *moti perpetui*. I emphasised above the importance of sport in Britten's music, and his transformation of Ravel's knocking dyads into sonic sport-like elements. This shows how the vitality of Ravel's animated toys become with Britten the expression of the sport-like. Physicality is also linked in Ravel and Britten to matters of dance, as found in Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro*. This piece presents many features that became staples of Britten's writing: a general economy in means, with a thinness and subtleness in the writing linked to child references; a great diversity of colours extracted from a chamber ensemble; a use of simple tunes as toys for motivic play between genres and styles; and a general physicality which breaks with the lyricism of the British Pastoral or the Austro-German pathos.

In summary, Ravel is a crucial model for Britten's playful aesthetic, may it be via common child-bound rhetorics, playtesting of the boundaries between genres, and toyification of music in small motifs, miniaturisation, knocking dyads, quartal harmony and physicality. The general economy of means of Ravel's writing spurs in Britten's music an interest in gestural physicality which brings music close to sport. The animist liveliness of Ravel's toys become symbolically with Britten the brisk vivacity of the sportsman. Britten, all told, is a Ravel with a cricket bat in hand. Chapter 3 will say more about this link between Britten and sport in more analytical terms.

2.5 Stravinsky and toy-like humans

Next to Ravel, Igor Stravinsky was another important source of stimulation for Britten's playful aesthetic. Surprisingly, however, if biographers agree on the importance of Stravinsky for the young Britten, analysts seem to ignore the rich analytical and aesthetic implications that such a stylistic relationship offers. In fact, Stravinsky's rhetoric mirrors Ravel's. When the latter endeavours to explore the human aspect of the toy, Stravinsky explores the toylikeness of the human. The toylike element of Stravinsky's music mostly revolves around the puppet as a symbol. This characteristic has been explored at great length, and with much panache, by Daniel Albright, for whom Stravinsky's music is about "the deep equivalence of the natural and the artificial."[295] According to Albright, Stravinsky is "attacking the concept of human subject [...] through motor-driven devices, mechanical warfare, not through Wagnerian exercises in drowning."[296] One finds again, in the crux of ludomusical rhetorics, a distancing from the Austro-German lyric flow. Stepping aside from these Austro-German long phrases and voice-lead chromatic constructions, Stravinsky deals with fragmentations, ostinatos, and false-simplicity: a dehumanised music with a puppet-like quality; a music deprived of all its elements of human lyricism. For Linda M. Austin, this puppet-oriented strategy is an extension of French concerns, especially in ballet music: "Performances of *Coppélia* and *Petrushka* continue to show in particular the mechanical movements of dolls and the disjointed motion of marionettes admit degrees of affective and physiological elasticity into the biotechnical category of the automatic."[297] In the same vein, Glenn Watkins links these aspects to matters of war. Stravinsky's music, in that context, displays a toy-soldiery

[295] Albright, Daniel. "Toy Nightingales and Dancing Dolls: The Origins of Stravinsky's Drama", *The Kenyon Review*, 10/1 (1988), 105.
[296] Albright, Daniel. "Truth and Lies in the Stravinskyan Sense: 'Oedipus Rex'", *Modernist Cultures*, 3/1 (2010), 26.
[297] Linda M. Austin, "Elaborations of the Machine: The Automata Ballets", *Modernism/Modernity*, 23/1 (2016), 66-67.

quality: "Stravinsky's 'March' [from *Trois Pièces Faciles*, 1914] similarly provides a portrait of the *naïf* world of toy soldiers straight out of a coloring book."[298] Watkins and Austin point towards the inheritance in Stravinsky's music of French aesthetics, while Albright indicates its anti-Germanic aspects.

In parallel, Richard Taruskin explored the Russian cultural traits of Stravinsky: *nepodvizhnost'* (immobility); *drobnost'* ("the quality of being a sum-of-parts");[299] *uproshcheniye* (simplification). *Drobnost'* in particular recalls the nonsensical semiotics of play explored in chapter 1 through Elizabeth Sewell's analyses, i.e. how art can be made as a succession of ones, which do not merge holistically in a coherent unicity. Taruskin links this notion in Stravinsky to an absence of memory, and finally to a "subhuman" quality.[300] To the fragmentation of time corresponds the fragmentation of space, through a stratification of music into autonomous superposed layers.

On such a note, Jonathan Cross's study of Stravinsky's *Symphony in C* offers many tools for investigating splinteredness in terms of non-tonal analysis. When he describes the "sort-of-C-major" where "we hear the tonal and non-tonal, the functional and non-functional, held in dynamic tension",[301] Cross puts his finger on non-unitary ways to conceive tonality. As presented below, and more in-depth in the next chapter, this type of analytical attitude is central to understand the pretence tonality at the core of Britten's playful aesthetic.

Allied to Stravinsky's stylistic de-humanisation, is a whole rhetoric of play as fate: of the human driven by forces they do not control. For Brian Sutton-Smith, the rhetoric of play as fate is multifaceted, "such as the attributions that the gods are at play, that the

[298] Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (University of California Press, 2002), 132.
[299] Taruskin, Richard. *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hemeneutical Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 383.
[300] *Ibid.*
[301] Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, 208.

universe is at play, that our brains are at play, and finally that we are creatures of the play of fortune and luck, as exemplified by games of chance."[302] Stravinsky's works are infused with such a rhetoric, with its Faustian tales (*L'Histoire du Soldat*), gamblers (*The Rake's Progress*), card games (*Jeu de cartes*), humans puppeteered by gods (*Oedipus Rex*), or ritualistic sacrifices (*The Rite of Spring*). The puppet, once more, epitomises this characteristic best. Interestingly enough, this rhetoric infuses Stravinsky's own self-descriptions: "I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed".[303] If 'vessel' implies a spiritual character, it also expresses an implicit passivity; an idea of being played by destiny. The same idea permeates his famous aesthetic statement: "I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc. *Expression* has never been an inherent property of music."[304] This sentence perhaps reveals less about the expressivity of Stravinsky's music than about the psychological interests of Stravinsky himself; about a desire to be driven by external forces and to be, like a puppet, devoid of expression. After all, the sentence itself is a puppeting of a text actually written by Walter Nouvel.[305]

It is this very aspect of Stravinsky's music which seems to have worried Theodor Adorno in his *Philosophy of New Music*.[306] Adorno severely criticises Else Kolliner's praise of what she calls Stravinsky's "infantilist aesthetic", a term which is reminiscent of the self-claimed infantilism of futurist Russian artists. For Adorno, the "infantilism is the style of the worn-out and exhausted."[307] Cross describes how Adorno's reading of Stravinsky is inscribed in a fear of the totalitarian potential of such a vision of a childlike

[302] Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 53.
[303] Quoted in Michael Oliver, *Igor Stravinsky*, Phaidon Press, 1995, 41.
[304] Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography (1903-1934)* (Marion Boyars, 1990 [1st ed. 1936]), 53.
[305] See Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, 14.
[306] Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*.
[307] *Ibid.*, 133.

aggressiveness.[308] Indeed, Adorno rejects Stravinsky's sport-like empty corporeality. By doing so, however, he identifies (albeit in negative terms) the crucial feature of Stravinsky's puppet-like aesthetic. In fact, the mention of toys and the child is for Adorno's high-modernist attitude a rhetorical manner to depreciate Stravinsky's music: "Infantilistic music behaves towards its models like a child who takes apart a toy and puts it back together again faultily."[309] In short, Adorno uses a ludic rhetoric to disarm ludic rhetorics, in deprecatory ways. This may explain the ease with which high modernists succeed in debasing ludic modernism, by turning its rhetoric against itself.

As a matter of fact, Cross notes a certain obsession among scholars to look at Stravinsky's modernism with an "anti-modernist urge to synthesise".[310] Indeed, "though the modernism of such music seemed radically and variously to challenge the nineteenth-century ideal of the unified musical work", writes Cross, "theory took a contrary reactionary stance by generally insisting on reinstating the primacy of connecting processes in that music [...] in order to assert its coherence."[311] And of course, when this coherence is nowhere to be found, theory had the tendency to present Stravinsky as an anti-modernist, framed by Adorno's Schoenberg vs. Stravinsky opposition. Taruskin, by contrast, shows a more Russian theory of modernism which does not dillydally with matters of unity and coherence. Cross reviews the many comparisons made between Stravinsky's block-organisation and French plastic arts like Cubism, or between his rhythmical energy and Primitivism in painting. Cross' discussion shows therefore a rich and (sometimes heated) discussion between these Russian or French readings of Stravinsky versus the Adornian Austro-German fascination for unity which led to discard Stravinsky from the ranks of those who influenced Britten. The vivacity of the debate,

[308] Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, 229-234.
[309] Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 137.
[310] Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, 202.
[311] *Ibid.*, 193.

however, with major implication in terms of music analysis, shows the huge gap still present between Stravinsky studies and Britten studies. Apart from Philip Rupprecht's strata analyses, nothing very *drobnost'*-like is to be found so far about Britten's music. No block construction, additive rhythms, and other elements are commonly analysed in Britten's style. This absence shows to which extent if some Stravinsky scholars reclaimed Stravinsky's modernism as a different kind of modernism to be appreciated for what it is (and with Franco-Russian aesthetic roots), many Britten scholars still attempt to analyse Britten's modernism through Austro-German credentials in unity and coherence. J.P.E. Harper-Scott's attempt at marrying Marxist theory and phenomenological appeal for unity and truth in his book on Britten is in fact only one more symptom of the 'anti-modernist' frame described by Cross.[312] This is all the more striking, when a glance at the modernist studies of literature or visual arts reveal such interests in non-unitary ways of art creation, and of course, are often centred on matters of ludic layouts.

Stratifications, toyifications, splinteredness, or childlikeness, therefore, are many ludic aspects which suggests Stravinsky to be a second model for Britten, next to Ravel. Consequently, Britten's playful aesthetic inherits a mix of Russian and French non-developmental ways of writing which deal with false-simplicity, static circularities, fragmentations, miniaturisation, or puppet-like de-lyricisations. Differently than in Ravel's case, though, the study of Stravinsky's influence on Britten has been more often acknowledged (however, not in terms of the ludic). Bayan Northcott, for example, details the curious series of borrowings between Britten and Stravinsky.[313] Additionally, Cameron Pyke dedicates a whole chapter of his *Benjamin Britten and Russia* to the history of Britten's discovery of Stravinsky's music., from as early as 1929.[314] According to

[312] J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Ideology in Britten's Operas* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[313] Bayan Northcott, *The Way We Listen Now, and Other Writings on Music* (Plumbago, 2009), 127-132.
[314] Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 120.

Pyke, two areas particularly fascinated Britten, "Stravinsky's ballet music and the large-scale vocal works *Symphonie de psaumes* (1930) and *Oedipus Rex* (1927)."[315] As in Ravel's case, most of Britten's encounters with Stravinsky's music happened through the radio, performances, gramophone records, and scores.[316] His diaries from the 1930s, Ashby observes, "recount his joyful discoveries of *Jeu de Cartes*, *Pulcinella, Renard, Les Noces*, and especially the *Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex*, this last praised for its startling originality."[317] Indeed, when looked at more closely, these two pieces (*Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex*) summarise much of the impact of Stravinsky on Britten's playful aesthetic.

Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* offers for example striking similarities with Stravinsky's splinteredness of the *Symphony of Psalms*. The "Dies Irae" in particular owes much to the third movement of the *Symphony of Psalms*. Both present fragmented bursts of orchestral writing, especially putting emphasis on the brass section. The following passages show for instance strategies of writing that are strikingly alike (fig. 2.5). Both utilise similar hunt topics as fanfare-like modes of orchestration (Dampierre ternary rhythms, *ranz de vaches*, and brass military pitch repetitions).

[315] *Ibid.*
[316] *Ibid.*, 121.
[317] Arved Ashby, "Responding to the Continent", in Stroeher, Vicki P., Vickers, Justin (eds.). *Benjamin Britten in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 177.

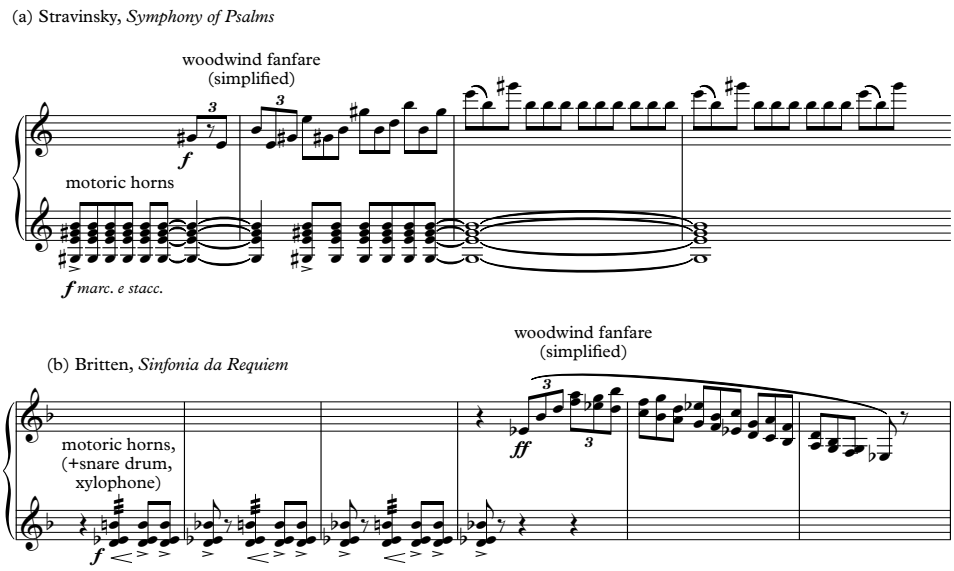


Figure 2.5 (a) Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* (b) Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1948, 1942)

To start with, the mechanical in Stravinsky's music finds in Britten a more carefree and vivacious expression. The Stravinskian splinteredness, and its evocations of puppet-like de-humanisation, are reused in Britten as bursts of energetic gestures. The mechanical puppet becomes, with Britten, sportlike. In fact, Britten's use of Stravinsky's style recalls the strategy described above about Britten's use of Ravel. The modernist Franco-Russian fragmentation of these composers, linked to aspects of ludic modernism (toys, puppets, and other childlike distortions of reality), gives in Britten a boisterous sportlike gestural quality. At the same time, Stravinsky's puppet-like aesthetic is echoed in Britten's technique of stratification. Stravinsky's layering of strata "relatively independent of each other" and "deliberately uncoordinated"[318] has a direct influence on Britten's own game-like stratifications, as a challenge of self-limitation once more akin to a sport-like attitude. In addition, like Ravel, Stravinsky offers many examples of playing with genres and topics for Britten to copy. In the words of Kofi Agawu, "In

[318] Joseph N. Straus, *Broken Beauty: Musical Modernism and the Representation of Disability* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 77.

Stravinsky's music, an essentialised parasitical tendency often originates in a play with, or appropriation of, established topics."[319] For Scott C. Schumann, Stravinsky delights in topic distortions of dances, marches, *pieces de caractère* and so on.[320] This play with genres and topics, is also a central aspect Britten takes from Stravinsky.

This is the case of *Oedipus Rex*, one of Britten's main Stravinskian models, which presents, according to Albright, a 'deadish' *Merzbild* of genres, from tarantelle, circus music, Handelian aria belly-dance, and Verdian drama: "*Oedipus Rex* is a machine that erects characters, pushes them forth, and at last annihilates them—an iron maiden, a rack for the dismemberment of puppets."[321] Styles, genres, and topics are used as empty vessels, as formal containers deprived of their rhetorical content, as dead as the Latin language uttered by the singers. Stravinsky's toyification of genres is associated with a "zombie" rhetoric[322] which transforms living things into in-between liveliness, as semi-dead toys. If Britten finds in Stravinsky another model, aside from Ravel, in manners of exploring semiotic thresholds between genres, I would argue that this happens without using the same zombie rhetoric as Stravinsky. The Brittenian child in particular, through its vitality, tricks, and boisterousness, takes a more Ravelian direction on this matter.

However, Britten takes from Stravinsky what Adorno describes as the latter's "desexualised relation of his music to the body".[323] Toyification and childification of musical genres (of dances, marches, sport, and so forth) are for Britten ways to remove the sexual aspect of his music. This claim seems to contradict much of the queer reading of Britten, especially the maximalist presence of sexuality in Britten's art as described by Philip Brett. Here again, taking play and the childlike seriously means to consider playful

[319] Agawu, quoted in Scott Charles Schumann, *Making the Past Present: Topics in Stravinsky's Neoclassical Works* (PhD, University of Texas, 2015), 61.
[320] *Ibid.*
[321] Daniel Albright, *Stravinsky: The Music Box and the Nightingale*, (Gordon and Breach, 1989), 29.
[322] Albright, "Truth and Lies", 27.
[323] Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 129.

aesthetics as a special way to treat sexuality. In particular, motivic toying, de-lyricisation, and spliteredness are ways to remove the sensual qualities of music, while the emphasis on gestural carefree repetitions offers a more sportlike and childlike spontaneity. In other words, ludic modernism helps to nuance Britten's depiction of sexual subjects and to see the use of the childlike and of toyification as erasures of the sexual. These erasures have of course a lot to do with a closeted attitude, tightly felt in the music, but it inherits also modernists erasures of sensuality, coupled with a typically Victorian attitude to sport. In sum, the Stravinskian puppet-like, with its Franco-Russian origins and vorticist tendencies in the erasure the subject, finds in Britten a particularly interesting application in terms of de-sexualisation and childification of the adult.

Stravinsky is a clear model for Britten on almost-tonal pitch organisation, linked to topical elements of the music-exercise and the school-like. Graham Griffiths explored the importance of the fingering process in Stravinsky's writing: "Stravinsky had developed a unique mode of working, i.e. a pianistic mode of thinking that could slide between piano practice and musical composition via an inter-textuality based upon the concept of process."[324] Mechanical gestures are indeed an important component of Stravinsky's music. The gesture directs motivic manipulations. The fingering dictates play and a conflicting pitch-organisation emerges from the fingering-playing process. Griffiths' analysis of the opening of the *Symphony of Psalms* is telling:

> Stravinsky's orchestral *ritornelli* at the start of the *Symphony of Psalms*, for example, are constructed from arpeggios that act on the ear as harmonies or chords in linear presentation. In succession they convey no sense of tonal (diatonic) progression. Yet, the retention of a common *interval* as the focal point of successive arpeggios/chords provokes a subtle conflict: there emerge two simultaneous rates of harmonic change, as portrayed by the inner interval and the outer notes. As the pivotal interval at the arpeggios' centre is slower to change than the outer notes, one is able to sense the 'play' of musical procedures—of the composer engaging in a deliberate manipulation of his material.[325]

[324] Graham Griffiths, *Stravinsky's Piano, Genesis of a Musical Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 139-140.
[325] *Ibid.*, 142.

The piano is then the driving element of Stravinsky's compositional process. After all, not only is the piano the playful interface analysed by Roger Moseley,[326] it is also in Stravinsky's case a symbol of his puppet mechanics and ludic rhetorics, as in its accompaniement of "Ten Green Bottles" in *Petrushka*. The piano is the tool he uses for composing, but also a plaything through which affordances are tested. Stravinsky's music is the result of his playing-at-being-played by the natural limitations of his piano. The piano is Stravinsky's toy on which he operates tricks.[327] Like Britten, Stravinsky seems to offer a trickster's art. The faux-tonality of Britten's music will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

To summarise, Britten finds in Stravinsky a model for much of his developing playful aesthetic: for his stratification of playthings, for the non-tonal outcome in the encounters between layers, for his playtesting of the limitations of genres, and for its modernist erasure of sensuality. Together with Ravel, Stravinsky offers rich examples of ludic modernism for Britten to make his own. In particular, Stravinsky's ludic rhetoric of the toy as a humanless human, broadens the horizons and possibilities of the Ravelian animism, creating a heightened ambiguity between the toylike human and the human toy.

2.6 Prokofiev *l'enfant terrible*

A third ludic model is Prokofiev. For Britten, according to Cameron Pyke, Prokofiev "restored to Russian music the jest and irony, the satire and laughter [...] Mischievousness and youthful vigour gushed from his music."[328] For sure, Britten's discovery of Prokofiev in the 1930s happened at a moment when Britten looked for ways to cutting short with the rhythmical apathy of the pastoral-school Britishness. Prokofiev's

[326] Moseley, *Keys to Play*.
[327] Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor*, 251-263 (Westerhaus, 2012: 251-263)
[328] Britten quoted in Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia.*, 89.

style offered vitality, rhythmicity, and sportliness for the young Britten. It offered it attached to the ludic modernist rhetoric of the *enfant terrible* (and its use as a self-promoting marketing strategy on the Russian composer's part). According to Pyke, "these elements of wit and rhythm—which Prokofiev himself described as the 'modern', 'toccata/motor' and 'grotesque/scherzo-ish' of his musical language—appear to have been a more important part of his music's appeal to Britten at this stage than the lyrical and Classical elements."[329] In a similar vein, Pyke identifies three main points of influence from Prokofiev on Britten: Prokofiev's position as a high-profile performer of his own works as a model for Britten; Prokofiev's Russianness as a new vitality against the English musical establishment; and the brilliance and wit of Prokofiev's compositional displays as an example for much of Britten's artistic attitude.[330] In particular, Britten's piano pieces (his *Holiday Diary*, *Piano Concerto*, or *Diversions*) show many stylistic and melodic similarities with Prokofiev's works, as analysed by Pyke and Lyn Henderson[331]

In the Introduction, I described similarities between the British reception in the 1920s of a 'clever' Sergei Prokofiev, and a decade later of a 'clever' Britten. Like Prokofiev, Britten was accused of superficiality (of being clever but without heartfelt convictions), which was sometimes linked to attitudes of manipulation and seduction (see Introduction). As with Britten, if these accusations were deprecatory, they nonetheless engaged with one of the essential characteristic of Prokofiev's music, that is its ludic modernism. Prokofiev's playfulness, takes a tragic-comic form, which continuously counter-balances the serious with the light-hearted. From the confrontation of these two opposite moods arises a form of aggressiveness; the tragi-comic brutality of an *enfant*

[329] *Ibid.*, 90.
[330] *Ibid.*, 95.
[331] *Ibid.*, 92-3; Lyn Henderson, "His Influence on Britten: The Vital Prokofiev", *The Musical Times*, 144/1882 (2003), 16-19.

terrible, which combines elements of virtuosity, gesture, sportiness, tricks, and grotesquerie in semiotic fluctuation between the playful and the non-playful.

The piano is the symbolic aggressive percussion of the *enfant terrible*, at once a "neo-barbarous" apparatus[332] and Romantic symbol of music expression. The piano is a toy on which to charm and to assault. What is striking in Prokofiev's pieces, is the "gestural language" of his piano writing as analysed by Christina Guillaumier.[333] In particular, Prokofiev used modernism as "shock tactics" to unsettle the listener.[334] Modernism appears with Prokofiev as a drama to captivate audiences, in contrast to the elitism of the high modernists' conceptions. In addition, the virtuosity expressed by Prokofiev's gestural focus has a sportlike aspect. Indeed, his "physical gymnastics on the piano provided visual imagery for the audience, but was also an important constituent feature of the virtuosic."[335] Prokofiev's performances were not just to be heard; their sportlike devilish display needed to be seen. This virtuosity found itself at the threshold between the Russian Futurist ludic modernism (of the aggressive revolutionary child) and what Guillaumier calls the "technical daredevilry that was a Romantic legacy".[336] This devilish-revolutionary, using ludics to destroy, is the disobedient *enfant terrible*, indeed.

The Futurist childlikeness of Prokofiev's music manifests itself through a brilliant spectacle of virtuosic scales. As analysed by Guillaumier, "pianistic figurations such as scalar and chromatic figurations, rapid passages in thirds and sixths are not merely a nod in the direction of traditional pianistic technique: they become music materials."[337] That is to say that Prokofiev reallocated this music-practicing material as elements for toying.

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[332] Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 29.
[333] Christina Guillaumier, "Ambiguous Modernism: The Early Orchestral Works of Sergei Prokofiev", *Tempo*, 65/256 (2011) 28.
[334] *Ibid.*, 37.
[335] Christina Guillaumier, *From Piano to Stage: A Genealogy of Musical Ideas in the Piano Works of Sergei Prokofiev (1900-c.1920)* (PhD, University of St Andrews, 2010) 144.
[336] *Ibid.*, 98.
[337] Guillaumier, *From Piano to Stage*, 102.

In brief, Prokofiev plays by the very definition of play given by Bernard Suits.[338] Britten's own handling of practice-like material has therefore a direct debt to Prokofiev and as such, Prokofiev is a central model for Britten's play. This debt, however, is shared with Stravinsky's 'zombie scales' evoked by Albright and discussed above. In Stravinsky's music, using practice material is a way to exemplify emptiness and lack of expression via the use of a purely functional music designed for rehearsing practice. In Prokofiev's music, this material becomes the opportunity for a futurist show-off which mixes the childlike aspect of the practice of scales to the *enfant terrible* figure, into the mechanistic and virtuosic aspect of piano-playing. On that matter, Britten's own use of practice-scales as a reference to the childlike (presented in more details in the next chapter) owes perhaps more to Prokofiev than to Stravinsky. If Stravinsky's piano-exercises show a puppet-like inexpressive aspect (linked to the puppetting of eighteenth-century styles), Prokofiev's scalic exhibitions present the destructive child at play. Agile scalic playing crystallises the 'enfant' and the 'terrible' together; it makes reference to the childlike via piano-practice and to destruction via devilish virtuosity. The use of these scales, however, is not limited to piano playing. Typically, the violin writing in the second movement of Britten's *Violin Concerto*, for example, presents a similar ludic-disruptive scalic strategy to the second movement of Prokofiev's *Second Violin Concerto*.[339] The scale, from Prokofiev to Britten, becomes the agent of musical calisthenics, the expression of a sportlike and boisterous energy: the expression of a naughty child.

Next to scalic semiotics, Prokofiev's music presented Britten with strategies to play with tonality. Richard Bass theorises Prokofiev's technique of "chromatic displacement" which describes ways of replacing a series of notes with its chromatic neighbours while keeping their first diatonic function. This technique, for Bass, depends

[338] See discussion in previous chapter: Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 225.
[339] For a comparison between the two pieces, see Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 97-103.

on the "illusion it creates".[340] The technique is striking in the following example from *Romeo and Juliet* (fig. 2.6) where running scales easily shift chromatically into new scales without altering tonal perception. These chromaticisms do not lead to a metamorphosis of the tonal direction; on the contrary they are temporary slippages which are only solved back to their starting point. This example also gives insight into the vitality of Prokofiev's running scales, associated with the childlike behaviour and carefree energy of the "Young Juliet".[341] There is attached to the chromatic displacement technique, forms of humour or/and of disruption.[342]



Figure 2.6 Prokofiev, "The Young Juliet" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1935-40)

(© Boosey & Hawkes, 1940)

Chromatic displacement, in Prokofiev, also affects cadential progression. For Guillaumier, Prokofiev's music resides strongly on what she calls 'pseudo-cadences'[343]. i.e. as a "progression [which] appears to work and function similarly to a perfect cadence but sounds unexpectedly different, creating a distinctive Prokofievan sound."[344] Figure 2.7 presents how these pseudo-cadential strategies infuse "Young Juliet". Chords may be substituted; however, the subdominant (S), dominant (D), tonic (T) progression stays

[340] Richard Bass, "Prokofiev's Technique of Chromatic Displacement", *Music Analysis*, 7/2 (1988), 199.
[341] In this case too, and this may be true of other passages of Prokofiev's works, these childlike scales meet a neo-classical reference.
[342] One can find a similar strategy in one of Lord Berners' *Valse Bourgeoises*, ("Strauss, Strauss, and Strauss") in which chromatic displacement expresses a dandy taste in queerness and disruption.
[343] Guillaumier, *From Piano to Stage*, 105.
[344] Guillaumier, *From Piano to Stage*, 105.

intact in terms of perception. This technique has something gestural to it. If the pitch-organisation seems non-tonal, the gesturality of the cadence remains.

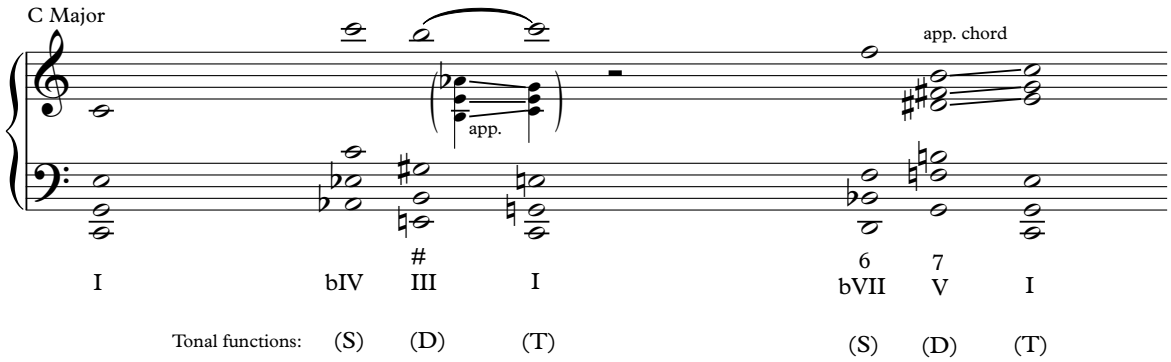


Figure 2.7 Prokofiev's pseudo-atonality in "The Young Juliet"

The beginning of *Peter Grimes* offers a striking parallel to Prokofiev's scalic chromatic spinning. After the steady B flat major opening, there appears a succession of scales twisting in unexpected directions. To use a cricket analogy, in the spirit of play, Britten' handling of scales is not unlike a cricket bowler, Britten is playing tricks with the listener and leads them into a game of deceived expectations. His scales spins around the batsman like a bowler's ball. This is because the scale is an element strongly characterized tonally: it implies a key which is recognisable by the position of its semitones, especially the articulation between the leading-note and the tonic. By playing with these tonal expectations (fig. 2.8), Britten creates a series of deceptive tricks. As shown, B flat major quickly swings around against expectations and finishes in A major. This is a wicket: the scalic spinning was successful, and the listener/batsman was tricked. The scale metamorphoses itself into other scales by small modifications in the alterations of leading notes. These sudden changes emphazise what is happening on stage: the music jumps straight into the action of the trial without any preparation. As shown on figure 2.7, once

the A major is reached, a succession of chords deepens the ongoing insecurity and tonal ambivalence. The harmony becomes ambiguously playful.

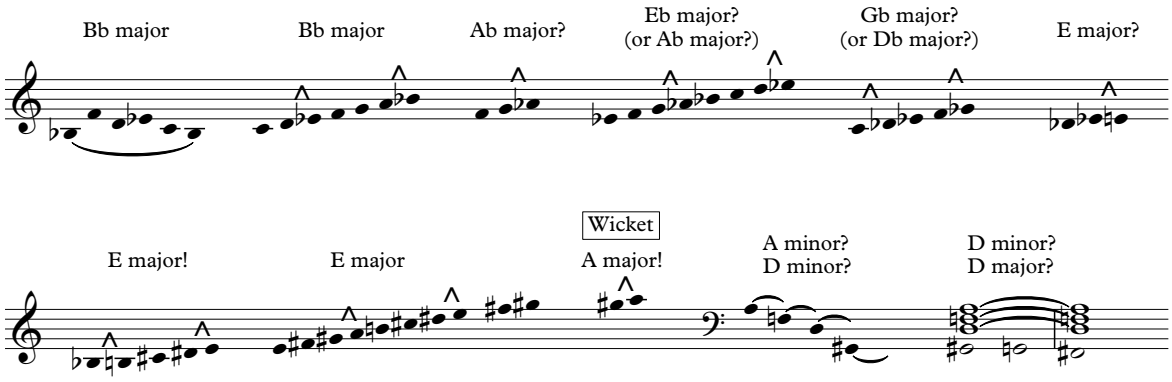


Figure 2.8 Scalic tricks in the opening of *Peter Grimes* (1945)

In comparison, Prokofiev's use of atonal aggregates in his pseudo-cadences is framed within a tonal chord-progression. Britten's breakaway from tonality often happens in the opposite way, and uses a triadic vocabulary in non-tonal frames. Britten thereby gives the illusion of tonality while being non-tonal, and Prokofiev the illusion of atonality while staying tonal. One could say that the first is 'pseudo-tonal' when the second is 'pseudo-atonal'. Either way, Prokofiev's trickster techniques provided Britten with the opportunity to play *l'enfant terrible* and disrupt cultural codes. There was, however, one more Russian *enfant terrible* model for the young Britten. Indeed, Pyke observes, "Prokofiev's influence complemented, though it did not exactly replicate, that of Shostakovich."[345]

[345] Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, 95.

2.7 Shostakovich and the Russian grotesque

From all the composers studied in this chapter, Shostakovich is by far the one who gathered the most attention in relation to Britten.[346] These studies, on the other hand, focus on interactions from the 1950s and 1960s. However, an earlier ludic influence of Shostakovich on Britten, especially via *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, is to be accounted for. This ludic early Shostakovich of the 1930s (albeit the only one from our list of composers not to be linked to the Parisian scene in any regard), resides mostly in the grotesque. This section, then, points at the influence of Shostakovich's on Britten's grotesque. For Paul Kildea, Shostakovich's influence needs to be compared to *Wozzeck*, in terms of Viennese modernist legacy.[347] This would be only a narrow view on the grotesque dimension in Shostakovich, and a limited understanding, as a consequence, of Britten's grotesque as a Viennese matter. To understand the influence of Shostakovich on Britten, Shostakovich's grotesque needs to be understood as an endogenous Russian phenomenon, imbued with ludic facets.

Like many other modernist figures, Shostakovich was another *enfant terrible*. Moreover, like Prokofiev's, his music parades many Russian Futurist avant-garde ludics. For the Russian Futurists, as discussed, the revolutionary child is the child who tears apart the present via shock-tactics to build a better future. In music, this translates into a childlike and revolutionary use of the piano as a mechanistic toy, simultaneously destructive and ludic. On top of this Futurist aspect, Shostakovich's style emphasises the Russian modernist's fascination with the grotesque. As the grotesque describes something monstrous and ridiculous at the same time, it is a threshold to be explored between two opposite semiotic regimes. More specifically, the grotesque centres on the body as a

[346] See, for example, Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 435-443.
[347] Kildea, "Benjamin Britten: Inventing British Expressionism?".

"paradoxical physicality—namely the incomplete metamorphosis of one bodily form into another."[348] As with French ludic modernism, which finds its roots in nineteenth-century French child phantasmagoria,[349] Russian ludic modernism sprouts from nineteenth-century elements. Perceptively, Ani Kokobobo explores the cultural undercurrents of the Russian grotesque realism which developed in nineteenth-century literature. She argues that these derailed descriptions of bodies in materialistic, mechanical, and animalistic ways are tied to the historical social fall of the gentry in the nineteenth century.[350] Indeed, the 1861 Russian reform of serf labour led to a reconsideration of the role of the gentry in serfdom, and triggered a sudden questioning of their social superiority. Not only did the Russian gentry thereby discover its commonality with lower social classes, but also their responsibility in the exploitation of serfs became officially recognised. The gentry, coated in moral righteousness, woke up to discover themselves, in the social mirror handed to them, as grotesque monsters:

> An aesthetic of psychological monstrosity, initially employed to depict social outsiders and non-gentry literary characters, was used to show the flaws of the gentry. This aesthetic, characterized by despiritualization, dehumanization, and at times ugliness, manifested key traits of the grotesque. With its ability to estrange the familiar without fully effacing it, the grotesque proved an adept mode for conveying changing attitudes toward the gentry.[351]

The distanced description of Katerina in Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk* (1934) owes much to the Russian grotesque. Marina Frolova-Walker describes the constant shifts of moods in the music, fluctuating between the serious and the ridiculous.[352] These mood-swings, allied with dissonant superposition of the dance-like or fanfare-like music when

[348] Shun-Liang Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque: Crashaw, Baudelaire, Magritte* (Legenda, 2010), 5.
[349] See Coombes, *Music and Childhood in French Culture*.
[350] Ani Kokobobo, *Russian Grotesque Realism: The Great Reforms and the Gentry Decline* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 4.
[351] *Ibid.*, 10-11.
[352] Marina Frolova-Walker, "'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk': Bleak Tragedy or Black Comedy?", *The Opera Quarterly*, 25/1-2 (2009), 150–156.

accompanying serious dramatic scenes, create what has often been described as a form of orchestral irony.

Britten inherits in full this technique and that of the Russian grotesque, via his early encounter with *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*. In a review of the opera in 1936, Britten praised the "detached comments on the [...] gruesome events on stage" from the orchestra's part in the interludes of *Lady Macbeth*. This opera, is the "sadistic drama itself" he wrote in this review.[353] These interludes epitomise Shostakovich's soundtrack-like counterpointing between the stage and the musical genres (dances, marches) played in the orchestra. These macabre deviations of genres have a direct impact on what Donald Mitchell calls Britten's 'dances of death': the scherzos and manhunts which can be found all over Britten's music of the 1930s and 1940s (as in *Ballad of Heroes*, *Our Hunting Fathers*, the *Sinfonia da Requiem*).[354] In particular, Britten kept in mind Shostakovich's description of Katerina when staging his own *Lucretia* in 1946. The paradigm of socialist realism at the heart of Shostakovich's opera and its denouncing of bourgeois mode of expression translates into the detached comments of Britten's own opera. Accompanying her rape, for example, the orchestra plays a tarantella, hidden by a hymn to the Virgin sung by the Chorus. These successive layers of masks (the tarantella, the prayer) borrow as much from Shostakovich as from Stravinsky. Like Shostakovich, the discrepancy between the stage situation and the orchestral tarantella commentary, with its gross implications of dance-like bodily movement, toys with the grotesque. Like Stravinsky, the *Lucretia*'s tarantella is an 'empty vessel' for a portrayal of puppets.[355] *Lucretia* is in that regard akin to Stravinsky's own use of a tarantella in *Oedipus Rex* as an accompaniment of Jocasta's and Oedipus' discovery that they are in fact not just wife and

[353] Britten, "Soviet Opera at B.B.C.: Shostakowitch's 'Lady Macbeth'", in *Britten on Music*, 18.
[354] Donald Mitchell, "Violent Climates", in Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 188-216.
[355] See Albright above.

husband, but also mother and son. In a nutshell, the fate-like Stravinskian erasure of sense, and the Shostakovich-inspired grotesque join into a de-humanisation of the operatic subject.

Esti Sheinberg has explored the link between the grotesque and ironical musical treatments. For her, the grotesque is the result of an irony whose contradiction is unresolved.[356] Such a leeway in the keeping together of semiotic oppositions leads Frances Connelly to consider the grotesque as the exploration of a *Spielraum*, Walter Benjamin's room for play discussed in chaper 1:

> To apprehend the grotesque, it is essential to understand it as being "in play." It always represents a state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown. As such, the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that of flux. Whether aberrant, metamorphic, or combinatory, grotesques are all in a transitional, in-between state of being. Blurring categories, the grotesque pulls us into a liminal state of multiple possibilities.[357]

The grotesque is then a form of play because it consists of a constant exploration of the threshold between the monstrous and the laughable. In musical terms, it translates into an unremitting play of topics. Shostakovich collides, merges, opposes, and overlaps topics to explore their boundaries. A piece like *Football* (1944), for example, exemplifies Shostakovich's topical amalgams. The music, supposed to represent a football match, is in fact a French can-can. A strange mimesis unfolds, and the runs and passes of the football players are admixed and conflated with an erotic cabaret choreography. For Mervyn Cooke, this aspect of Shostakovich's music has a direct link with his experience in Soviet silent film piano accompaniment, where improvisational practices or reuse of a stock of *pièces de caractère*, led to possible semiotic leeway between the screen and its

[356] Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich* (Routledge, 2000), 27-29.
[357] Connelly, Frances. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

soundtrack.[358] This room for play opened to Shostakovich an ideal place for experimentation with topics.

This is where the strategies of Britten and Shostakovich mostly meet. For both of them, working for films was an essential part in their development of a ludic attitude. Prokofiev, too, finds a place in this ludic soundtracking attitude and, by far, Shostakovich himself found much inspiration in Prokofiev, as much as Stravinsky. Such an attitude goes beyond soundtracking. It reveals the mechanics of a grotesque mismatch of genres throughout much of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, or Britten's repertoire. As described by Liudmila Kovnaskaya, "what attracted the young Shostakovich to Stravinsky and Prokofiev was their eccentricity, humour, irony, grotesque, and play with laughter: humour masquerading as approval behind the veneer of mockery, and irony masquerading as mockery behind the veneer of approval."[359] Play, humour, and grotesque are then revealing masks, a ludic modernist strategy which is used by Auden, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Britten alike.[360] Like Prokofiev, Shostakovich uses the piano as an *enfant terrible* toy, both virtuosic and aggressively futurist. Besides, Shostakovich uses similar semi-tonal displacement than Prokofiev (see above), linked to a "tongue-and-cheek character."[361] And this attitude made also its way to Britten as a sheer physicality and stamina. Britten's sportlike aesthetic, owes thus to Shostakovich's frantic music too.

To summarise, Shostakovich provided Britten with another *enfant terrible* figure, as well as ways to use the grotesque as a ludic rhetoric. In addition, Britten's playing with

[358] Mervyn Cooke, *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 36.
[359] Lyudmila Kovnatskaya, "Shostakovich and Britten: Some Parallels", in Rosamund Bartlett (ed.), *Shostakovich in Context* (Oxford University Press, 2000) 186.
[360] For examples of such strategies in Stravinsky and Britten's oeuvre, see in particular Sheppard, *Revealing masks*.
[361] Patrick MacCreless, "Shostakovich's politics of D minor and its neighbours, 1931–49", in Pauline Fairclough (ed.), *Shostakovich Studies 2* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 126.

topics echoes Shostakovich's soundtrack-like mismatching of semiotic layers. These types of detached commentaries and merging of the ridiculous and monstrous into the grotesque had a crucial influence on Britten in the 1930s-1940s, long before the development of his friendship with Shostakovich.

2.8 Copland's youthful freshness

The major models for Britten's playful aesthetic offered for discussion so far belonged to a Franco-Russian sphere. I would like now to turn to an American figure, strongly influenced by the ludic Parisian aesthetics; a composer consequential to the development of Britten's ludic modernism: Aaron Copland. If little on the influence of Shostakovich or Stravinsky on Britten in the 1930s is found in the literature on Benjamin Britten, nothing to date is available on Copland's influence, apart from the notes accompanying the editions of Britten's letters, diaries, and biographies, all testimony of Britten's interest in the music of the American composer. In particular, nothing like a stylistic commentary of this influence has yet been proposed. Considering Copland's influence, however, is not to sever totally from the study of the Franco-Russian influence, because Paris, and the Stravinskian teaching of Nadia Boulanger that Copland followed from 1921 to 1924, are of course central to the understanding of Copland's own development. So far, then, apart from Shostakovich, I presented four ludic modernist figures (Ravel, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Copland) who have in common a proximity from the Parisian sphere. Paris, in short, may well be the capital of ludomusical modernism.

As mentioned, Britten's letters and diaries show his fascination with the works of Copland. Britten's discovery of the composer goes back to January 1935, when he heard the *Dance Symphony* on a BBC contemporary concert: a "really beautiful and

exhilarating" piece.[362] Britten and Copland met in 1938 at the ISCM festival in London, and this encounter was shortly followed by Copland's visit to Snape the same year, when Copland played to Britten his freshly premiered 'play-opera' for young people, *The Second Hurricane*. For Britten, the memory of this moment kept "green" and fresh.[363] By the 1940s, on American soil, both Britten and Pears claimed Copland to be "the best American composer".[364] The pieces which impressed Britten the most, according to the comments left in his diaries and letters, were *Dance Symphony*, *El Salón Mexico*, *Outdoor Overture*, *The Second Hurricane*, and the *Piano Variations* (composed between 1929 and 1938). For Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Paul Bunyan* (1941) shows the direct influence of Copland's *Second Hurricane*.[365] More particularly, two decades after Copland's visit to Snape, Britten's *Noye's Fludde* not only shares Copland's attitude to writing for children, but also takes a very similar stormy theme. Indeed, Copland himself saw his potential influence on Britten's surge of interest for writing pieces for children: "Sometimes I flatter myself that [Britten's] subsequent preoccupation with young voices may have been in part an off-shoot of his pleasure in *The Second Hurricane*."[366] This list of encounters and praise shows the discrepancy between Britten's fascination with Copland and the place accorded by scholars to Copland in the studies of Britten's influences. This impact of Copland on Britten, as I offer to conceive it, is once more a matter of ludic rhetorics, and revolves in particular around the notions of vivacity and youthfulness.

[362] Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 244.
[363] Mitchell, *Letters from a Life* (vol. 2), 634-5.
[364] Britten in *ibid.*, 772: Pears in *ibid.*, 839.
[365] Mitchell, *Letters from a Life* (vol. 1), 567.
[366] Copland in Anthony Gishford (ed.), *Tribute to Benjamin Britten on His Fiftieth Birthday* (Faber & Faber, 1963), 72.

Of course, the music of Copland, the "American Stravinsky",[367] help to consider how Stravinsky's style took on a new light in the US. Especially, the United-States fashioned themselves culturally and politically in the first half of the twentieth-century as a 'Young America';[368] a country in its infancy where youthfulness was conceived as a political perspective. Copland's interest in the youth, is inscribed in that idea which finds its roots in Thoreau or Emerson, and leads to Dewey and the New Deal political project. Indeed, Copland dedicated much of his music to the young amateur. This is the case of *Outdoor Overture* (1938), composed for the young performers of the High School of Music and Art in New York City, conducted by Alexander Richter. Copland's account of the commission is telling: "Richter won me over when he explained that my work would be the opening gun in a campaign the school planned to undertake with the slogan: 'American Music for American Youth.'"[369] Indeed, Richter suggested something "optimistic in tone, that would appeal to the adolescent youth of this country."[370] This interest in the young, naturally, has a stylistic impact on the music itself.

In particular, *The Second Hurricane* (1937), showed by Copland to Britten at Snape in 1938, showcases how composition for young people was articulated within left-wing political US projects, preparing Copland's future participation in the WPA Music program, successor in 1939 of the 1935 Federal Music Project, which aimed at employing professional musicians during the Great Depression.[371] For Elizabeth Crist, the interest in community at the heart of *The Second Hurricane* has a lot in common with the French Popular Front ideal and to the thoughts of the so-called 'Young Americans' like Waldo

[367] Title of Gayle Murchison's book: *The American Stravinsky: The Style and Aesthetics of Copland's New American Music, the Early Works, 1921-1938* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).
[368] See M.E. Curti, "Young America", *The American Historical Review*, 32/1 (1926), 34-55.
[369] In Aaron Copland & Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1984), 285.
[370] *Ibid.*
[371] Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 25.

Frank and Lewis Mumford.[372] Similarly, Gayle Murchison describes Copland's attitude in terms of 'populism', i.e. a "deliberate turn towards an accessible modern style" which "led him away from urban music towards abstractions of folk music of the past, drawing on regional, national, and ethnic folk music in creating nationalist modern American music."[373] Simultaneously, Morris Dickstein links Copland's ideas of "clarifying and simplifying, reaching out to a wider audience, promoting some form of communal bounding, finding a distinctive native style, and doing this with freshness and vitality" to the project of the Group Theatre, created by a close relation to Copland, Harold Clurman.[374] In addition, for Daniel Felsenfeld, the type of writing that Copland adopts in *The Second Hurricane* is inspired by the Parisian writing for children found in 'Les Six'.[375] In brief, these different political, folk-inspired, theatrical, or stylistically Parisian facets, converge in Copland as a renewed interest for simplicity and clarity.

Copland's turn to American folklore, in particular, is led by his new focus on writing for the young. In that regard, *Billy the Kid* (1938) is symptomatic of the relation between Copland's new folklorism and his attention to the young people. Billy, this American 'kid' (though not literally a child anymore when he became famous), cow-boy, threat, and *enfant terrible*, showcases ideas of simplicity in Copland's modernism and of the potential violence of the youthful. For Felsenfeld, "To hear *Billy the Kid* now, years after Hollywood has hijacked its very specific palette, it sounds almost puerile and derivative."[376] Copland himself described the connection between folklore and youthfulness which triggered his collaboration with Martha Graham on *Appalachian*

[372] Elizabeth B. Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland During the Depression and War* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 72-73.
[373] Murchison, *The American Stravinsky*, 151.
[374] Morris, Dickstein, "Copland and American Populism in the 1930s", in Carol Oja & Judith Tick (eds.) *Aaron Copland and His World* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 92-93.
[375] Daniel Felsenfeld, *Charles Ives and Aaron Copland: A Listener's Guide* (Amadeus Press, 2004), 17.
[376] Felsenfeld, *Charles Ives and Aaron Copland*, 83. This comment of Felsenfeld points to Copland's influence on the Hollywood soundtrack style which, by way of consequences, became a major place of diffusion of ludic-modernist aesthetics.

Spring: "After Martha gave me this bare outline, I knew certain crucial things—that it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope. I thought about that in combination with Martha's own personality, her talents as a dancer, what she gave off, and the basic simplicity of her art.".[377] The simplicity of Graham's dancing, the youthful simplicity of Billy the Kid, the nostalgic/energetic simplicity of the Quaker folksongs and dances ('The Gift to be Simple' is the folksong on which *Appalachian Spring* closes) are many occasions to observe simplicity as a concept at the articulation between the folkloric and the youthful in Copland's music.

If *The Second Hurricane* was a crucial influence on Britten, it was because of this articulation between the folkloric and the youthful, in a general search for clarity. In other words, Copland's music presented Britten with the idea that folkloric music was not bound to be the apathetic nostalgia of the British pastoral school, but may instead be linked to ideas of energy, vivacity, and sportiness. Moreover, folksongs, and their simplicity, can share the boisterousness of a child. In terms of style, Copland's aesthetic kidlike/folk-like simplicity, offers three aspects of paramount importance for the development of Britten's playful aesthetic.

The first of these elements is the motivic simplicity of Copland's works. For Neil Butterworth, "The most consistent stylistic feature of Copland's music is the economy of thematic material."[378] Indeed, Copland presents a stylistic economy in means, which must have been part of its appeal for Britten. Copland "creates the formal structure through the alteration of short melodic fragments by repetition and extension. The adjective 'spare' is often applied to the textures that result"[379]; his music, is "straightforward and fat-

[377] Copland quoted in Felsenfeld, *Charles Ives and Aaron Copland*, 66.
[378] Neil Butterworth, *The Music of Aaron Copland* (Toccata Press, 1985), 183.
[379] *Ibid*., 184.

free".[380] Copland presents Britten with ranges of examples to push further his own economy of means and lusory games of limitation, in connection to youthful aesthetics. Copland offers Britten with a ludic rhetoric of the child, as the behavioural model creating playful art. There is of course also a mediation of Stravinsky who inspired Copland and Britten equally. However, if Copland presents Britten with a vivacious and boisterous folklorism in contrast with the British Pastoral, he equally offers Britten a youthfulness devoid of the nihilist emptiness of Stravinsky's toys, and promotes an optimism of the young as an active member of a Democratic community.

The second element is the didactic-like material which arises in Copland out of the encounter of the youthful and the folkloric. Canons, parallel thirds, and scalic displays, are some of the many forms this kidlike simplicity takes, in particular in *The Second Hurricane*: "The vocal writing mostly comprises short repeated phrases, but with sufficient character to be memorable. Often the chorus is in unison, or thirds, with simple canonic figures. Copland's melodic trade-mark, the interval of a third, is much in evidence."[381] This again is paramount for Britten. The scalic exercises, used by Britten as musical topics (see next chapter), owe a great deal to the influence of Aaron Copland.

The third aspect is the similar pseudo-tonal strategies of both composers along the line of the ludic treatments of tonality observed in Ravel, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich. For Felsenfeld, apropos the *Piano Variations*, "Copland never allows us to make up our minds, always teasing expectations—he *hints* at keys, and at conventional choices, without ever really landing there."[382] Meanwhile, for Murchison, "[Copland] did not necessarily embrace functional tonality but returned to triadic harmony as a foundation, albeit used in novel ways."[383] These descriptions echo what I will describe in

[380] Felsenfeld, *Charles Ives and Aaron Copland*, 81; about *Piano Variations*.
[381] Butterworth, *The Music of Aaron Copland*, 73.
[382] Felsenfeld, *Charles Ives and Aaron Copland*, 81.
[383] Murchison, *The American Stravinsky*, 151.

the next chapter about Britten's pitch-organisation strategies, i.e. the nonsensical use of tonal elements via play-testing of a limited motivic material. I will show the importance of addressing this non-functional use of triadic material in Britten.

In sum, Copland's youthfulness, freshness, and optimism, bound to the American folklore via the idea of simplicity, is of a crucial importance for Britten's lusory development. Copland's economy of means, his ways to rethink diatonicism playfully, his manner to give an American optimism to the puppet-like stylistics of Stravinsky, and his focus on writing for children as the place where these interests meet, provided a broad range of ludic stimuli for the young Britten.

* * *

This chapter presented ludic traditions in modernism of which Britten was aware. He found in these models rhetorical ways of playtesting topics and signifiers, like in Ravel's and Stravinsky's exploration of the human-toy boundary, or with Shostakovich's soundtrack-like mismatching. Britten also found in ludic models examples of economy of means, like in Ravel's toylike mimesis, Stravinsky's nihilist longing for inexpression, or Copland's folkloric-youthful simplicity. There is also a direct influence of ludic-modernist models on Britten in terms of energy and vivacity, like with Ravel's animalisms, Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's *enfant terrible* disruptive boisterousness, or with Copland's boyish optimism. The childlike, in particular, appeared as a decisive component in this web of influences, often allied to pseudo-tonal strategies, with exercises-like scale writing, or with triadic non-functional organisation.

These considerations, as argued, are the result of putting aside a much-too-Austro-German reading of Britten and of modernism more broadly. When the high-modernist veil drops, ludic modernism appears in full light. Consequently, when chapter 1

questioned what playful aesthetics are, the present chapter dealt with the forms playful art takes during modernism and investigated the canals of influences running down to Benjamin Britten. The next chapter raises music-analytical strategies to consider more closely the mechanics and topics of playful aesthetics into Britten's music.

Chapter 3:

Analysing Britten's Playful Aesthetics

Chapter 1 prepared a philosophical and semiotic ground for exploring playful aesthetics. One step closer to Britten, chapter 2 put together a historical and rhetorical context for contemplating the broad range of ludic influences on Britten's music. The present chapter ties together these philosophical and historical surveys to provide a music-analytical perspective on Britten's playful aesthetic. On the one hand, this chapter engages analytically with the concepts raised in chapter one: toys, playthings, autotelic manipulations, games of constraints, lusory attitudes, mismatches, problem-solving, nonsense, and childlikeness. On the other hand, it follows the conceptual line of the ludo-modernist influences sketched in chapter two: playtesting signifiers, clarity, economy of means, boisterous energy, childlikeness, pseudo-tonality, and scalic-exercises. In this chapter, these diverse playful notions are brought together into a music analytical discourse which aims at reappraising Britten's playfulness and give tools for doing so. Similarly, the 'toykit' gathered in Introduction, (fancy, practical jokes, stratification, false-simplicity, and childlikeness) is merged in the theory of Britten's play produced in this chapter.

I defined in chapter 1 three modalities of playfulness. The first deals with the mechanics of toying and art-game processes. The second considers childlike aesthetics in all their variety. The third observes play as a critical method. I insisted that these three modalities of the playful interact, and I hinted at Britten's music as a perfect example of playful art. The present chapter pursues that argument further. A first section questions the playful mechanics in Britten's music and brings out five parameters of musical toying to consider. The second section investigates play, games, and the childlike as topics, and

enlarges the minutiae analysis of the first section to broader perspectives on playfulness. That second section observes, hand-in-hand, childlikeness and the criticality of play. It delves particularly into the critical power of childlike rhetorics, and their ambivalent strategies in the description of violence as childlike play and of reconsidering what it is to be an adult.

I quoted in the previous chapter Jonathan Cross' description of a music-analytical scholarship centred on Austro-German conceptions of unity and coherence, principally concerned with an "anti-modernist urge to synthesise"[384] and a "nineteenth-century ideal of the unified musical work."[385] In terms of music analysis (the chapter's focus), those conceptions are also a handicap for investigating play. In comparison to the rich teutonic vs anti-teutonic debate in Stravinsky studies, very few attempts are found along the lines of block-theory, layering analyses, or *drobnost*-splintered descriptions in Britten's music. There are some notable exceptions, such as Philip Rupprecht's strata theory[386] and the Gamelan-theoretical reading of Mervyn Cooke, both quoted in the Introduction.[387] Yet, there is still scant considerations of the matters discussed by Cross in 1998.

Overall, however, the place accorded to music analysis in Britten studies is minor in comparison to Stravinsky or even Schoenberg. While claiming Britten's place among the modernists, not much analysis is really developed. The fashioning of modern Britten is made mainly with thematic approaches: via pacifism, defence of the innocent, or homosexuality. These themes, of course, are primarily discussed in relation to opera plots and textual considerations. That is to say that Britten studies offer a much more literary approach than much of scholarships on twentieth-century composers. Britten studies are

[384] Cross, *The Stravinsky Legacy*, 202.
[385] *Ibid.*, 193.
[386] Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty"; Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*.
[387] Cooke, *Britten and the Far East*.

in consequence extraordinarily rich in content and discussions, while being paradoxically shallow in terms of music analysis.

In consequence, this chapter is articulated around two sections. The first investigates Britten's playful mechanics while the second deals with play as a topic, with the childlike rhetorics and critical attitudes it fosters.

3.1 Playful mechanics

Britten's way of composing has a lot in common with a game player's attitude. The limitation to short characterised elements (playthings) played at the same time with and against others is at the core of his aesthetic. Each of these motifs undergo constant variations and displacements and take on a polysemous meaning in a complex relation to the other motifs. Focusing in details on an extract from *Death in Venice*, I present in this section five central parameters of Britten's playful mechanics. The extract in question (R77 to 79, Act I Scene 5) corresponds to the opening interlude which precedes the moment when Aschenbach wanders on the beach, contemplates the sea, and observes children's games. The music exemplifies what Rupprecht has described as the "optical discourse" of the opera[388] via the "simultaneous variation of a basic melodic impulse".[389] The musical toying is indeed based on an earlier motif of the opera, the 'view', which appeared when Aschenbach first glanced from his hotel room's window onto the sunny beach.

[388] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 253.
[389] *Ibid.*, 256.

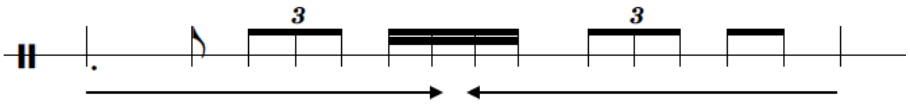


Figure 3.1 Extract from *Death in Venice* (R77, Act 1, Scene 5: "On the Beach") (© Faber Music, 1973)

The music is a typical manifestation of Britten's economical lusory strategies, in that it is built on only three musical playthings (see fig. 3.1): the view motif (PT1), a triadic bass accompaniment (PT2), and a series of calls (PT3). Each element undergoes its own process of variation. The coincidental result of these superposed logics creates a pseudo-tonal style; a triadic focus deprived of tonal functionality. Motivic flexibility, variation, interactive relation of match and mismatch between the three playthings: the score manifests emblematic traits of Britten's playful aesthetics. The playthings (PTs) are manipulated and toyed with, in various dispositions. Each object is driven by an inner logic, a driving principle which is sometimes at odds with the others. The logic of PT1 relies on a wandering succession of thirds, combined with a rhythmic acceleration/deceleration. PT2's logic is based on an undulation of triads, combined with a similar almost-palindromic rhythmic acceleration/deceleration. In PT3, the logic is in the echoed repetition of a major second and major third alternation, combined, like with the others, to a similar rhythmical process of speeding up and slowing down. These independent logics pilot each of those PTs, and are realised through variation. Consequently, there are two 'rooms for play' in Britten's musical toying. The first takes place in the realisation of the motive itself, according to its driving logic. The second is in the interaction between PTs, that is, in the multi-toying of the three rule-bound music material. Each playthings is toyed with, and they are all toyed against each other.



logic a wandering thirds



logic b acceleration/deceleration



combined realisation of *a* and *b*

Figure 3.2 Lusory construction of PT1 (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

Figure 3.2 shows the lusory construction of the first of these playthings (PT1), as an example of a process found in the three PTs. Two driving principles are at work: *logic a* which is a descending row of thirds (with potential up and down wandering along the row); and *logic b*, the accelerating/decelerating rhythm. These logics are therefore *realised*, and there is an exploratory process in the embodiment into musical material of these logics; i.e. in their realisation. Such interaction between inner logic and mismatch between strata cuts short the discussions on Britten's tonal unity or coherence. As the logic of each stratum is dictated by a motivic and rhythmic behaviour, the tonal organisation is only the result of play. The music resists tonal integration. The organising process is not tonality, but the mechanics of toying, which, as the simplicity of driving principles, guarantees Britten's stylistic economy. Similarly, the playtesting of the realisation of those motifs leads Britten to types of writing based on variation. These two

parameters (economy and variation) are the two first parameters of Britten's play-games. Here is why.

3.1.1 Economy

Christopher Mark rightly spotted the economy of means at the core of Britten's aesthetic. For Mark, it is "an investment in economy that provided the touchstone throughout his career".[390] Mark, however, narrows down Britten's concern for economy to his post 1960s pieces, as a direct consequence of *Curlew River* and his discovery of Far Eastern music. Similarly, Bayan Northcott questions the Spartan difficulty Britten's music imposes on some "listeners who habitually equate musical 'substance' with density of texture".[391] More unpleasant is Tom Sutcliffe's 1991 documentary in the BBC 'J'accuse' series in which Sutcliffe argues that "[Britten] used a superficial smartness to disguise his weaknesses though his early works at least had fire and vitality. Inspiration flagged, soon after he was 40. From then on, his emotional pulse got weaker and weaker."[392] Sutcliffe presents Britten's ongoing research for 'simplification' (or, as I would say, his deepening of the play-game) as a kind a devitalisation.[393] As seen, these considerations of Britten's economy and clarity are either too deprecatory in tone, or too narrowly focused chronologically to fully partake with the centrality and originality of that stylistic trait in Britten's music overall. Through the theory of play, however, Britten's economy of means takes its due place at the core of his style.

Economy is the first upshot of Britten's playful mechanics, and the condition such mechanics' existence. I previously emphasised that play and games overlap in the notion

[390] Mark, "An Excess of Less?", in Rupprecht (ed.), *Rethinking Britten*, 235.
[391] Northcott, *The Way We Listen Now, and Other Writings on Music* (Plumbago, 2009), 123.
[392] Tom Sutcliffe, *Benjamin Britten: A Failure* [video] (BBC J'accuse series, 1991).
[393] Suttcliffe's comments perpetuate the classic critique of Britten in the 1930s (Britten as 'smart' but not much more). He does so, however, paradoxically for Britten's later works, and talks about the early works as full of vitality (*ibid*.).

of limitation. On the one hand, play is testing the limits of a reallocated object; it is the exploration of a room for motion in what an object affords. On the other hand, games are defined by a lusory attitude, that is to say by self-imposed obstacles to outfox. In a nutshell, limitation is what links play and games together, and this is why it is so central to Britten's play-gaming process. The Spartan economy of Britten's music is the Spartan economy of the toy's design.

In consequence, economy cannot be conflated with simplification. Play and games are ambivalent ways to start from the simple and imbue it with greater complexity. If they manifest a clarity of expression, they are also by definition the realm of intricacies and fluid ongoing change: of confusion. This is exactly the case of *Death in Venice*, as commented on by Mervyn Cooke:

> Motivic unity and *economy of material* constitute two of the most impressive features of *Death in Venice* [...]. They are the outcome of Britten's lifelong search for clarity of musical expression, a quest which had preoccupied him from the earliest stages of his stylistic development. His perennial desire to limit the materials at his disposal and to respond creatively to the *challenge of self-imposed restrictions* may partly be related to his increasing interest in gamelan techniques.[394]

Cooke does not describe Britten's technique as play, yet, strikingly, his formulation, "challenge of self-imposed restrictions", calls to mind Bernard Suits' ways of formulating and defining games as the "voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles."[395] Moreover, Cooke hints towards elements of the evolution of these self-challenges in Britten's work along his discovery of gamelan techniques. In other words, Britten develops further his lusory compositional process through self-limitation and economy of material.

In the musical extract of *Death in Venice* in question, economy is indeed a cardinal characteristic with many links to the elements of ludic clarity explored in the previous

[394] Cooke, *Britten and the Far East*, 225; my italics.
[395] Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 43.

chapter apropos the influence of French and Russian music on Britten. The limitation to three PTs expresses this lusory economy. The whole section is driven only by the interaction (the play) between these three motives and by nothing else. However, I have not yet fully surveyed the *apparent likeness* of those three playthings (PTs). I briefly mentioned the common rhythmical principle at work in the three PTs, (accelerating and slowing down ebb and flow). On a pitch organisation level, too, the three PTs join in a common third-interval focus from which each of their logics are derived (fig. 3.3). The arpeggio, the triad, and the 'cadential-like' voice-leading are indeed different affordances an an interval of a third.

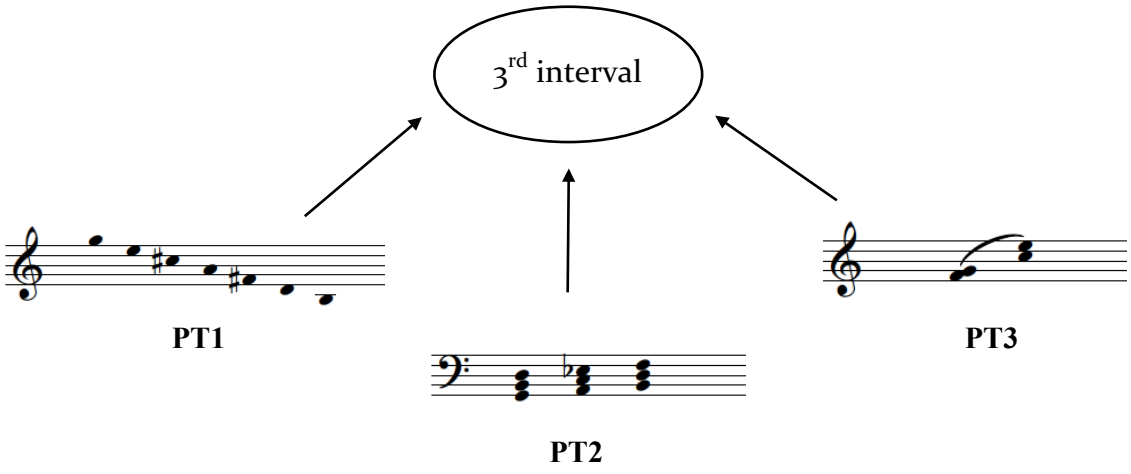


Figure 3.3 The three playthings as affordances of an interval of third (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

Consequently, the music is even more economical than one might first assume, as the three playthings are interconnected as variations on the same concern (as said, a play on the interval of third). This central concern is declined according to three principles: row of thirds (PT1), triadic chords (PT2), a third-interval resolution (PT3). Lovers of musical unity and coherence would delight in such a core principle and see in that process a typically Beethovenian motivic linkage. I do not think this is the case, because of the

stratified use made of those motifs and the playful non-developmental way Britten collides and mismatches these motives against each others. The third relation is not an external core entity which begs development into a series of forms. Rather, the third-interval is the affordance that the three PTs have in common. It is the potential affinity to be explored between PTs, which allows a greater game of interaction between them. Once more, Britten's use of triadic vocabulary is a matter of play, devoid of developmental or tonal processes.

In a similar vein, the sparse musical texture and the orchestration add to the impression of economy. There is a deliberate roughness in the disposition of the objects. PT1 is played in unison and is not harmonised. PT2 is realised with packed triads in the low register. PT3 is not harmonised and, in spite of its quasi-tonal cadential voice-leading, only alternates a sparse major second and a thread-bare major third. To sum up, there are two economical elements at hand in this extract: an economical disposition of the music material and the use of a limited amount of them. As it has been seen previously, these objects are themselves limited by lusory principles. In that sense, economy is a condition of play.

The pseudo-simplicity due to the limitation to concise and toyified elements have links with references to childhood and children, as will be discussed on the second half of this chapter. It also has consequences in terms of how accessible Britten's music is: it is straightforward thanks to its economy, but complex due to play. The simplicity vs complexity paradox of Britten's music is the paradox of the toy, and Britten's economy of means is the expression of aesthetic toyification of musical material, i.e. the reduction of musical material to a simplified plaything to toy with.

3.1.2 Variation

Like his economy of means, Britten's interest in variation has been often noted by critics, in particular in variation-led pieces like the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (1937), *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945), and more generally in Britten's fascination with grounds and passacaglia devices. As noted by Hans Keller, "everyone acquainted with [Britten's] works knows his particularly strong tendency towards the art of variation, and his mastery of that form."[396] Yet, variation is not limited to a form, but is the playful mechanical motion of Britten's toying. Variation is for Britten a compositional process which permeates all his work. This is because musical toying relies on short motifs (alias playthings) which are not developed but kept ongoing and *played* thanks to a process of variation. By being manipulated, displaced, intermeshed, and transformed, the playthings are kept in a state of constant metamorphosis by Britten's play. Again, variation is strongly linked to an element of limitation, because variation is about versions and configurations of a same thing. Variation is perforce a powerful lusory device; a way to manipulate and overcome self-restrictions in means.

In the *Death in Venice* extract, Britten's variational method is at play. The playing out of the playthings' logic is combined with an economy of means into a game of variations. The constant reiteration of the music material is made through incessant modifications. Britten explores here the room left for motion within the self-imposed limits of his objects. For example, PT1 is repeated five different times. The following paradigmatic presentation helps to assess how these reiterations act by way of variation. The length of the variation might change, with some parts omitted, other prolonged (fig. 3.4).

[396] Keller, *Britten: Essays*, 8.

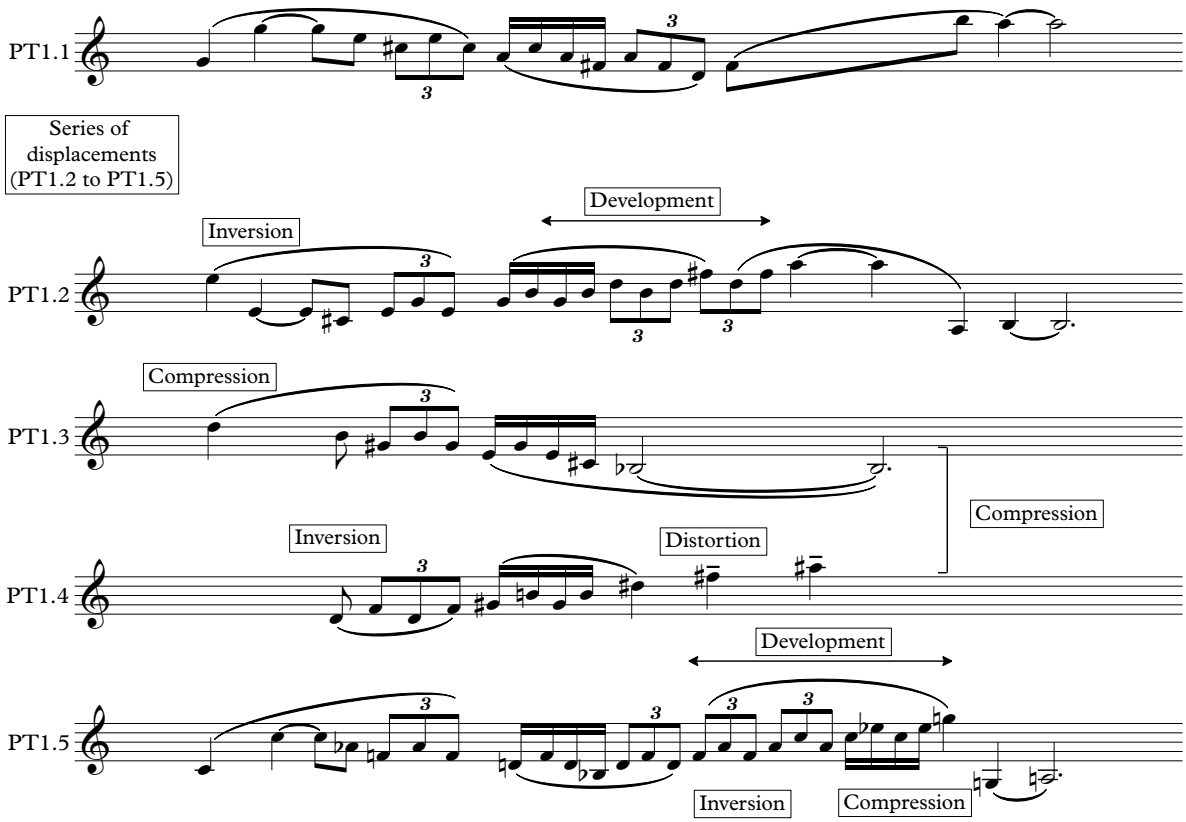


Figure 3.4 Paradigmatic analysis of PT1 (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

Nicolas Ruwet's paradigmatic graphs rely on a visual presentation which helps to follow step by step the variational transformations undergone by a musical motif.[397] I adopted here the same method. The score is to be read from left to right. The same music (or melodic line) is heard, with nothing omitted, but the disposition on the score helps to understand the process at work by visual association. This tool is especially useful for the analysis of Britten's music as it helps to unravel the playthings' kaleidoscopic variations.[398] A paradigmatic presentation is a geological stratigraphy of the ongoing realisation of a plaything; it is the accumulated trace of play. As described by Kofi Agawu, "a paradigmatic analysis typically gathers the signifying units of a work into

[397] Ruwet, Nicolas. "Méthodes d'analyse en musicologie," *Revue belge de musicologie*, 20 (1966), 65-90.
[398] Paradigmatic analysis is scarce in Britten studies. One of the rare occurrences may be found in Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 80.

groups, columns, or paradigms and arranges each according to an explicit criterion. The number and content of the paradigms and their mode of succession in turn serve as a basis for interpreting musical meaning."[399] In sum, paradigmatic analysis unearths the ambivalent relation between the same and the constantly changing, that is, between repetition and transformation, and so of variation, a central element of play.

I propose, from my analysis, a list of variational processes through which a plaything can be playtested, drawing on a broad range of motivic-analytical notions. One may recognise those terms from other contexts, and especially in reference to the 'developing variation' technique in Brahms and Schoenberg. I give here to those notions quite precise meanings which have not much to do with such understandings of variation and development. For example, the 'developing' form of variation I summarise here works either by continuation of a motif (what I call below an 'extension'), or by addition of notes in its middle part (what I call a 'division'). It may overlap with Schoenberg's definition of the 'developing variation' as "an endless reshaping of a basic shape",[400] but what I argue with those terms, is that Britten's music pushes against ideas of clarity and coherence, albeit within an economy of means which offers elements of apparent simplicity. Internal unity and consistency of expression are not central to Britten's music. Not that parallels with the Second Viennese School have no merit, but that there is a lot more going on in Britten's music. Thus, bearing in mind this caveat, here are Britten's playful variational tools:

[399] Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 167.
[400] See Arnold Schoenberg, Arnold. "Linear Counterpoint (1931)", in his (ed. by Leonard Stein) *Style and Idea; Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (University of California Press, 1984) 290.

- *Displacement*: the plaything is repeated at a different pitch (it corresponds to rhetorical figures like *mimesis* or *ethoponia*).[401]
- *Distortion*: a changing of some intervals or rhythms (augmentations and diminutions are both distortions in that sense).
- *Relocation*: exact repetition in a varied environment.
- *Generation*: corresponds to Schenker's linkage technique (*knüpkftechnike*), or what Zdeněk Skoumal observed as the motivic organisation in Janaček, i.e the generation of a new motif out of a previous one.[402] Michael Baker interestingly links that technique in Britten's music to a psychoanalysis of Britten's opera characters.[403]
- *Development*: elements of division (adding notes within) or extension (adding notes after) of the plaything (i.e. forms of prolongations by addition of sounds)
- *Compression*: opposite of development, i.e. the removal of parts of the motif.
- *Inversion*: mirror or backwards inversions.
- *Heterophony*: simultaneous variation of a same plaything at two voices.

Figure 3.4 above shows some of these processes at work: displacements (PT1,2 to 5); developments (PT1,2 and PT1,5); compression (PT1,3 and PT1,4); or inversions (PT1,2, PT1,4, and PT1,5). Play provides Britten's music with an intrinsic transformational quality through variation.[404]

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[401] See Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 441.
[402] Zden*ěk,* Skoumal, *The Music of Leoš Janáček: Motive, Rhythm, Structure* (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 1-22.
[403] Michael Baker, "Motives and Motivations: Linkage Technique in Britten's Operas and Other Vocal Works", in Gregory J. Decker & Matthew R. Shaftel (eds.), *Singing in Signs: New Semiotic Explorations of Opera* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 100.
[404] This approach may recall what other analysts deploy through the means of transformational theory. James Donaldson for example (2022) interestingly links transformational theory to topic theory in his analysis of Thomas Adès's music, where he links musical transformations to topical references to toys:

3.1.3 Match/mismatch

At the end of the Introduction, I reviewed Daniel Albright's use of the concept of 'fancy' (taken from Coleridge) which he employs to describe some processes at work in Britten's *Les Illuminations*. To recall Albright's argument, if imagination substitutes the real world for another, by contrast, fancy "plays with fixities and definites" of the present world and its materiality.[405] For Shun-Liang Chao, fancy brings together references by means of accidental coincidence.[406] Therefore, fancy is the realm of playtesting and intermeshing elements, of exploring chance relations, and pushing playthings against each other. For Chao, fancy is a Surrealist attitude, and delights in chance interaction. To use Chao's example, a tomato becomes a balloon only because of their spherical commonality, not because they are objects linked in practicality.[407] Similarly, Susan Laxton describes this fanciful dissolution of sense in the surrealists' interest in the notion of play, as ways to engage at the same time with sense and nonsense; meaning and the disengagement from meaning.[408] When toying with musical playthings, Britten activates fanciful interactions and semiotic collisions of these playthings. This poses methodological issues for their assessment. The answer to that conundrum resides in pragmatic analysis.

I described in chapter 1 Elizabeth Sewell's theory of nonsense literature as a succession of patches, of a semiotic serial logic of 'one and one and one and one' which never coalesce into any unitary integration. This analytical conception recalls the pragmatism of William James, and its appreciation of the construction of meaning as an accumulation of patches of experience. Chapter 4 will be based on such an approach. In

James Donaldson, "Living Toys in Thomas Adès's '*Living Toys'*: Transforming the Post-Tonal Topic", *Music Theory Spectrum,* 44/1 (2022), 155–172.
[405] Albright, *Music's Monisms*, 121.
[406] Chao, *Rethinking the Concept of the Grotesque*, 15.
[407] *Ibid.*
[408] Laxton, *Surrealism at Play*, 11-12.

musical terms, it joins Richard Taruskin's analysis of the *drobnost'* in Russian music, that is "the quality of being a sum-of-parts".[409] Sewell (in literature), James (in psychology), and Taruskin (in music history) display a similar bottom-up attitude to their material, to investigate the accretion of sense. A similar approach must be developed for Britten's playful aesthetic. To appraise Britten's way of interlocking playthings together (i.e. his way to explore the room for play in the toyified musical objects he limits himself to), a Jamesian pragmatic close-study and bottom-up approach must be deployed, in order to assess the unfolding of play through time.

Let me adopt such a 'pragmatic' observation of the extract under scrutiny. To start with, I showed the multi-logic at play in the music. PT1, for example, is the result of two different logics, one melodic, the other rhythmical (cf. analysis of fig. 3.5 above). The play between these logics leads Britten either to cleverly make them intersect and work together, or on the contrary to wittily poke the objects against each other and by that way highlight their confrontation. Altogether, the superimposition of the three variational explorations of the PTs gives a series of matches and mismatches. PT1 offers many possibilities of tonal match or dissonant mismatch, by its third-row nature. When combined with PT2, the two realisations of the playthings can be aligned, can work against each other, or can evolve ambiguously in parallel. The following figure (fig. 3.5) shows several patches of Britten's play taken from the piano reduction of the score. Let me consider those four patches of momentary encounters between layers.

[409] Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 383.

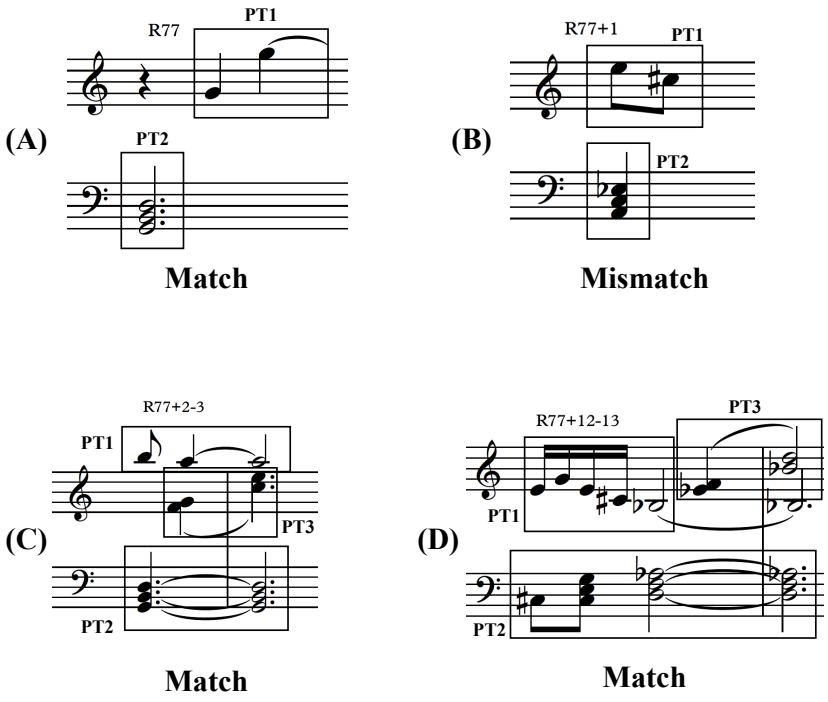


Figure 3.5 Four patches of encounters (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

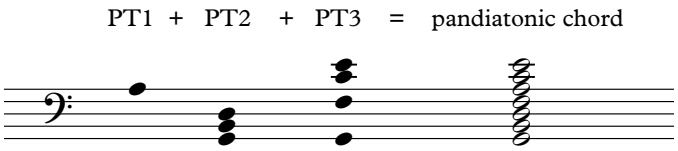
Patch (A) combines PT1 and PT2 in the most traditional way: a melody inscribed in the matching resonance of its accompanying triad. (A) is in G major.

Patch (B) shows a momentary conflict between PT1 and PT2. Two notes clash with each other: C natural (PT2) against C# (PT1) and Eb (PT2) against E natural (PT1). What tools are now available to assess the properties of this clash? Firstly, one might use polytonal analysis: the superposition of two diminished triads on A (A-C-Eb in PT2, C#-E-G in PT1). Secondly, one may consider the general colour of the resulting organisation which hints at the octatonic scale (or a 6-Z49 Fortean set class).

Patch (C) shows a far more ambiguous match. The three PTs are combined, but each of them follows their own logic, and their own tonal implication. PT1 is too fleeting to denote any specific key. PT2 seems to be in G major. PT3 sounds closer to C major due to its cadential-like counterpoint (cf. Fig. 3.6a below). Assembled, the three logics patch (C) give a pandiatonic chord (Fig. 3.6b).



(a) quasi-cadential counterpoint of PT3



(b) pandiatonic result

Figure 3.6 Pitch-organisation of PT3 (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

It is difficult, then, to affirm assertively in which key the patch (C) really is. Its three elements belong to different tonal places when considered in their own variational logic: PT1 is non-tonal, PT2 is in G, PT_3 is in C. It may be in C major (a dominant, or a dominant with its tonic superposed), but this is unimportant. What would be the point of describing it in C, if indeed this does not sound like a dominant which needs resolution on a tonic (even if PT3 in itself does)? This moment goes by in a flash. The description of the confrontation of the playthings' logic and their momentary encounters teach us more about the music than a C-major analysis of the bar, which is, moreover, not the sensation given by the music on a surface level. Play and pragmatism forces us to consider the momentary experience, and leave aside the traditional large-scale analyses of structures and panoramic processes. Tonal analysis, in particular, is limited in its power to appreciate and describe the pitch-organisation in Britten's play. This shows two fundamental things for this investigation of play in Britten's music. The first is that tonal

analysis does not allow us to understand the complexity of the harmonic language of Benjamin Britten, and I am arguing many times in this chapter that Britten, for the most part, is not a tonal composer. The second element is that play gives, on the contrary, many possibilities to study Britten's non-tonal use of tonal material. Play-analysis, with its flexible approach, brings a radical change of paradigm for the study of Britten's pitch organisation.

Patch (D)'s resulting chord is a dominant fifth and sixth chord. Two things should be noted. Firstly, that this chord is the result of the momentary match of two different playthings' logics, that is of the descending row of thirds of PT1 and the parallel ascending fifths chords of PT2. Secondly, even if the fifth and sixth chord is a tonal one, it appears in a non-functional context, and is suddenly disclosed as an unexpected collision of the layered material.

The interlocking of the musical material at work in Britten's music is experienced in terms of patches, and his work as a patchwork of experiences. This experiencing of Britten has a direct link to the semiotic characteristics of play I discussed in chapter 1. If playing means fiddling with objects, testing their limitations, combining them in manifold ways, then it creates a succession of chance encounters, a series of events which do not necessarily construct a coherent whole. In musical terms, it means that the G major of patch (A), the octatonic-like result of patch (B), the pandiatonic C major chord of patch (C), and the dominant seventh chord in Eb flat major of patch (D) do not make a coherent key altogether. They are, on the contrary, shifting reflections of the three PTs and their simultaneous unfolding. They produce chance semiotic content by their temporary interlocking, content which refers by fleeting references to many tonal, non-tonal, or atonal implications, but which composing elements have no logical semiotic relation. The logic between the PTs is not semiotic but mechanical, i.e., their logic is play, not tonal

organisation. This requires any play-analyst to be cautious. By focusing on the overall outcome of play, one may lean towards one method of analysis more than another (may it be Schenkerian, neo-Riemannian, tonal, topical, or otherwise). Yet, because Britten tinkers with the confrontation of the divergent logics of varied musical objects, his music offers ever-changing features. To this constant kaleidoscopic reconfiguration of the music, one should adapt one's analytical methods. Consequently, analysts should stay open-minded in the tools they use for the analysis of Britten's playful mechanics, which means that play-analysis invites the play-analyst to *play* with the multifarious methods contained in their toolboxes. This is surely a key-strength of the analysis of play: it is not restricted to its own play-methodology but naturally welcomes any other method of analysis to assess the variegated aspect of toying.

There is, then, a pseudo-tonal outcome to Britten's playful turning of playthings against each other. Play with non-integrated patches denotes the tonal, but does not create a tonal syntax. Philip Rupprecht's theory of stratification in Britten's music offers a similar approach.[410] Similarly, in an analysis of *The Rape of Lucretia*, Rudolph Réti defines Britten's music as a "tonal multitonality" in comparison to Boulez' atonality.[411] In his own words: "At the first glance, the Britten example would seem as strikingly tonal as the Boulez seemed atonal. Yet Britten's tonality almost disappears if one follows the inner contours of the lines and does not take the chordal expansions too literally."[412] Consequently, the analysis of Britten's pitch-organisation must investigate this tonal-*like* aspect of his music. 'Play' is a powerful tool for that purpose.

[410] Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty"; Rupprecht, *Tonal Straification and Conflict*
[411] Rudolph Réti, *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality: A Study of Some Trends in the Twentieth-Century Music* (Rockliff, 1958), 153.
[412] *Ibid.*, 97.

By being pseudo-tonal, i.e by denoting keys by transient patches of non-functional triadic vocabulary, Britten's music has in consequence a very variable status of dissonance. José Oliveira Martins' analyses of polyscalar dissonances offers interesting elements to the present reflexion.[413] He describes the degrees of mismatch or porosity between superimposed scales (in other words, their friction or permeability).[414] This approach engages with the unfolding quality of scalar multi-layering. Indeed, in his own words: "The traditional reductive focus of contrapuntal layers onto tonal centricity or functionality thwarts the analytical attention from the clashes of the chromatic mismatch between scales."[415] In this conception of pitch-organisation, the status of dissonance is paradoxical. On the one hand, the more porosity there is, the stronger the sense of polarisation fostering a traditional sense of the consonance-dissonance opposition. On the other hand, the more mismatch there is, the less the traditional tonal understanding is felt, and the consonance versus dissonance status vanishes. By varying by degrees towards match (what Oliveira Martins calls 'porosity') and mismatch, Britten's pseudo-tonal music presents one with a very inconsistent status of dissonance (and I will develop later in this chapter how these aspects interact with Britten's childlike aesthetic). These elements are not singular to Benjamin Britten, and may well deserve closer scholarly and theoretical attention with regard to other composers.

3.1.4 Correspondence and polysemy

The two last parameters of Britten's toying are the correspondences between playthings and the polysemy expressed by the different uses and dispositions of these

[413] José Oliveira Martins, "Scalar Dissonance and the Analysis of Polytonal/Modal Mismatch in Twentieth-Century Music", *Musurgia*, 26 (2019), 49-87.
[414] "Scalar dissonance stands as a regulatory principle for multi-layered scale interactions, where the relative alignment of scale elements is interpreted in terms of porosity and mismatch of the interacting strata." (*Ibid.*, 57-58)
[415] *Ibid.*, 58.

playthings. There is indeed a complex set of correspondences between the playthings and their ongoing variations. I already described the fact that the three PTs are all organised around third-intervals, and all rely on speeding-up/slowing-down movements. The PTs have, at their core, something in common which traces back to their various sonic embodiments.

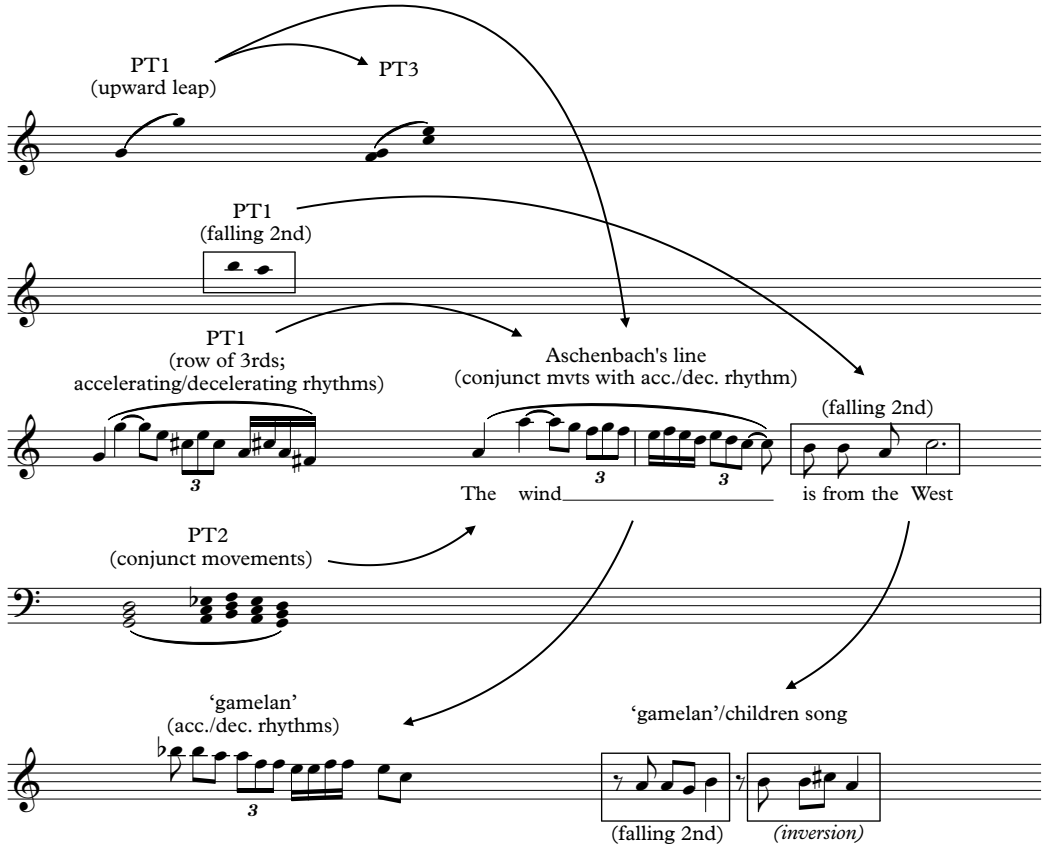


Figure 3.7 Web of correspondences (*Death in Venice*, Act I Scene 5)

As shown by figure 3.7, there are yet more connections to disentangle in this extract. First of all, there is a direct correspondence between the lyrical leap upwards of the opening of PT1 and the call-aspect of PT3. Likewise, PT1's closure on an interval of second corresponds to PT3's second-interval clash. Britten uses this correspondence as a way to crossfade PT1 and PT3 on several occasions. What is more, when Aschenbach begins to sing, his vocal line is a blend of PT1 and PT2 (the swift rhythm of PT1 but with

the conjunct motions of PT2). The second interval, however, remains at the motif's end, and even has its echo in the gamelan playing which follows. Likewise, the rhythm of Aschenbach's line (inspired by the rhythmic principle of PT1) also has a direct impact on the beginning of the boys' gamelan. Thus, Britten presents us with an ongoing web of correspondences, which only becomes more complex as the opera unfolds. Correspondences and variation, together, produce the flowing aspect of Britten's music, in spite of its focus on short and succinct musical material.

The last parameter I would like to consider is the polysemy created via the process of toying. As already discussed at length in the first chapter, playing with a toy relies on engaging with the plurality of its semiotic affordances. If one plays with one's stapler, one does not limit oneself to only stapling, but one uses the object in many polysemous ways: pretending it is a mouth, a crocodile, castanets, a telegraph key, and other fanciful semiotics. The same happens when sounds are used as toys; they refer to multifarious shifting meanings.

Play is especially reinforced in music because musical signification, differently from visual or verbal signification, relies on ambiguous processes of exemplification. That is to say that a lyrical musical line refers to lyricism as *x* refers to lyricism. Christian Accaoui, drawing on Nelson Goodman's theory of exemplification, describes how much the ambiguity of identifying *x* (a human, a voice, a siren, an emotion, love, etc.) is what makes music such an inherently polysemous art, and why it is so tricky to talk about it.[416] At the same time, play is by definition the realm of unceasing change and metamorphoses

[416] Christian Accaoui, *La Musique parle, la musique peint: Les voies de l'imitation musicale et de la référence dans l'art des sons*. *Tome 2: Sémiotique* (Éditions du Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, 2022), 57-65.

of meaning. Combined together, music and play create a profoundly polysemous semiotic, which offers to Britten a vast playground on which to develop his art.

"The wind is from the West" says Aschenbach. The sound of the wind may be deconstructed into few elements: swift oscillations of sounds, fluidity of rhythm, surrounded by pauses and silences. All these elements are exemplified by the PTs and Aschenbach's vocal line. His mention of the 'West', too, happens on top of the major second-interval repetition. This interval is then focused on in the Eastern gamelan writing, with touches of childlike playground sounds. This shows how 'polysemy' and 'correspondences' interact: sometimes they lead in the same semiotic direction (the wind), sometimes they move in contrary ways (East/West).

Britten also plays with references to genres. PT1 and PT2 blend to create Aschenbach's vocalise. The vocalise gives many semiotic affordances which enter in counterpoint with the text. It becomes a figuration of the wind, or of laziness ("the lazy sea"). It becomes also a reference to the vocalise itself, as a musical style which emphasises and gives abstraction to an important word in the text, in this instance, "la Serenissima". The use of the vocalise lends, as in many sacred pieces, a touch of sublime to the word, and thus to the greatness of Venice, and to its quietness. Furthermore, as shown in figure 3.7 above, the vocalise generates the basic material of the gamelan music which accompanies the beach games of the boys. Wind, sky, clouds, sea, birds, sun-due laziness, sea-side relaxation: all these elements are a semiotic cluster afforded by the musical writing made of slow oscillations, wandering fluidity of rhythm, and slow deformations of the sonic environment. There is a dizzying effect of that beach soundscape which only finds a sudden contrast in the striated rhythms and sport-like dynamism of the gamelan (and its beach-games percussion) which follows. Once again,

with few lusory means, and with the use of musical toying, Britten sets up a rich music for us to engage with.

The five parameters scrutinised above (economy, variation, match/mismatch, correspondence, and polysemy) are the methodological gamut yielded by an analysis of Britten's playful mechanics. How now can such an analysis go beyond the minutiae of the ins and outs of toying? How to link the patch-analysis of play with an overall understanding of a piece, and give a more comprehensive reading of Britten's playful aesthetic? To answer that question, the chapter now turns towards playfulness as a topic, that is as a subject matter and as a rhetoric, via children's play, toys, tricksters, and sport. That way, the following discussions aim at broadening the range of analytic tools for appraising Britten's playful art by looking into more cultural aspects of playfulness, beyond the analysis of compositional toying. Thus, the next section considers the variety of rhetorics at work in childlike aesthetics, hand in hand with the critical power of play, via topics evoking children or sport.

3.2 Playful topics

Next to the mechanics of toying, Britten's music expresses a playful aspect via a series of topics. Such topics are comprised of children, sport, and school-bound environments. Exercising, in particular, shows a special importance, as well as the analogy between sporting exercises and musical ones. Thus, the following sections intermesh considerations about scalic exercises, sport gestures, and diverse elements of childlikeness like cuteness, tricks, or boisterousness. Crucially, I explore in the following pages the two main critical functions of such playful topics: first, a blurring of the child-adult distinction; second, a denouncing of the violence of war via play, with the

implication that play can be a violent activity, and consequently that war may be playful. Hence, the 'serious' activities of the adults (bloodshed and war) are no more than child's play, leading back to reinforcing the erasure of the child-adult distinction. Britten's music offers to hear the childlike for its vitality, and to bring the listener into a childlike state via elements of boisterousness and *Paidia*. All in all, the relationship between play, children, and violence is at the centre of such topical interactions, showing, for example, the violence against children, but also the violence of children themselves (as when a child, driven by curiosity, crushes a fly when they only intended to touch the insect). So, the childlike in Britten's aesthetics has a critical function, which is in turn linked to the motivic mechanics of play explored in the first part of the chapter. Contrary to the first part, however, which focused on a single extract in great detail, this second part discusses a variety of works by Britten, to show the multifarious topical forms play takes throughout his oeuvre, may it be in operas, songs, cantatas, or other. Furthermore, some of the pieces discussed are explored through different angles and reveal the richness of Britten's playful poetics. The conclusion of the chapter explores the interaction of playful topics with playful mechanics more fully, giving an example of how such a type of cross-analysis may be done. The following sections, however, give few elements towards such a conclusion.

3.2.1 Cuteness, tricks, and violence

I discussed in chapter 1 Sianne Ngai's theory of cuteness as an aesthetic category which expresses characteristics like smallness, compactness, simplicity, pliancy, and helplessness.[417] This emphasis on cute features is linked to conceptions of the child. There

[417] Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde", 816; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.

are in Britten's music definite moments which conjure up these qualities and create an aesthetic of the cute. This is especially true of some of his repertoire for children.

Such is the case in the naïve simplicity of *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943), where the title dictates the overall rhetoric of the piece. *Rejoice in the Lamb* can be heard as a celebration of the cute, expressed via the naivety of Christopher Smart's poem, by the softness of the treble voices, and by the economical toying of the music.

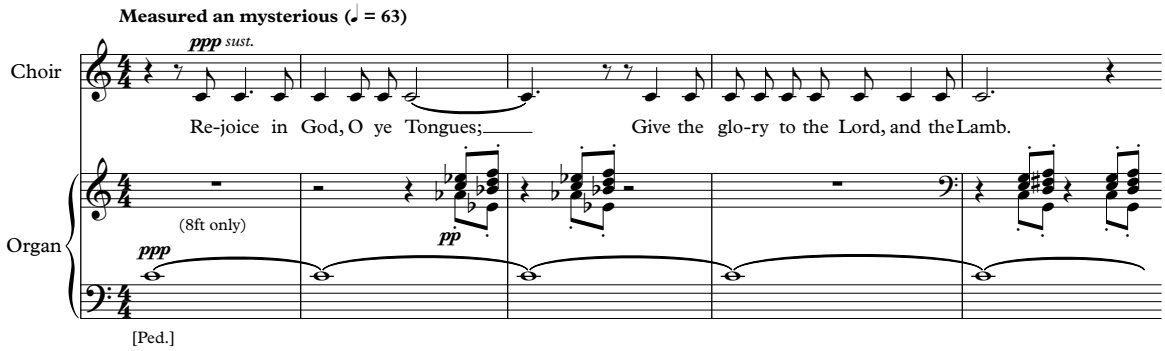


Figure 3.8 *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1943)

The extract above typifies the simplicity of the music (fig. 3.8). Far from Handelian displays, Britten's mode of rejoicing is toned down to a hushed miniature version. Like the lamb it rejoices in, the music of Britten exemplifies characteristics of the cute. The organ accompaniment, in particular, offers a strong sense of the cute with *pianissimo* and *staccato* trumpet stops (again, far from the resounding trumpets of Handel). The organ's motif is composed by toying: the PT is composed by two sub-PTs, an ascending triad and a pseudo-cadential falling fourth (see fig. 3.9). Together, they create a series of encounters that come to punctuate the recto-tono of the choir with various match and mismatch.



Figure 3.9 Playful construction of the organ part (*Rejoice in the Lamb*)

Yet, this organ motif is not only created by toying, it also exemplifies, topically, the toy. The motifs' shortness, allied with staccato-playing and organ manuals sound gives a toy-like semblance. The pseudo-tonality, and the mismatching effects between layers emphasises this impression. This motif, by being a toy, conveys an aesthetic of the cute, enhanced by Smart's text, the treble voices, and the overall simplicity and light-heartedness of the piece. Cuteness, however, goes hand in hand with forms of violence in *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Smart, after all, is the symbol of the sacrificed the lamb, as expressed by Britten's reorganisation of the extensive poem by Christopher Smart. He selects verses from Smart's "Jubilate Agno" and reshapes them to construct a double rhetoric. On top of Smart's rhetoric present in his poem, Britten's reorganisation operates a *mise en abyme* of Smart himself and makes of Smart the centre of a new narration on madness and social oppression of the artist. Smart, in Britten's doing, becomes the lamb in which we are invited to rejoice (see table below, fig. 3.10).

Rhetorical structure	*Religious rhetoric of Smart*	*Smart as a representation of the artist*	*Fragments from the* Jubilate Agno
Exodium	Rejoice in God, praise the Lord	Smart says: "Rejoice in God, praise the Lord"	Fragment A
Narratio	As do characters from the Old Testaments and their animals. Hallelujah, the artist praises the Lord	Praise of the Lord like men, animals, plants. Smart's speech becomes more and more extravagant.	Fragment A

	As my cat Jeoffry does		Fragment B1 / B4
	As mice do		Fragment B4
	As flowers do		Fragment B3
Confutatio	Yet, as the Christ I suffer, I am misjudged and said to be mad	Smart is in a mental asylum. He is beaten by the watchmen	Fragment B1 / B2
Confirmatio	The letters praise the Lord	Smart is the sacrificed lamb. His naive religious poetry (which sent him to prison) is the childlikeness in which we should celebrate. Rejoice in Smart, rejoice in the lamb	Fragment C
	The music instruments praise the Lord		Fragment B2 / B4
Peroratio	Alleluia, the artist praises the Lord	Hallelujah, Smart praises the Lord	Fragment A

Figure 3.10 Double rhetorical organisation of *Rejoice in the Lamb* (1943)

In the tightness of the music—in its toyification—there is a trace of de-humanisation and a determination to combine together musical elements which resist magnetically any integration. The organ motif, after all, exemplifies the cuteness of the toy, but it exemplifies as much the violence of the toy's manipulation. There is a latent violence in Britten's objectification of musical motifs, which goes hand in hand with the aesthetic cuteness of the toyful.

This co-presence of the cute and the violent, is described by Ngai as raised by the cute object's passivity, which is "likely to excite the consumer's sadism or desire for mastery as much as her desire to protect and cuddle."[418] This is, however, only a partial view of the co-existence of cuteness and violence. There is in the child's attitude itself, an inherent tendency to violence, to play with toy guns, and mistakenly squash the insects they are curious about. Such violence transforms the cute—to be understood as the childlike—as the source of a light-hearted destruction. Britten's neatness and

[418] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 65.

determination to fix motifs together, no matter what, is in fact the very attitude of a child playing. The toy is not just an instrument of play, it is also the possibility of a consequence-free act of violence. All told, when allied to treble voices, and rhetorics of the sacrificial lamb, Britten's motivic toying becomes a topical reference to the toy, mixing together elements of cuteness and of violence.



Figure 3.11 "Agnus Dei", *Missa Brevis* (1959) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1959)

This is true again of the "Agnus Dei" from the *Missa Brevis* (1959), where a passacaglia bass (PT1) is confronted by short staccato motifs (PT2), and by simple melodic repetitions (PT3). PT2, in particular, recalls the organ motif of the beginning of *Rejoice in the Lamb* (see fig. 3.8). Both are trick-cute, and express on a smaller scale the

mix of trick-ness and cuteness felt in the overall piece. Britten's play in figuring out ways to combine 'no matter what' the three strata of his music expresses the latent violence present in games. As Bernard Suits describes it, "what games involve is the erection of obstacles to their goals just that those obstacles can be overcome."[419] The 'overcoming' implied in the lusory attitude defined by Suits, is in fact a potential for violence, in link with the childlike.

This presence of the toy as a form of de-humanisation, or as a form of violence, recalls what has been discussed in the previous chapter apropos Stravinsky's puppet aesthetic. *Rejoice in the Lamb* and the *Missa Brevis*, are for that matter strongly influenced by Stravinskian nihilist toyification. In Britten's music, however, the violence of the toylike still takes a very human form: it is the violence of the child playing.



Figure 3.12 Puck's music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960, Act 1) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1960)

[419] Bernard Suits, "Sticky Wickedness: Games and Morality", *Dialogue*, 21, (1982), 757.

The articulation between the cute and the mischievous is found in the figure of the trickster. I described in chapter 1 the role of the trickster as a social critique, who tests the boundaries of culture and calls the admitted into question. The trickster's behaviour is epitomised by child's play. Puck, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), is emblematic of the fusion of violence and cuteness discussed so far. Puck's music, on a juggler's trumpet, is a series of calisthenics of Stravinskian short puppet-like motifs (fig. 3.12). The mixolydian colour emphasises Puck's boyish optimism and energy (here may be found a pinch of Copland's youthful style). Overall, the music offers a series of toy motifs (Puck is the toymaker in the story), twisted and spun into unexpected chromatic displacements. Those chromatic displacements, as explored in chapter 2, are a legacy of Prokofiev and his boasting and boisterous *enfant terrible* displays. Stravinsky, Copland, Prokofiev: Puck's music epitomises the ludic-modernist legacy found in Britten's music.

Tricks and cuteness operate hand in hand in Britten's work, as in *Psalm 150* (1962), written for the centenary celebration of his Lowestoft prep-school. The piece is for young voices, accompanied by a bric-a-brac orchestra left to the conductor's choice: as advised by Britten on the score "the more instruments there are, the merrier". The musicians are to be the children themselves, playing recorders, violins, cellos, trumpet, keyboard, etc. The assembly of these instruments creates a bricolage. Besides, there is a baroque reference to instrumentation, but where the choice of instruments for the parts is to be found in schoolroom material. A further link to the psalm 150 itself may be made: all the musical instruments praise the Lord; may they be recorders or schoolroom percussion. As a result, this assembly of instruments not supposed to play together (e.g. recorders, percussions, and piano) gives a cute aspect to the piece. This cuteness comes from the helplessness of the orchestration as much as the faulty quality of children playing

instruments. The characteristic sound of the piece (harsh balance, rawness of timbres, out-of-tune doubling) is central to its aesthetic impact. By being faulty it attempts to be cute, and by being cute, it aims to be childlike, and offers a child's version of a real orchestra.

Other elements add to this impression of cuteness. The tonality itself refers to the cute. C major is the cutest of tonalities, as it is the one used in the first steps of piano practice (because it only uses white keys). Similarly, the march-tune of the opening bars of *Psalm 150* is a very simple one. It has a nursery-rhyme quality by its phrasal structure: its three phases end on the same closure that sounds like a playground song game (see fig. 3.13a). Associated with the march, it takes a scout-like quality: it collapses the cute and the soldier-like together, and introduces a form of adult-like childishness.



Figure 3.13a Nursery-like tunes in *Psalm 150* (1962)

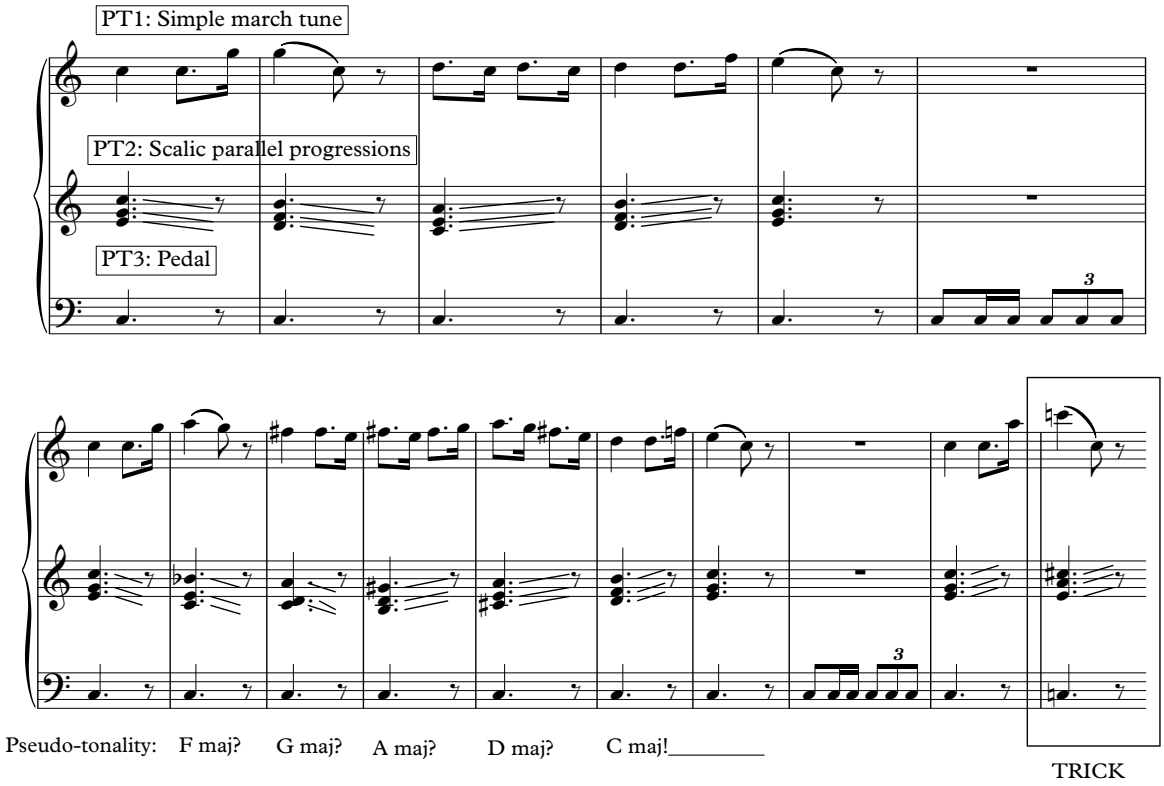


Figure 3.13b Tricks and pseudo-tonality in *Psalm 150* (1962) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1962)

At the same time, the piece triggers harmonic tricks (fig. 3.13b). This is the case of the puzzling progression of the second phrase (bars 7 to 13). The harmonic progression is not dictated by a tonal logic but by the logic of the conjunct motion. As show in figure 3.13b, each chord creates a series of expectations that the next contradicts. The cuteness of the sixth chord displacements becomes now bamboozling tricks. The cute child was in fact a mischievous one. Likewise, in bar 16, the harmonic progression enters in direct mismatch with the tune (C sharp / C natural opposition). There is a polysemy to that moment. First of all, it sounds like a mistake and refers to inexperience and helpless cuteness (and is only one step further from the out-of-tune playing). Yet, it insinuates mischief at the same time. The anal displacement of the sixth chord on the piano creates a troublemaking relation. It is a disruption made by playtesting; the sudden moment when

the two playthings toyed with create a strong mismatch which has in store a radical and rebellious content.

Cute and tricky, the piece also exemplifies the lusory attitude at the core of Britten's writing for children. Children's instrument-playing and singing imply strong limitations for the composer who endeavours to write for them a complex yet playable music; who wants to "pour in these restricted bottles [his] best wine."[420] This is a game: a self-limitation to overcome. And the overcoming seems particularly 'clever' as it uses the very flaws of children music-playing to create the ambivalent semiotic content. In other words, Britten uses the imperfections imposed by his lusory game (children playing music) as the solution to his conundrum. And he does so in such a manner that these imperfections become paradoxically cute and mischievous at the same time. The simplicity of Britten's music is only a façade, and is part and parcel of his childlike aesthetic.

A composer, like Britten, Stravinsky, or Prokofiev, may be something of a trickster. Indeed, Andrew Westerhaus presents Stravinsky as a composer with a 'bag of tricks', stockpiling materials to be recast against each other, using smokescreens to express something while not expressing it, and looking for the "loopholes that remain hidden for the conventional eye."[421] Much could be say in a similar fashion to Britten's aesthetic: he too calls for an eclectic stylistic material; he too uses revealing masks to say something while hiding what he is saying; he too looks for gaps in tradition. Looking for the loopholes in a given set of material, is even the very attitude of a lusory player of a game. It is the way to overcome the obstacles. The search for loopholes, and the way to

[420] Britten, "Freeman of Lowestoft" (1951), in *Britten on Music*, 109.
[421] Westerhaus, *Stravinsky and the Ludic Metaphor*, 203.

expose them, is the clever attitude typical of game players, may they be called Britten, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, or even Auden.

Britten's childlike aesthetic is based on a constant tricksting of the genres, topics, and styles at hand. Britten is a master of the semiotic threshold. He creates bridges which present the same as the other, and the other as the same. His aesthetic is full of such ambivalences as cuteness and violence, childlike adults and adult-like children, marches which become chaos, or school-like exercises becoming mischief. Britten's mechanical toying with motifs is the instrument of his play, the attitude of a childlike trickster which toys with whatever element he finds at hand.

The conflation of the cute and the trick-like, in Britten's music, is the boundary crossing of the distinction between the adult and the child, or more precisely between the childlike adult and the adult-like child. The trickster is the child who wants to be the adult, as much as the adult who wants to stay a child. Both bring together a latent violence in their bag of tricks. This articulation, between the childlike and its violent undertones, is expressed more in depth in chapter 5 with *Noye's Fludde*. As expressed there, this type of mix is typical of children's literature and child-art, ranging from Lewis Carroll and Roald Dahl, to Wes Anderson.

3.2.2 Childlike adults and adult-like children

Without a doubt, Britten's operas are infused with figures of adult-like children and childlike adults. In particular, the operas articulate the ambivalent symbol of the soldier. Boy soldiers, and their adult equivalent (adult soldiers behaving like children), abound in Britten's stage works. This is true of the apprentice officers in *Billy Budd*, who claim that "Life's not all play upon a man'o'war" (words they parrot from senior officers); or in the *Golden Vanity*, where trebles impersonate sailors old enough to have children or

marry. Comparably, the central traumatic tale in *Owen Wingrave* opposes the figures of the wise pacifist child who does not want to fight, and the childlike warrior-father who strikes him dead for that. In *Owen Wingrave*, Britten's play with material gives a general toy-like atmosphere which only stresses further the childish vision of the world of the Wingrave family, which delights in sending its progeny to war like sacrificed pawns on a board game. This ambiguity is particularly striking in Kate and Owen's exchange at the arrival of the latter: "We're not shocked by childish talk", to which Owen answers "And I'm not shocked by girlish talk." As shouted by Owen to his family portraits: "I am a boy, but resolute." In *Billy Budd*, *The Golden Vanity*, and *Owen Wingrave*, this child-adult ambivalence is expressed through the symbol of the soldier. In this way, it emphasises the ambivalence of violence, both childlike and adult-like.



Figure 3.14 (a) "You Spotted Snakes" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). (b), "Life's not all play" (*Billy Budd*) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1960, 1964)

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a similar amalgam is found in the musical characterisation of the fairies. In "You spotted snakes" (fig. 3.14a), Britten mixes march and lullaby genres. Thus, he exposes the central paradox of his fairies: there are both royal guards and magical creatures. Trumpet calls, mechanical and fragmented utterances, metrical breaks, wooden *col legno* and percussion timbre: these trebles are presented as toy-soldiers. At the same time, via the glittering and lyrical lullaby, they impersonate magical fairies. By playing with genres and topics, Britten stresses the child/adult (fairies/soldiers) ambiguity. Toying, for Benjamin Britten, is therefore an affair of genre and topic too.

In symbolic connection to the soldier, the toy is another ambiguation of the child/adult relation, as in the royal-guard toy-fairies discussed above. The apprentice officers of the *Indomitable* (in *Billy Budd*) are musically presented in analogous ways, i.e. as soldiery toys. The music which accompanies their parroting ("Life's not all play upon a man-of-war") expresses tongue-in-cheek repetitions of a small fragment (fig. 3.14b). This type of motif, which compares with the ones used in "You spotted snakes" (fig. 3.14a) is typically toy-like. 'Toylike', not in the mechanical sense but in the topical one: as a motif which refers to toys as a cultural object. The mechanical toying and the topical reference to toys, however, go hand in hand in this example. The use of small musical fragments exemplifies characteristics of toys, that is their simplicity, repetition, wobbliness, inhumanness; all elements which in turn converge to childlikeness. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, these toys have a direct debt to Stravinsky and Ravel: the former puppet-like description of humans, and the latter human-like description of puppets. As with the cute vs trick conflation discussed above, toys become signifiers of the admixture of the child and the adult. Britten presents children as toylike, and in that way makes them exemplify their very childlikeness. At

the same time, as toys, they become miniatures of the adult world; its simplification; its mimicry. They become strangely adult-like.



Figure 3.15 "Now rouse up all the city" (*Gloriana*, 1953) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1953)

A similar boy-soldier conflation is found in *Gloriana*'s Act 3 Scene 2, where street boys march to rally people to the cause of Essex's rebellion (fig. 3.15). The music consists of a simple military march, only accompanied by a drum on stage. The tune, however, calls to mind playground tunes, and has a light-hearted quality at odds with the violent rebellious project claimed in their slogan.[422] The mix of cruelty and cheerfulness is, once more, typically childlike and the head-chopping mission of these boys recalls the light-hearted violence of *Alice in Wonderland*.

> Now rouse up all the City
> And join our gallant army

[422] This is the very tune which fascinated Imogen Holst and which pushed Britten to tell her 'he was still thirteen'. See recollection of that anecdote in chapter 1, in the discussion of Bridcut's *Britten's Children* (2006), 7-8.

By noble Essex led:

And join us in our duty,
Make Cecil and make Raleigh
Both shorter by a head.

March along with us!

Once again, the childlike and the war-like are blended. Once more, the topical assemblage of boys as soldiers is made through the use of marches. These marches express the energy and vivacity of the child, as much as its tendency to lean towards violence.

There is something, however, inherently paradoxical on investigating elements of childlikeness and play-games in Britten's aesthetic. This is because when one looks at his child compositions (his juvenilia), one finds nothing of the sort. Strangely, it is only as an adult that Britten develops his child-*like* aesthetics, and his musical games of limitation.

3.2.3 Childlikeness, sport, and the pseudo-erasure of sexuality

I discussed in the previous chapter Britten's erasure of sexuality, and the influence of Stravinsky on the matter. I offered the view that the childification of musical material and topics was on Britten's part a way to remove the sexual aspect of his music. Such a claim seems quite against the current of Brett's analysis of the maximal presence of sexuality and homosexual love in Britten's music. In fact, it is not so much opposed to that idea that it seems. The childlike is Britten's closet. This means that the apparent erasure of the sexual, in a Stravinskian manner, through toylike compositional mechanics, and the emphasis of the childlike, is in fact a pseudo-erasure. By erasing the sexual, Britten's music points at the sexual as a source of unease. A similar train of thought is found in the Victorian attitude to sport inherited by Britten (evoked too in chapter 2). The

adoration of the body—of a body de-sexualised and sportlike—is another may to erase the sexual. But this attempt, once more, is a pseudo-erasure, because the strange absence of the sexual only points more strongly at its existence.

Many pieces by Britten, especially in the 1930s, refer to physical activities: physical training (*Three Divertimenti*); swimming (*Holiday Diaries*); cycling ("Going Down Hill on a Bicycle"); or hunting games ("Sport", *Our Hunting Fathers*), among others. Physicality also influenced much of his subsequent work, up to his last opera, *Death in Venice* (1973), in which is found an Olympic pentathlon at the end of Act I. In these "Games of Apollo", a choir comments on the actions of the ballet dancers, enacting the beach games of the boys observed by Aschenbach. This suppressed fascination with the young Tadzio reframes the scene into an Olympic games-like contest, not devoid of homoerotic undertones.[423] While the dancers on stage perform cartwheels and other acrobatic moves, the choir makes coded references to an array of young figures from Greek mythology or literature involved in pederastic relationships: Hyacinth (and Apollo) fatally wounded during a game, or Phaedrus' (and Socrates) reflections on beauty.[424] These beach games become a Greek pentathlon with running, long jump, discus throwing, javelin throwing, and wrestling. The music, driven by the commenting chorus (in a Greek manner), stylises those sporting activities through gamelan sounds. The gamelan presents polysemous features: an obvious reference to the East (the sun); mixed with neoclassical Hellenic exoticism (the Olympic games); as well as watery gestures (the beach); and a boyishness through toy-like percussion timbre (the boys); and finally, a sporting physicality (pentathlon and acrobatics). In the "Games of Apollo", sport is then entangled in homoerotic, neoclassical, childlike, and seaside-holiday features. This example shows

[423] Similar homoerotic descriptions of Olympic games can be found in Henry de Montherlant, especially his illustrated *Paysage des Olympiques* (Grasset, 1940).
[424] At the end of Act I, this accumulation of images of love overflows Aschenbach who, devastated, utters "I love you", and acknowledges at last that he fell in love with the boy.

the intermingling in Britten's music of the notions of sport, play, and games. Britten's fascination with childhood, his compositional strategies, and the essential physicality of his works (which find one of their best examples in this passage from *Death in Venice*), manifest on an aesthetic and semiotic level a connection between games, play, sport, and music.

Britten's music, in sum, shares something with Aschenbach's own de-sexualisation of his love for Tadzio. A similar pseudo-erasure is found in *Young Apollo* (1939) where scalic displays evoke childlike music practice, as much as sport-like exercising. The solar reading of love, may it be in Aschenbach's music or as expressed by the choice of musical topics in *Young Apollo*, betrays a closeted attitude inscribed in the music itself. Once more, by taking seriously the playful as an aesthetic category in Britten's music, and by considering the childlike at its centre, the traditional readings of Benjamin Britten's music are seen in a new light.

3.2.4 Sport gestures and boisterousness

In addition, the childlike and sport also are linked together by a common boisterous quality. For instance, Britten's "Playful Pizzicato" (from the *Simple Symphony* 1933-34) offers many features to discuss regarding the intermingling of sport and playfulness. In this piece, a physical quality is allied with a reclaiming of childhood. Indeed, *Simple Symphony* is based on pieces from Britten's own juvenilia, composed when 10 to 13 years old. Britten's introduction to the piece for the Decca recording sleevenote in 1955 is now famous:

> Once upon a time there was a prep-school boy. He was called Britten mi. [...] he loved cricket, only quite liked football (although he kicked a pretty 'corner'); he adored mathematics, got on all right with history, was scared by Latin Unseen. [...] There was one curious thing about this boy: he wrote music.[425]

[425] Britten, "Simple Symphony, Op.4", (1934), *Britten on Music*, 358.

Even Britten's choice of the titles presents a mischievous and childlike attitude, because all the titles are based on double letters like his own name: BB (Boisterous Bourrée), PP (Playful Pizzicato), SS (Sentimental Sarabande), FF (Frolicsome Finale); and of course *Simple Symphony*.[426] The adjectives used express a sport-like and energetic childlikeness: boisterous, playful, or frolicsome. At the same time, they denote a lusory attitude towards double-letter limitations (i.e. a double-lettered naming game).

In "Playful Pizzicato," the same mind-set is at play. First of all, Britten's self-limitation to pizzicati manifests, like its double-letter titles, an inclination towards lusory games. Likewise, this pizzicato-only piece tests the limitation of the performers. The writing flirts with being playable or not, and challenges the players' speed and endurance. There is a game-like attitude on the performers' part, who participate in the composer's game and try to overcome the pizzicato challenge. Speed (an element essential to many sports) is often a crucial element in Britten's music: frantic fugues (*Bridge Variations*, *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*), breathless manhunts (*Albert Herring*, *Peter Grimes*), or car racing at full speed ('Calypso' from the *Cabaret Songs*). According to John Bridcut, "[Britten's] fascination with speed and movement led naturally in adult life to skiing, which he took up with great success. It also lay behind his favourite toys — his cars."[427] And these speedy 'toys' were often the opportunity for Britten to become a child again: "He knew that speed impressed his young friends, who usually sit with him in the front, while any adult passengers were confined to the back."[428] In car racing, pleasure can come from the danger of losing control of the vehicle. In risk-taking resides the

[426] On Benjamin Britten's use of puns with double letters or else, see Mervyn Cooke, "Be Flat or Be Natural? Pitch Symbolism in Britten's Operas," in Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten*, 102-127. Such double-letter games, in connection to a childlike toying with words, can be found in some books for children, for example Lemony Snicket's *The Reptile Room, The Ersatz Elevator, The Carnivous Carnival* and all the other volumes of his *Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006).
[427] Bridcut, *Britten's Children* (2006), 186.
[428] *Ibid*.

enjoyment. This recalls Roger Caillois' concept of *ilinx*, based on "the pursuit of vertigo and which consists of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind."[429] As in 'This Little Babe' (*A Ceremony of Carols*), where musical lines come dangerously close to each other in canon and seem like an athletic running competition, "Playful Pizzicato" puts speed and physicality at the forefront. In particular, this use of an instrumental technique (pizzicati) reallocated for the sake of the game itself (fiddling on violins), falls into the category of play.

Therefore, "Playful Pizzicato" displays elements of games (in lusory limitations to overcome for the composer and the performers) and play (in the autotelic reallocation of the pizzicato playing). Moreover, there is a connection between the speed of the piece and sport. On top of it, the physicality of the pizzicato challenge brings this piece closer to the notion of sport. The work puts forward the strong connection between music and sport, as activities: performing, playing, composing, training, sporting.

The *Simple Symphony* illustrates the possibility for music and sounds to lean towards sport (via physicality), games (via lusory self-limitations), and play (via autotelic manipulations). Significantly, *Simple Symphony* epitomizes how these interactions may happen in a general reclaiming of childhood and elements of boyishness.

Other pieces offer even closer links to sport gestures. This is the case of "Early Morning Bathe", part of Britten's 1934 *Holiday Diary* for piano. The opening of the piece presents a quick succession of snapshots of sounds typical of the early Benjamin Britten. This style recalls Roger Caillois' concept of *paidia*, the unruled game or play, defined by its "frolicsome and impulsive exuberance."[430] Paidian style (as I propose to call it) is

[429] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.
[430] *Ibid.*, 13.

found in many early works by Britten: the March and Waltz of the *Suite for Violin* (1934-5), the March and Burlesque of *Three Divertimenti* (1936), "Rats Away!" of *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936), or at the transition between the last movements of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1942). It is characterized by glimpses of instrumental gestures presented in a chaotic manner and with a nonsensical taste of childish disruption.[431]



Figure 3.16 Paidian childlish disruption in "Early Morning Bathe" (© Winthrop Rogers, 1935)

"Early Morning Bathe", from *Holiday Diary* for solo piano (1934) presents the first occurrence of these stylistic tricks of Britten's, linked here to a visual and tactile depiction of getting into the cold water at the beach, as vivaciously described by John Bridcut:

> The ginger barefoot walk across sharp shingle, the first tentative steps into ice-cold water, the decisive immersion of the whole body, the realisation that the water was not as cold as it had seemed, the purposeful swimming in deeper water, and when the awkward exit across painful pebbles... It is all there in the music.[432]

Cold baths and wild swimming, which were amongst Britten's favourite activities, are linked (again) in his music to childhood memories. As Britten himself recounted, "These little pieces [...] are (subjective) impressions of a boy's seaside holiday, in pre-war

[431] See the next section on *Three Divertimenti* for a topic analysis of this paidian style.
[432] Bridcut, *Britten's Children* (2006), 191.

years."[433] The music is indeed vividly descriptive and one shivers at the sound of those brisk clashes of fresh air and cold water. Evocations of water in piano music (or in harp music) have a long and rich history: for example, swift music, made of light back-and-forth arpeggios on the piano, is typical of Debussy's or Ravel's writing. In their music, sounds evoke the splashes of water and exemplify the shape of waves. The undulations in the second page of Britten's piece (when the proper swimming begins) follow this tradition. Yet, it goes one step further. Indeed, there is an analogical gestural process between piano playing and swimming. In Britten's piece, the performer seems to *literally swim on the piano*. The pianist's movements are circular in both hands, recalling the gestures of a breaststroke. It establishes many possibilities of comparison with, at the centre of it, a similitude between music performance and sport performance: training, rhythmicity, automatisation of gestures, and so on.



Figure 3.17 Breaststroke gestures in "Early Morning Bathe" (© Winthrop Rogers, 1935)

In consequence, Britten's piece presents an analogy between the musician's gesture and the gesture of the swimmer. The swimming gesture of a breaststroke finds its equivalent in the piano playing. At the same time, the resulting sounds evoke water, in a long genealogy of piano pieces. Those two phenomena occur concomitantly and give to

[433] Mitchell, *Letters from a Life* (vol. 1), 348, reprint of Britten's 1944 programme note. To situate this music as recollections of "pre-war years" is a way for Britten to add some distance with his own biography, as he was only still a baby before the start of the First World War.

the piece its particular flavour: physical and sport-like via the gestural analogy, while belonging to a watery piano-writing topic. Besides, there is a gestural playfulness in the piece through its variational writing. The repetitive breaststroke is also an exploration of the keyboard, which recalls Roger Moseley's analysis of a keyboard as an "interface" and gestural "platform".[434] Furthermore, Britten's variation-driven piece is an autotelic activity: a playful manipulation of the motivic material, as seen in the first section of this chapter. Interestingly, this autotelic aspect creates a narrative description of a swimming practice: the swimming (a play-sport-like autotelic repetition) becomes a musical programme (a narrative instrumentality). More: Britten uses the gestural limitation of a breaststroke to create *nonetheless* a tune interwoven between the hands (which, again, has links with a Ravelian and Debussyan piano or harp writing). In other words, by restricting himself to a self-imposed limitation of the motivic material he is composing with, Britten showcases a lusory attitude. His compositional process, therefore, can be assimilated to a game. Britten's piece, in sum, is a *compositional game*, which *playfully manipulates* the music material drawn from an analogy between the pianist's gesture and a *sport gesture*.

If *Holiday Diary* offers fruitful analogies with swimming, *Go Play, Boy, Play* can be read as a tennis match. To start with, I would like to analyse the sounds of a tennis game. For that purpose, consider the sounds of a ball on a tennis court. Figure 3.18 represents the four impacts made in a tennis game of two players. Racket smashes (impacts A and C) are alternated with bounces on the court (impacts B and D).

[434] Moseley, *Keys to Play*.

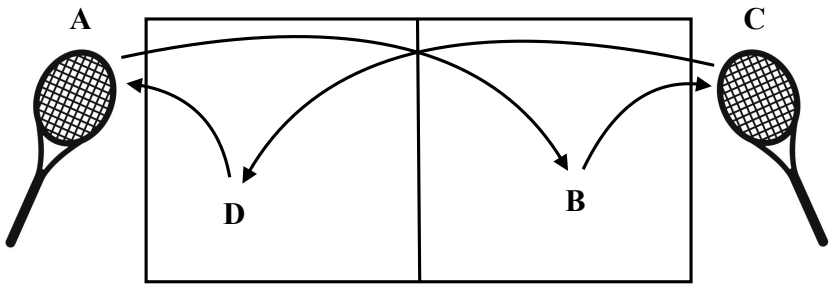


Figure 3.18 The four impacts in a tennis game

Figure 3.19 transcribes the rhythmicity of these impacts during a sample tennis game (from Wimbledon 1964).[435] In the transcription, I tried to transpose the tennis court on a 'music staff'. Player 1 is above the staff, player 2 under it, as if the tennis court was seen from above, with the net as a dividing line. We can observe the repartition in time of the four impacts. The slurs in the transcription figure the possible aural associations of the rhythm. This can also be observed in the groupings created by the resulting rhythm: A+B; C+D.

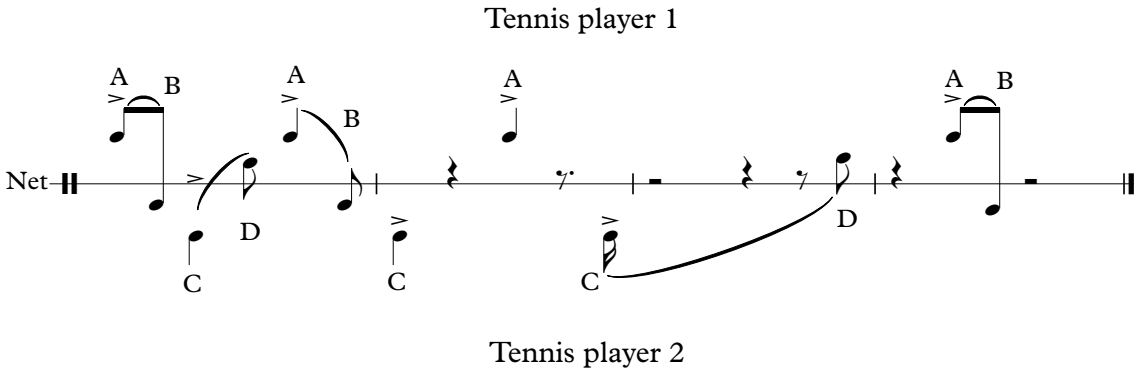


Figure 3.19 Transcription of a 1964 Wimbledon Game

[435] The example is taken from a match between Fred Strolle and another competitor, Wimbledon, June 1964. Available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzpMlDoEIAI (0'11 to 0'30). Consulted on the May 26 2023.

There is, however, an inherent aural ambiguity in the perception of these impacts, and a paradigmatic shift of perception between two instincts of groupings: either as A+B/C+D (as evoked) or as B+C/D+A. The difference resides in the place of the 'strong beat' (the racket hit) and of the 'weak beat' (the court bouncing). Thus, the perception oscillates between an iambic weak-strong or trochaic strong-weak association of sounds.

Another point: even if a tennis match is a ruled '*ludic*' game, its sounds are in fact very close to a '*paidian*' anarchy.[436] There is a chaotic perception of the ball sounds, which are the result of the player's physical movements: an unpredictability through silences, an alternation of pitches and spatialisation of the hits and bounces sounds.

With these two points in mind (the ambiguity of perception, and the overall chaotic soundscape), let me turn now to a piece by Britten.

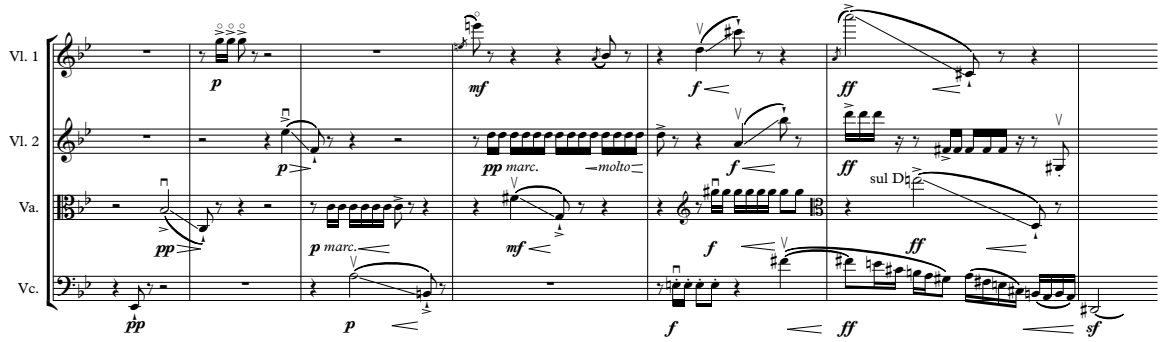


Figure 3.20 Paidian style in *Three Divertimenti* (1st mvt, bars 4-17) (© Faber Music, 1983)

Initially entitled *Go Play, Boy, Play*, the first movement of Britten's *Three Divertimenti* (1936) mentions school physical education ('PT', Physical Training). The music offers a carefree display of sounds, what I coined above as Britten's 'Paidian style', which is found in many of his pieces from the 1930s. These sounds call to mind the hits

[436] I rely here again on Roger Caillois' *ludus-paidia* opposition (between the ruled game and carefree play).

and bounces of the tennis court presented above. In particular, the ambiguity of groupings (iambic or trochaic) of the tennis match is structuring the gestural quality of Britten's glimpses of sounds.

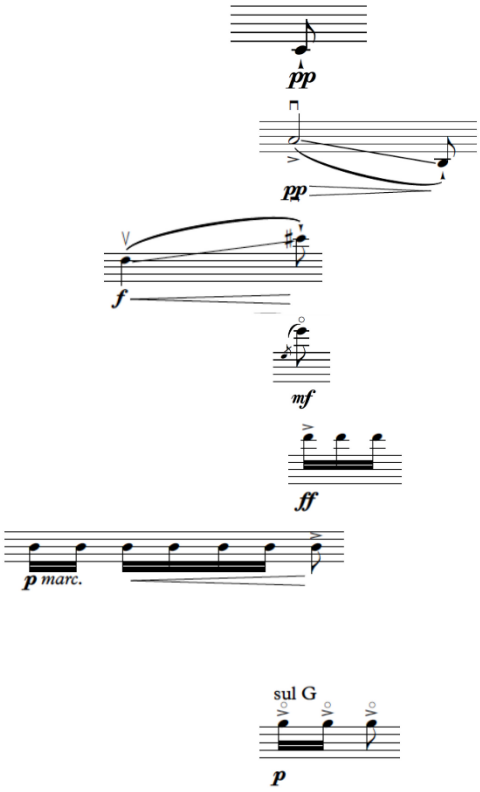


Figure 3.21 Paradigmatic presentation of the paidian gestures in *Three Divertimenti* (1st mvt)

To correlate the sounds of the tennis game and these shapes, one needs what could be called a 'musicalisation'. The music represents sounds that do not exist on the tennis court but which are evocative of it. Firstly, the glissandi give to the music a flexible quality. Coupled with crescendi and descrescendi, it gives to the sound a visual aspect: the trajectory of the ball in the air, and the direction of it (falling to the ground or ascending toward the next racket hit). Otherwise, as seen in the fig. 3.21, repetitions of one note in a sudden crescendo gives an other concretisation of the visual aspect of the speed of a ball. In other words, my transcriptions of the Wimbeldon match, if arranged and played by a string quartet, would *sound* less comparable to a tennis match than

Britten's extract which was probably not intended to convey any such thing. This musical passage is a 'musicalisation': the sporting sounds are amplified and adapted in order to render the visual aspect of the tennis match. This may be a fanciful analysis, but the vivacity of Britten's music, its gesturality, and its relation to the childlike and school-bound exercises invites the analyst's imagination to participate in such parallels drawn from a close-study of the soundscape of sport.

3.2.5 *Paidia* and violence

I defined above Britten's 'Paidian style', in reference to Roger Caillois's concept, as frolicsome glimpses of instrumental gestures presented in a chaotic manner and with a nonsensical taste of childish disruption. *Go Play, Boy, Play* (or *Three Divertimenti*), offers a new angle on the matter. As seen, the piece emphasises a sportlike quality, but, next to sport, it also has stylistic critical functions. The first movement of the piece juxtaposes two different styles: the march (with its allusion to regimented bodily discipline) and *paidia* (on the contrary a boisterous and chaotic burst of sounds), analysed above as a tennis game. The two styles are inherently opposed to one another: the paidian snaps and flicks of sounds are very different from the march's square appearance.

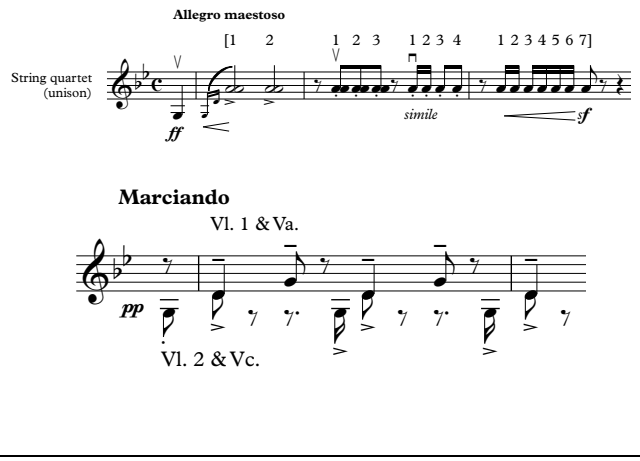
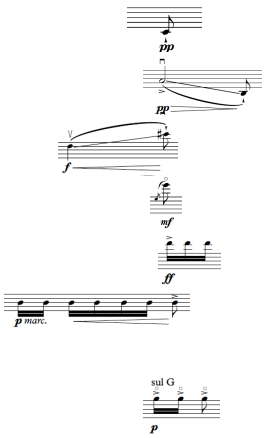
MARCH (disciplined and synchronised bodies)	*PAIDIA* (chaotic and carefree gestures)
	

Figure 3.22 Two types of physicality in *Three Divertimenti* (1st mvt)

This piece has a dual aspect because of these two physicalities—the seriousness of the march and the playful nature of the disorderly *paidia*. Both are found in the playground: the march-like military aspect of the physical training lesson, with jumping jacks and stretching (see archival footage of interwar sport lesson in schools);[437] and the disorganised running of playing children. The music combines the military and the schoolboyish aspects of athleticism. The children's exercise motions are musicalized by the glissando's plasticity and bouncing effects which, as seen above, also open the listener's imagination to a broad range of sporting equipment, including elastic, bouncing tennis balls, racket sounds, and more. Simultaneously, it has a pointillist appeal which refers to avant-garde styles, especially Webern; but a Webern which seems fitted for childlike physicality and sport education.

As in *Go Play, Boy, Play*, the first movement of the *Suite for violin* (1934-5) puts together march and *paidia*. It does so, however, in a surprising and peculiar manner. Indeed, if the reference to the march is done via the title, the music is made of disruptions and snapshots of sounds dispersed between the violin and the piano part. The title, 'March' tricks the listener because the music is in fact its very negation. Rightly, it seems to have puzzled at least one of the critics of the first performance: "The difficulty with Mr Britten is to know whether he is being serious or not. Is the march in this suite, for instance, intended to emulate or to parody Anton Webern? Whichever answer is given, this exiguously notated piece proved ineffective in performance."[438] This comment encapsulates the traditional accusations of Britten as too clever and non-serious. The

[437] See for example "1930s UK Boys Private School, Gym Class" (Kino Library Archives, BP1). Available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcBsFt2Cz_E (Consulted on May 26 2023).
[438] *The Times* (22 June 1938), quoted in Mitchell, *Letters from a Life* (vol. 1), 561-562.

mention of Webern, however, ties these paidian sounds with avant-garde techniques, especially pointillism.



Figure 3.23 *Suite for violin and piano* ("March") (1934-5) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1935)

There are glimpses of Webern-like sounds in the piece, but coated in an overall pseudo-tonal quality alien to the Austrian composer. The flicks and snapshots of sounds exhibit a broad tonal vocabulary, broken into pieces of scales, arpeggios, or chords. The exchanges of sounds between the violin and the piano, have more in common with the tennis match observed above than a serial construction. Yet, both Britten's *paidia* and Webern's aphorisms share a pointillist presentation. In Britten's case, however, it takes the form of a childish disruption of the march, full of obstacles and pitfalls. The proper march motif pops up at R1 (bar 12). At this point, the march motif reframes the paidian

accompaniment of the piano in a squarer perception, and, lo and behold, what was not a march seems now to fit quite well as a march-like accompaniment! This march is then paradoxically challenged and reinforced by the paidian anarchical snapshots of sounds. Britten, once more, delights in playing with the boundaries between topics and genres. He uses their features as a threshold to their intermingling, and creates confusion. Britten tricks the listener once again, and exploits play as a disruptive process. This epitomises the creative, disruptive, and critical aspect of play developed by Walter Benjamin and discussed in the Introduction. Indeed, by removing tonal syntax but playing with pseudo-tonal triadic gestures, Britten is in the end as disruptive and revolutionary as Webern's atonality.[439]

This capacity of play and *paidia* to destroy offers to Britten further semiotic possibilities when linked to matters of war. War, like games, has a ruled and unruled ambiguity at its core, as summarised in the following table:

	Play	**War**
Order	*Ludus* (ruled play) / Game	March
Chaos	*Paidia* (unruled play) / Playground	Battlefield

Figure 3.24 Semiotic analogies between war and play

Returning to the *Sinfonia da Requiem* discussed above, one can observe how Britten plays on that ambiguous interaction. The 'Dies Irae' is full of march-like elements (as military trumpet calls and thrilling drums) and posits a war-like scenery: God's anger unleashed

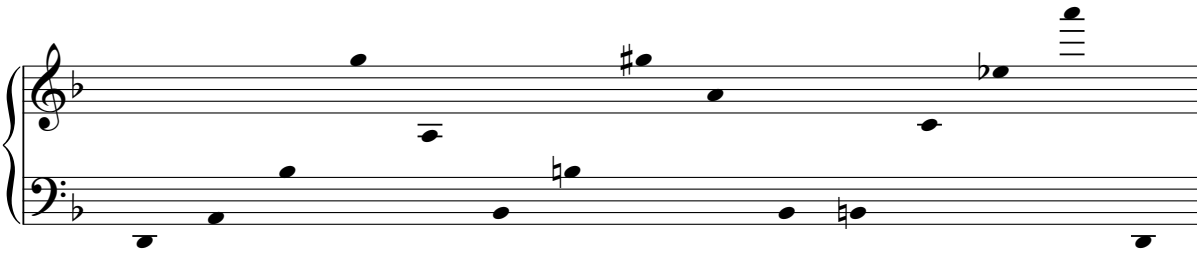
[439] Surprisingly enough, one would expect to find more literature on the Viennese influence of serial aphorisms on Britten's 'paidian style', considering the importance given by Britten scholars to Viennese references.

on earth through men battling against each other. Yet, at the end of the movement, the battlefield collapses into ashes, through *paidia*, used as a liquidation of the music in an array of out-of-control cadences. One may observe such a dissolution of the orchestra into pointillist writing in the score extract displayed in figure 3.25.

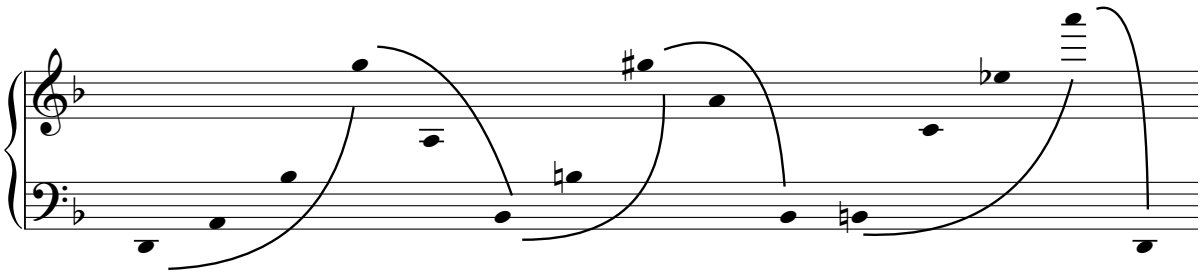


Figure 3.25 Paidian pointillism in *Sinfonia da Requiem* (end of 2nd mvt) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1942)

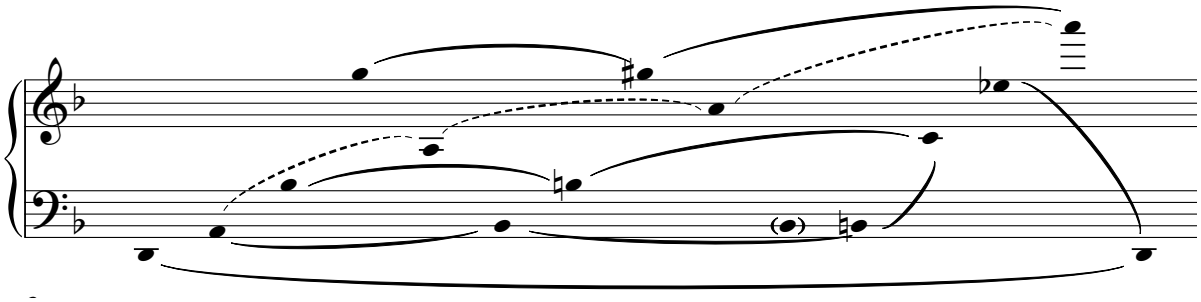
The paidian style pushes chaos to its climactic extreme. At the same time, it drains the movements' chaotic energy into the calm and peaceful music of the following "Requiem Aeternam" (third movement). *Paidia*, then, acts paradoxically as a stimulant and as a soothing transition. This is due to the ambiguous perception that the paidian writing triggers. What appear to be isolated pitches, perceived as up and down sweeping gestures, are in fact composed of a hidden chromatic counterpoint (fig. 3.26).



a. Paidian isolated pitches



b. Surface: up and down waves



c. Hidden structure: chromatic counterpoint

Figure 3.26 *Sinfonia da Requiem* (end of 2nd mvt)

This hidden chromaticism is built on a strong attraction towards the pitches D and A. Via a progressive simplification it thereby clarifies chaos into the organising pitches of the third movement (D-A-Bb) (see fig. 3.27 below)

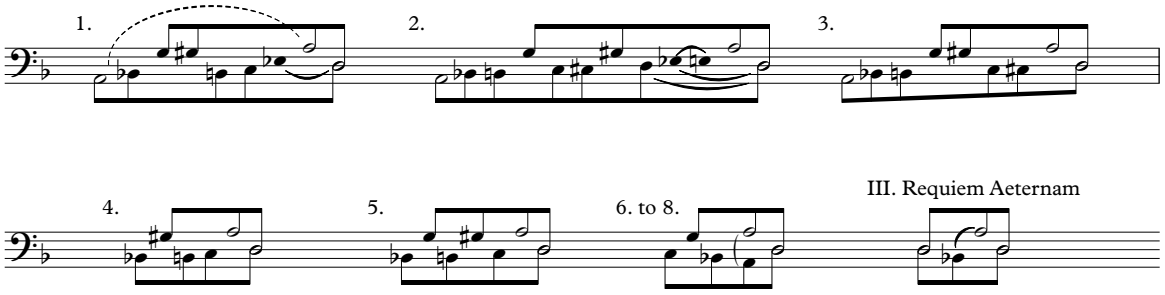


Figure 3.27 Chromatic contrapuntal progression, *Sinfonia da Requiem* (end of 2nd mvt)

This transition puts forwards themes of violence: climactic bloodshed, disintegration, bombing, war, and death. This apex of violence is linked to the ambiguity theorised in table figure 3.26 above between order and chaos. Like war, play seems to be particularly harmful here. The total chaos of war, the epitome of destruction, is analogous to a playful anarchy, a nonsensical toying with sounds. There is a sudden reversion of what is playful or harmful, of what is good or bad, of play as leading to war, and of war as a mere play. Childlike play is not just presented as an antidote to violence, or as what is harmed by it. It is war itself which is presented as play, in a sudden shift of situation. Play as an escape makes way to play as a critique: a critique of play.

3.2.6 Scalic exercises

Another expression of childlikeness in Britten's music is made through reference to practice-like scales. These can be "hectic contrary-motion scales on the piano, that daily grind for any schoolboy doing his music practice", as described by John Bridcut

apropos *Abraham and Isaac* (1952),[440] ands so share the sport-like aspect mentioned above. Or it can be plain solfeggio exercises, as in Britten's orchestration of Rossini's "Gorgheggi e solfeggi" in *Matinées Musicales* (1941) where the singing exercises of Rossini are organised in an energetic symphonic piece of frenzied moto perpetuo movement. Vocal exercises are found too, as Flute (alias Thisby)'s 'death' aria in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (fig. 3.28). Britten deliberately uses in this aria the discrepancy between the simplicity and unimaginative aspect of the vocal exercise and the supposedly dramatic aspect of the scene. As commented by Daniel Albright, "Flute, naturally, sings a duet with a flute, but it consists mostly of practice scales—Thisby, distracted, has abstracted herself from the opera, even from the recital hall, and has settled into her living room, where she is amusing herself with elementary voice exercises."[441] By referring to a household atmosphere in link to musical exercises, Albright puts his finger on a central aspect to which I will return shortly. In addition, Flute's duet with the flute is out-of-sync, to add to this theatrical incongruity. This too (the didactic error) is a major characteristic to take on board in the present consideration of music-exercise as a topic.

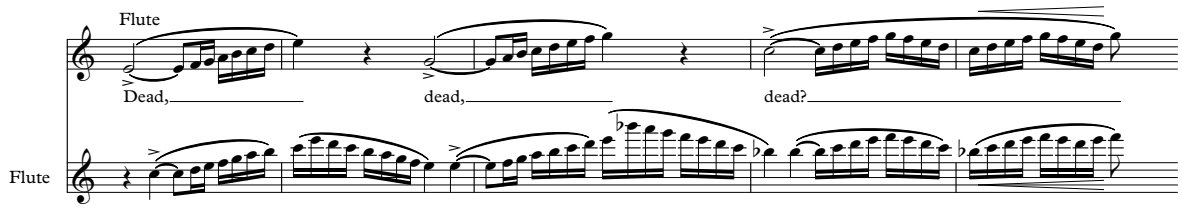


Figure 3.28 Vocal-exercise topic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act II, "Asleep my love?")

(© Boosey & Hawkes, 1960)

Indeed, the music-exercise acts like a topic in Britten's music, that is as a stylistic

[440] Bridcut, *Britten's Children* (2006), 216.
[441] Albright, "Britten's A Midsummer Night's Dream", 295.

trait culturally shared with listeners. Typically, the music-exercise refers to situational experiences shared by many, as in the specific occasion of hearing a child practising on the piano (from a neighbour's window, for example). Altogether, the music exercise is identifiable thanks to its scalic or arpeggio properties. This is the case of the following example from *Abraham and Isaac* (fig. 3.29).



Figure 3.29 Music-exercises in *Abraham and Isaac* (1952) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1952)

As observable in that extract, three aspects are to be considered in connection to that topic. The first is its simplicity. A scale is simple because its primary function is educational. Piano scale-exercises, for example, are stripped down of any musical or praxial complexity, to be reduced to the pure technical exercise of fingering combinations. The second aspect which is linked topically to the music-exercise is the mistake. If one exercises musically, one tries to learn how to do something via a trial-and-error process. In other words, wrong notes (mishaps) or wrong gestures (fingering or issues in de-synchronisation of the hands for example) add some salt to the music-exercise. A third aspect to be considered is the patterning of those scales and arpeggios, because exercising operates through constant repetition and the displacement of a pedagogical motif (for example raising up or down on a piano in sequences). These patterns are explored by the instrumentalists in order to exhaust the possible combinations of pitches on a same motif. In that regard, the music exercise is a relative of the study, which develops limited material (a technical point the teaching focuses on) on a whole musical piece with the aim of exploring the application of that said technique.

You may see here where I am heading. Music exercises, as the study, by being based on restricted motivic material, are potential compositional lusory games as they explore the registers of an instrument by the ongoing displacement of a motif. Indeed, the three elements evoked above (simplicity, mistakes, and patterning) have a strong potential for Britten's playful mechanics. Simplicity calls for an economy of means. Mistakes can be used in games of match and mismatch. Patterning, and the exercising through displacement of a motif, is a type of variation. In consequence, reading between the lines, these elements have playful latent affordances which are easily combined to Britten's toying, while at the same time referring topically to the childlike by the evocation of child music-practice.

At the same time, the music exercise is at the boundary of what music is, the purely technical exercise being *de facto* devoid of musical content or meaning. Thus, such didactic contraptions are toys for pushing music to its existential boundaries, while making links to the childlike and the school-bound. The use of scalic exercises points to the critical function of Britten's play-methods.

Scalic exercises are also pseudo-tonal sound organisations. This is what revealed the previous analysis of the "March" of the *Suite for Violin and Piano*, where fragments of tonal vocabulary (scales and arpeggios) where presented in non-tonal disruptive ways through *paidia*. More generally, the logic of a scalic-exercise (as in the famous piano-exercises by Hanon for instance) is dictated by its didactic properties, that is by the exploration of a skill by displacements on the keyboard. If the vocabulary is tonal, because scalic or triadic, its syntax is not because it follows its educational aims, and not cadential ones. Therefore, the scalic exercise is the sound-result of a gestural concern, not

a musical one. The consequential pitch-organisation of a scalic exercise is non-tonal and is used a great number of times by Britten for its pseudo-tonal potential.[442]

Music-exercises, in Britten's music, are often bound to domestic atmospheres, with the staple image of a child practising on the home piano. In the *Turn of the Screw* in particular, music-exercises infuse much of the musical material of the opera. The music-exercise topic is in a semiotic relationship to the educational atmosphere of the story. More, it emphasises the play between the schooled discipline of the children, and their mischievous childlikeness. This oscillation between paidian drive (unruliness and carefree behaviour) and school-bound discipline is typical of the daily life of a child. The music-exercise, with its mistakes, the didactic and neat application of the player, and its textbook qualities, crystallises the ambivalence of the disciplined and the undisciplined in the child. Besides, in the mysterious and ghostly story of this opera, the music exercise emphasises the puzzling aspect of these apparently natural and undisturbed day-to-day scenes of children behaviour. Behind the simplicity of the music exercise is hidden all the uncanny fears that this opera has in store. The practicing mistakes associated to the topic are whispers which arouse the listener's suspicion. For example, the second variation in act I presents a series of patterned music exercises and scalic didacticisms for the strings and the woodwinds (fig. 3.30). Their simplicity and exercise-like quality calls to mind a childhood atmosphere, as when Miles, in Act 2, practises his piano. The writing seems to be out of a simple child's composition based on an exercise-model. This is why the

[442] This pseudo-tonal use of the music-exercise topic is also typical of Stravinsky, in particular via pieces like the *Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex* where is found, as noted by Joseph N. Straus, "a triadic surface constrained by a post-tonal substructure." (see Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 90). Straus' claim that Stravinsky "appropriates the central sonority of the tonal language and imposes a new meaning on it" (*Ibid.*, 93) recalls my proposed concept of pseudo-tonality. In short, as explored in the previous chapter, Stravinsky is a central model for Britten's playful art.

element of dissonance in this example (and in the *Screw* in general) is so polysemous: the dissonances offer three simultaneous levels of reading. On the first level, they are the expression of the children's lack of skills. These 'wrong notes' and mistakes express their poor dexterity. On a second level, it expresses the children's naturally mischievous minds, which disrupt for pleasure and play with whatever is at hand (scales included). These modernist clashes are trickster's ones; they are the expression of a toying from a child's part and echoes Britten's actual compositional practice. Lastly, on a third level, dissonance points to the uncanny, to something queer and strange: it makes one suspect ghostly manipulations. In short, clumsiness, mischief, and the uncanny are semiotically intermeshed in these slightly dissonant musical exercises.



Figure 3.30 Music-exercises in *The Turn of the Screw* (Act 1, variation 2) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1954)

Consequently, the music-exercise as a topic intersects with tricks and *paidia*. In addition, its didactic simplicity, its tongue-stuck-out application, and childish clumsiness, also relate to elements of cuteness. It is like a child's drawing, expressing at the same time inexperience and disruption.

Musical scales, as a topic, are used by Britten in many places to evoke elements of energetic display. This is the case, for example, in the "furiously fast" pantomime of the

opera ‘for children’ *The Little Sweep* (fig. 3.31). Hearing Mrs. Baggott’s arrival, Sam “leaps into the toy-cupboard” and the other children tidy the room with haste (a childhood situation with which we are all familiar). The music, made of scalic displays, tinged with wrong notes, denotes the speedy chase and frenzied runs. These musical exercises, however, are blended with accents and military rhythms, which gives a toy-soldiery taste to the scene, mixed to the children’s fear of a potential real violence coming up for them. At the same time, these hyperactive scales recall Shostakovich’s style, in particular because of its unison writing and its military tropes. By doing so, it calls to mind the *enfant-terrible* music of the Russian composer explored in the previous chapter, full of virtuosic disruptive scales hammered on a piano. In addition, downward glissandi add a paidian touch to these hectic displacements of scalic pattern. All in all, the example showcases once more Britten’s delight in using topics as boundaries between semiotic references, i.e. as pivotal polysemous contraptions. The scale expresses here an intermingling of musical exercises, toy soldiers, frenzied energy, *enfant-terrible* displays, and carefree *paidia*. In the end, after having hidden Sam and tidied up the room, the children “fetch books, toys, and games with which to occupy themselves.” Playing becomes a façade, a screen presented to the adult about to enter the room, hiding the children’s actual rescue enterprise. They play at playing. And Britten, aesthetically, does the same.



Figure 3.31 Music-exercises in *The Little Sweep* (Pantomime) (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1949)

Britten here handles the music-exercise topic in his usual fashion: like a toy. He uses the affordances of the topic to cleverly create bridges towards other topical dimensions. A musical exercise becomes a military music (*The Little Sweep*), or a lullaby ("Cradle Song"), or conveys the polysemous functionality towards childlike mischievousness, unskilled clumsiness, or uncanny denotations (*The Turn of the Screw*). In addition, Britten's music is brimming with other tropological uses of the music exercise (i.e ways to blend it with other topics). Figure 3.32 presents some of these topical mixtures.

(1)	*Abraham and Isaac* 	Musical exercise troped with medievalism
(2)	"The Plough Boy" 	Musical exercise troped with folksong
(3)	*A Midsummer Nights' Dream* ("Be Kind and Courteous") 	Musical exercise troped with baroque figuration

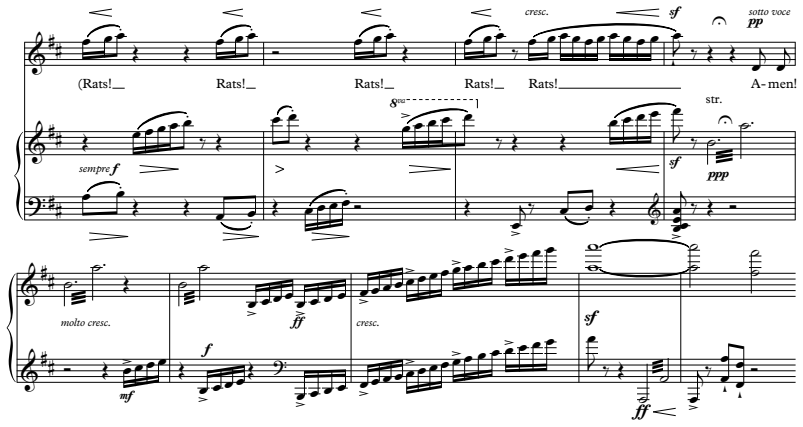
(4)	*Our Hunting Fathers* ("Rats!")  	Musical exercise troped with *paidia* (and used as a disruption to a prayer)

Figure 3.32 Tropological uses of the musical exercise (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1947, 1952, 1960, 1936)

(1) is an example of how the musical exercise can merge with a neo-medieval style, as an expression of Issac's childlike attributes. (2) gives an instance of the folky aspect that a scalic exercise, via its simplicity, can take. Again, it is bound to a special description of a boy. In (3), scalic exercises are also baroque figuration (a series of anabases and catabases in mimesis). It provides a schoolboyish side to the neo-Purcellian style of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (4) shows how music exercises are troped (mixed) with sport-like *paidia* in *Our Hunting Fathers*. The upward scale is figuring the movement of the rat, a scream of fear ('Rats!'), school-bound exercises, and tennis-like exchanges between the instruments in a paidian manner. All together, they act as many disruptions to the serenity of the tenor's prayer.

These scales may also take a neoclassical aspect, as in some pieces by Stravinsky, such as *The Rakes' Progress* with its imitation of Mozart. This is the case, for example, in the piano scene in the *Turn of the Screw* where Miles' piano-playing (and its study-like writing) is in direct reference to eighteenth and-nineteenth-century piano repertoire.[443] In most instances, however, Britten's neoclassical reference is linked to

[443] See McKay, "Britten and Stravinsky's Neoclassical Operas". Discussed in chapter 4.

homoerotic Hellenistic or Greek imagery, which in turn is linked to aspects of the childlike and the sport-like. This is the case of the Games of Apollo in *Death in Venice* mentioned earlier, which mixes Olympian games and music-exercise references to sea-side holidays features and homoerotic neo-classicism. *Young Apollo* provides a similar blend. The ongoing A major scales running through the solo piano part and its string accompaniment is full of sporting vitality, school-related scalic topicality, and homoerotic display. It is a physical music which focuses on the body as a polysemous semiotic element: the physical exercising through sport, the physical training though musical practice, and the admiration of the young body.

In sum, Britten toyifies musical topics and genres. He plays, as a trickster himself, with exploring the boundaries, investigating the potential for polysemy in the musical exercise. He plays with its musical functions, and its mechanics, in an Audenian fashion, with slippages of meaning. His aesthetic embraces attributes of childlikeness with its tricks, cuteness, sport-like vitality, school-related references. Altogether, Britten's trickeries are linked to an ongoing description of childish ambiguities: the adult-like and childlike; the war-maker and the peacemaker; the unskilled child and the revolutionary artist.

3.3 (Conclusion) The meaning of toying

What conclusion to draw from all this? Much was said about the playful slippage of sense in Britten's music, as an effect from his motivic toying and topical toying. This invites the question: what does Britten intend and mean when toying of the sort with music, sounds, signifiers, and texts? One may concur with Gadamer that playing is also a being played (see chapter 1); that toying with an object is to be toyed by its limitations;

that gaming with limitations, is to be gamed by them. And perhaps this is it. Britten, by playing, is being played, and is not in complete control of all the semiotic implications of his manipulations. The ongoing changes created by the tinkering with playthings; the textual juxtaposition of unrelated material; the topical assemblage of apparently disparate cultural elements: all these aspects create unexpected occurrences *out of the playing itself*. As explored in chapter 1, playing is therefore a matter of open-ended semiotics, particularly fostered in the mysterious processes of musical signification, which constantly refer to things, while not stating anything clearly. In short, Britten plays as much as he is played by his music.

To illustrate this point, I close this chapter with "Who are these children?" from the song cycle of the same name (1972), on poems and rhymes by William Soutar. In Christopher Mark's words, this song epitomises Britten's "simplification taken to an extreme".[444] This simplification in means is Britten's ground for play. To start with, the song is composed of three playthings, presented on figure 3.33:

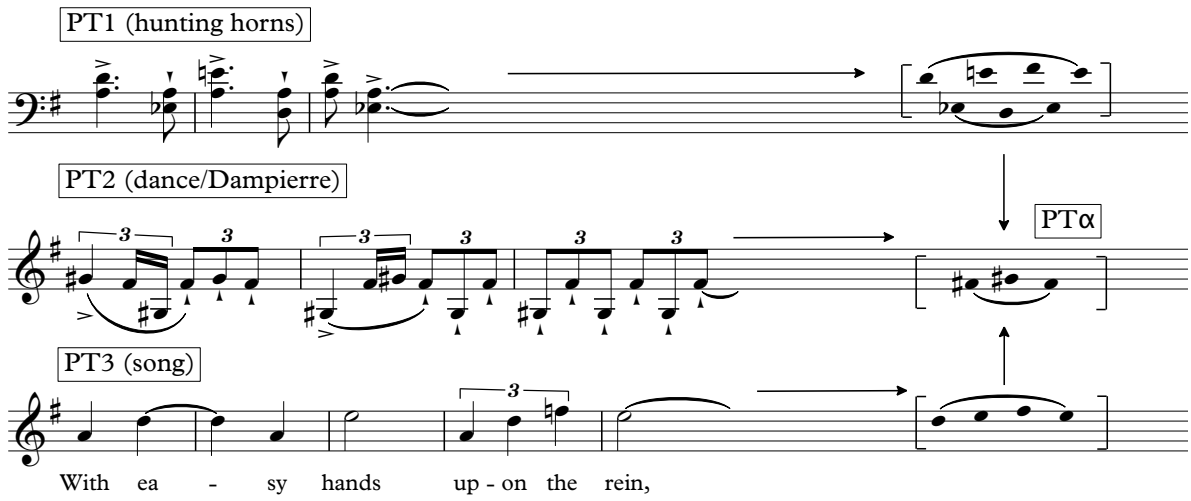


Figure 3.33 PT-organisation in "Who are these children?" (1972) (© Faber Music, 1972)

[444] Mark, "An Excess of Less?", 227.



Figure 3.34 Pitch-collection correspondence between PT1 and PT2 ("Who are these children?")

PT1 is based on a call, whose intervals widen by steps in contrary motion. PT2 focuses on a major second undulation (with a register leap of G sharps). PT2's major second step motion corresponds to PT1's widening. Moreover, there is another correspondence between PT1 and PT2 in terms of pitch collection: they both are constructed on a chromaticism whose central note has been moved an octave below (see fig. 3.34). Indeed, this leap is accentuated by the dynamics (an accent, followed by a flexional ending on which the leap is performed). However, in terms of rhythms there is a binary/ternary contrast between PT1 and PT2. PT1's binary horn-like calls find an opposition in the dance-like quality of the ternary PT2. The tenor line (PT3) springs from the upper line of PT1. It presents also a step motion widening (fourth, fifth, sixth intervals) but has, in opposition to PT1, a lyrical quality. Indeed, the fifth interval leap of PT3 does not denote a horn call but a lyrical singing emphasis. In short, these three simple elements present a complex tangle of similarities and oppositions, which unravels into three distinct semiotic denotations: hunting horns (PT1), dance (PT2), and lyrical song (PT3).

The text of the poem plays with and is played by these three semiotic elements: "With easy hands upon the rein, / And hounds at their horses' feet, / The ladies and the gentlemen / Ride through the village street." Seen through the fox hunting scene described by the poem, the three playthings which compose the music suddenly take on a new light. Indeed, PT1, PT2, and PT3 afford three different hunt call topics: PT1 functions as a horn

bicinium (with its two-part fourth-and-fifths relations); PT2, with its ternary dance-like rhythms is a typical Dampierre-style horn call; and PT3, with its lyricism designates a pastoral horn.[445] This polysemy of hunting horns in Britten's music has been already observed by Raymond Monelle, in his topical analysis of the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings* (1943). Monelle notes that "Britten was particularly sensitive to topical reference; he writes for [Dennis] Brain a horn part that is a virtual anthology of topic significations".[446] Therefore, the three plaything on which "Who are these Children?" is based, display, on top of their motivic relational complexity, a no less complex topical polysemy.

In particular, the heterophonic relation between the playthings emphasises their similarities, while creating a complex counterpoint. Heterophony is a device often found in Britten's music, as analysed by Mervyn Cooke.[447] Via heterophony, Britten explores the leeway (the room for play) in the counterpoint of a musical motif with itself. The process of heterophony creates a texture, a counterpoint, out of the same plaything, and is by that way another one of Britten's economical means. On figure 3.35, the voice and the upper part of the piano are heterophonic variations on the same melodic line. Heterophony is then a typically lusory device because it is economical in its means while creating complex contrapuntal texture. It is a staple tool (along with the passacaglia and other lusory means) in Britten's aesthetic.

[445] For a typology of the hunt topic, Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 95-110.
[446] *Ibid.*, 107.
[447] Cooke, *Britten and the Far East*, 42-46.

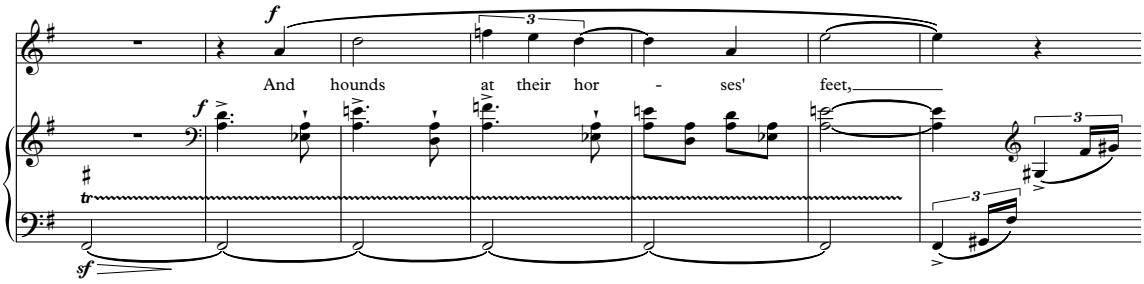


Figure 3.35 Heterophony and correspondences between PT ("Who are these Children?")

On the extract 3.35, PT2's major second undulation becomes a low pitched dramatic trill, and is a breakthrough from the horn topic. Actually, through the song, those three playthings interact and undergo topical metamorphoses, as shown by figure 3.36. On 3.36.B, the three playthings merge into an accompanied song, and the wobbly sonic encounter of the rhythms, allied with the text, goes along the entanglement of horses, hounds, and humans. In 3.36.C, the major seconds of PT2 are metamorphosed in watery gestures. The text interacts with this new liquid topic with "Brightness of blood", and "Brightness of silver", i.e. with mentions of reflection and sparkles of light. On extract 3.36.D, the topical transformations of the music follow again the tone of the text: "Is there a dale more calm, more green / Under this morning hour;" is set with a lullaby (PT1's leaps morphing into a lulling character). The last extract (3.36.E) presents PT1 and PT2 turned back to their original form, but presented in distorted registers. One could see there a representation of the foxhunting party parading away. This is one way to interpret the text-music relations. Another is to appreciate the semiotic implications of the register distortion, that is to say that the hunting horns topics lose their horn-like quality. By going into a high register, PT2 becomes puppet-like, and PT2, by going too low, becomes grotesque. In other words, PT1 and PT2 become childlike. Such hounds, horses, and hunters have now become puppets, hobby-horses, and children.



Figure 3.36 Topical transformations ("Who are these Children?") (© Faber Music, 1972)

Soutar's poem, inspired by a newspaper picture, describes a procession of fox hunters through a bombed village, enjoying blood sport during times of war. In the picture (reproduced on the cover of the Faber Music first edition of Britten's song cycle) can be seen children observing this alien crowd, hence the title: "Who are these Children?". For Donald Mitchell, the scene is linked to Britten's denunciation of war: "The 'domestic' horror [blood sports] is re-drawn as a symbol of international terrorism [the annihilation of the Jews by the Nazis]" says he on a chapter dedicated to dances of death and violence in Britten's music.[448] Next to the critique of violence, Graham Johnson links the song to a critique of the oppression of innocent children (as animals): "in his ordering of [Soutar's poems], Britten emphasizes the fragility of this invalid's world which is threatened and precarious and where the children above all are the passive victims of violence."[449] Mitchell's and Johnson's readings are typical of the themes found throughout Britten studies: an unmitigated denunciation of war by the composer, and the presentation of children as passive innocents persecuted. And yet, those foxhunters playing at war in a real war, holding on to their games in spite of change, express a sharp childlikeness. To the question 'who are these children?' one could answer as well: the foxhunters themselves. Once more, Britten's aesthetic blurs the boundaries between children and adults. In that context, Britten's 'denunciation' of war targets an activity of adults who lost their child innocence, and *at the same time* presents war as typically childlike. Similarly, children are passive innocents bullied by childlike adults. These child/adult ambivalences are at the heart of Britten's music. Moreover, they are at the core of his own compositional attitude via his motivic toying and lusory games. By playing compositional games, Britten exemplifies himself what it is to play in times of war.

[448] Mitchell, "Violent Climates", in Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 202. One can see here a typically Mitchellian perspective: pacifism linked to large-scale politics, and domestic/exterior binaries.
[449] Graham Johnson, "Voice and Piano", in Christopher Palmer, *The Britten Companion*, 304.

This blur between childlike adults and adultlike children is directly linked to Britten's pseudo-simplicity. Arnold Whittall, commenting on "Who are these children?", declares that Britten is "at his freest when simple material could be placed in an aura of ambiguity."[450] This comment encapsulates the accessible complexity of Britten's music. His limitation to small motifs to be played with (i.e. his game) naturally fosters an easy appreciation of the characteristics of those small objects. At the same time, by linking the motifs together and via variational displacements and distortions, Britten potentially creates music of great complexity. This complexity operates on three levels: on a syntactical level by the play with motifs; on a semiotic level via the unfolding polysemy; on an aesthetic level by a paradoxical violent childlikeness.

What lesson can be gleaned from this last example? First of all, as in the other pieces explored in this chapter, Britten plays with the limitations of his playthings and exploits their semiotic affordances. Conversely, because the semiotic he creates is dictated by what these playthings afford, Britten is played by his own compositional process. The musical object, be it motivic, textual, or topical, becomes a player itself, and enters with Britten in a two-player game of agency. Hence, Britten is not just clever at toying with music but also creates meaning via a process of paradoxical agency, where he is, by definition, not fully in control of the semiotic of his works.

A second lesson is to be found in "Who are these Children", which is that Britten's play is a process ambiguously autotelic. That is to say that Britten's music is a tinkering with sounds, text, and topics for itself, as much as for a meaningful project. The interpretation of Britten's music oscillates between those two possibilities. But therein is the trick: this oscillation between the autotelic (playing for itself) and the instrumental

[450] Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett*, 237.

(playing to denounce something or to convey a message) is in itself an exemplification of a powerful message; that life, after all, is perhaps nothing more than play. Bernard Suits would have delighted in such a conclusion which merges his own questioning of play as a Utopia.[451] Britten's art also connects on that matter with the Abusrdist philosophy of Albert Camus: which is that if the world stays silent to our existential questioning, the existential leap is to accept the absurdity of the world itself. All that is left to do is play. "Who are these children", after all, describes all of us, playing in the midst of the absurd violence of our world.

A third and final element of conclusion is to be drawn, out of what has been said so far. If Britten plays at being played, and this attitude is the only viable attitude of the Absurdist artist, then Britten's playful art is an invitation for the listener to enter into a similar game of agency. The listener's relationship to Britten's play is itself playful; to be understood: the listener too is played by and is playing Britten's music. Britten's art (created out of a playful process) becomes itself a plaything, with its own affordances to consider. Britten's music tricks us by its semiotic limitations and affordances. But let us not forget that it is up to us to trick Britten's art back, and to toy with it in return. The meaning of Britten's music (and of Britten's play) is in the end what we pragmatically make of it. It is our own Absurdist game.

[451] Suits, *The Grasshopper*; Bernard Suits, *Return of the Grasshopper: Games, Leisure and the Good Life in the Third Millennium* (Routledge, 2023).

Chapter 4:

Playing the Screw

In literary studies, *The Turn of the Screw* has become the epitome of the ambiguous story. Scores of scholars of Henry James' novella have dedicated their efforts to pin down its ambiguous mechanics. The seminal analysis on the matter is Edmund Wilson's "The Ambiguity of James" which questions the sanity of the Governess, the central character of the novella.[452] For Wilson, the simple ghost story (where the ghosts are real, i.e. the 'first story') is put in doubt by Freudian-inspired perspectives which hint at a psychotic understanding of the Governess (where the ghosts are imagined by her disturbed mind, i.e. the 'second story'). In consequence, the novella remains ambiguous, in the strict sense of the term, because there is no way to tell which of the two contradictory solutions is the true one. This interest in ambiguity in Henry James' works (with the *Screw* at its centre) finds its apex in the 1970s, when a settled structuralism on one side, and the development of theories on complexity on the other, flourished in literary fields. What is particularly fascinating to observe is the conflicting meanings that ambiguity takes along those numerous studies.[453] Most agree, however, on one thing, which is that the definition of 'ambiguity' should not be considered carelessly. These distinctions between ambiguity (*stricto sensu* an insoluble presence of opposite meanings), complexity (intricate multi-layering of meanings), and vagueness (unclear

[452] Edmund Wilson, "The Ambiguity of Henry James", *Hound & Horn* (1934), 385-406.
[453] Charles Thomas Samuels, *The Ambiguity of Henry James* (University of Illinois Press, 1971); Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation", *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977), 94-207; Ralf Normann, *Techniques of Ambiguity in the Fiction of Henry James, With Special Reference to 'In the Cage' and 'The Turn of the Screw'* (Åbo Akademi, 1977); Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of Henry James* (The University of Chicago Press, 1977); among others.

meaning) is therefore crucial to anyone who wants to tackle similar evasive and ambiguous works like James'.

Unsurprisingly, most of the studies of Benjamin Britten's and Myfanwy Piper's operatic adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) are centred on matters of ambiguity too. In particular, the presence on stage of singing ghosts (with actual words) has been widely questioned since the premiere which generated debates about Britten's version jeopardising James' ambiguity on the existence of the ghosts. Patricia Howard's study of the reception of the opera shows how contradictory this reception was, with some critics denouncing a debasing of James' complexity by being focused on the first story, and others (like Virgil Thomson) arguing that Britten opted for the second story.[454] As it seems, 'ambiguity' did not wait long before creeping in the debates on Britten's *Screw*. One crucial distinction developed by Normann apropos James' works is between macro-ambiguities and micro-ambiguities.[455] The existence or not of the ghosts (macro) is one thing (tackled by the first critics of Britten's opera), but how to assess the micro-ambiguities, vagueness, and complexities, on the works of Britten, is another. The scholarship to date on the opera offers some answers, but most of their methods are too insufficient to appraise these matters fully. This is why.

The first musical analysis of the opera is Erwin Stein's, who highlights the structural organisation and ubiquity of the main musical motives.[456] Hereafter is a summary of the core idea expressed by Stein (fig. 4.1). The first motif (called 'screw' motif in the subsequent scholarship) is made of ascending fourths, and is a dodecaphonic row. The second motif (its names vary, but I stick to the broadest: 'doubt') is made of

[454] Patricia Howard (ed.), *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 130-8.
[455] Normann, *ibid.*
[456] Erwin Stein, "'The Turn of the Screw' and Its Musical Idiom", *Tempo New Series*, 34 (1954), 6.

"scales of four descending notes".[457] Stein's argument is twofold. Firstly, there is a quartal relation between these two themes. Secondly, both generate all the themes of the opera. I give two examples of this generative process in figure 4.1. 'Malo' is generated from the thirds hidden between the ascending fourths of the 'screw', and so is 'Quint'.

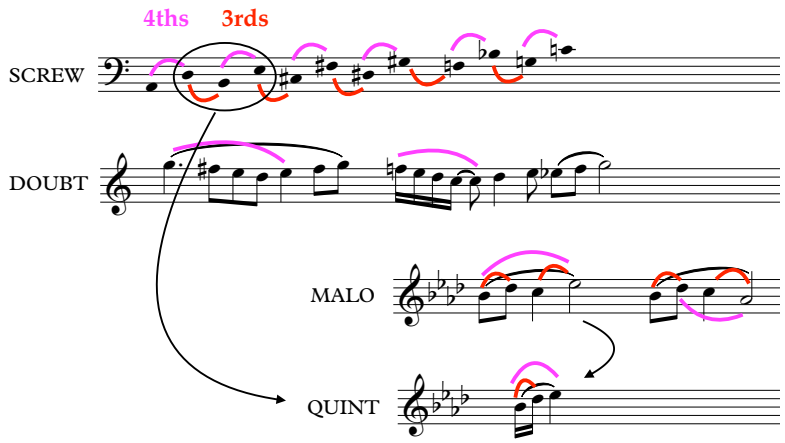


Figure 4.1 Stein's two structuring themes (called 'principal' and 'second' by Stein, which I name here 'Screw' and 'Doubt') and two examples of generated motives ('Malo' and 'Quint')

While incidentally demonstrating once more how economical Britten's music is in terms of motivic treatment, Stein's first insight in the *Screw* established the basis of many of the structural analyses to come. In this game of identification and recognition of motifs, however, most subsequent scholars never went much further than Stein's analysis. Most of Howard, Whittall, Evans, or Brett are more or less reformulations of Stein's article.[458] By building most of his material out of only a few notes, Britten's economy of means creates a world of endless interrelation between musical motives. This intricate web of correspondences fosters a general complexity of meaning because each statement can

[457] *Ibid.*, 7.
[458] Howard, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw*, 71-90; Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett*, 158-166; Arnold Whittall, "The Chamber Operas", in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 1999, pp. 104-112; Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 205-210; of Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 94-95.

endlessly be connected to other passages of the opera. Britten's motivic restriction and his play with the limitations of a dodecaphonic row of fourths typifies the parsimony and playfulness of his aesthetic. These structural analyses, however, are large-scale and top-down, through thematic relations and motivic similarities observed panoramically. The in-the-moment of the musical experience is not fully explored by this tactic (other than through elements of remembrance). Stein's analysis points at the structural ambiguity of Britten's music. But by being too structural it misses many semiotic aspects.

The same deadlock is found in most of the rest of the scholarship. While trying to reveal the ambiguity of the music (or, for some, to take side and pin down a definitive meaning), the methods and tools displayed fall short in assessing the complexity of the whole experiencing of the opera. For example, many other studies are arranged in a linear descriptive order, as guides for the analyst or the listener.[459] If the linear presentation gives some insight to the temporality of the operatic experience and how these experiences are accumulating all along ('in-the-moment'), these analyses go too fast to fully parse the music, the text, or the staging, apart from many well-spotted remarks scattered along the presentation.

Another method encountered in the musicological studies of *Screw* is psychoanalysis. It is the equivalent of Edmund Wilson's Freudian approach of Henry James' novella.[460] The psychoanalytical method goes one step further towards a close study. Indeed, these insights try to unravel what is hidden in the minds of the protagonists. And to do so, they use the traditional psychoanalytical material at hand: the observation of behaviours, and the analysis of speeches. But, this Freudian application is still top-down; it tries to confirm its pre-conceived ideas unto the musical and textual material. In

[459] Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*; Howard, *Benjamin Britten: The Turn of the Screw*; Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten, His Life and Operas* (Faber & Faber, 1983); Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*; Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*.
[460] Wilson, "The Ambiguity of Henry James".

the immeasurable elusiveness of the *Screw*, however, almost anything can be confirmed if one looks for it. Philip Brett carries this Freudian mind-set by putting sexuality at the centre of his study (albeit with a more positive view of homosexuality than Freud). In Brett's analysis, Quint becomes a gay model for Miles, a model opposed by the anti-onanist Governess.[461] Clifford Hindley goes further: Quint is not just a homoerotic model for the boy, but they are in a loving relationship thwarted by the Governess.[462] These readings are developed by Whitesell, Seymour, Emanuele, and Harper-Scott.[463] They give inspiring orientations on possible readings (among others) of the mystery which haunts Bly. Moreover, a psychological study of the behaviours and speeches of the characters is a major empirical asset for the analysis of the opera. It seems, however, more fruitful not to consider events as grounds for discrete selection, but to ponder experience in its complexity, without omitting any of its components. The following discussion about William James (Henry's brother) will try to achieve such a claim.

A last methodological lock on a full understanding of the vague and elusive aesthetic of Britten's *Screw* is the tonalism deployed by most scholars. By 'tonalism', I mean, as in the previous chapter, the systemic reduction of Britten's music in tonal terms, which prevents any analysis of the ambiguity, polysemy, motivic mismatches, and games of correspondences that Britten's motivic toying creates. Key symbolism and pitch symbolism are, for example, extraordinarily reductive,[464] and do not give much insight into the textual, musical and scenic experience (other than a top-down Lacanian

[461] Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten*, 87-105.
[462] Hindley, Clifford, "Why does Miles die? A study of Britten's 'The Turn of the Screw'", *The Musical Quarterly*, 74/1, (1990), 1-17.
[463] Lloyd Whitesell, "Doubt and Failure in Britten's 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *Indiana Theory Review*, 13/2, (1992), 41-87; Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*; Emanuele, *Maschi all'opera*; Harper-Scott, *Ideology in Britten's Operas*.
[464] See Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*; Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*; Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*.

symbolism).[465] Besides, the *Screw* has been preserved from Schenkerian analysis, apart from Harper-Scott's study of 'Malo'.[466] Not that this kind of analysis does not have its strengths, but, because this is an essentially *tonal* analysis based on the recognition of cadences, it hides exactly what is particular to Britten's pitch organisation. Not only does Harper-Scott's analysis press the music into structural cadential resolutions; he links them moreover to a Lacanian symbolic identification between Miles and Quint. Once more, my point is not to discard this final result (in the openness of the story, any argument plays into Henry James' hand), but more to question the ideological approach of the method which, in the end, erases the ambiguity, vagueness, and complexity of the opera.

To summarise, structural motivic relations, linear overviews, Freudian-inspired psycho-analyses, and tonal approaches are insufficient to fully assess matters of complexity, ambiguity, and vagueness in the *Screw*. If, combined, they give an awareness of the confusions at stake in the opera, these methods are too rigid for a more global understanding of the mechanics of layered, conflictual, or elusive meaning.

Some studies, however, reveal a much more fruitful parsing method of the musical and textual components of the opera. In particular, they help to link the Jamesian ambiguity of the opera to a ludic aesthetic. In a recent publication, Lawrence Kramer analyses the text and the music of the opera as riddles which "have too many answers and therefore have none."[467] He explores the music as a set of juxtaposed polysemous entities, where a "note is both an enigmatic signifier and a signifier or enigma."[468] At the same

[465] Mervyn Cooke avoids that trap in his original approach to pitch symbolism which he links to a likely schoolboyish pun of Britten: 'be flat!', 'be sharp!' or 'be natural!'. Cooke, "Be Flat or Be Natural?", in Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten*, 102.
[466] Harper-Scott, *Ideology in Britten's Operas*, 184-6.
[467] Lawrence Kramer, "Another Turn of the Screw, Enigma in Benjamin Britten and Henry James", in Rachael Durkin (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Music and Modern Literature* (Routledge, 2022), 173.
[468] *Ibid.*, 172.

time, Kramer closes the field of possible interpretations by stating that "the opera puts the audience in the position, not of the Governess, but of the children, and we, the children, cannot wholly resist the appeal of the ghosts."[469] If Kramer is right that the operatic version allows a different perspective than the novel (*de facto* focused on the Governess' perspective via her narrative), he also goes too far, as one can argue that the audience is put *at the same time* in the position of the Governess, the children, and the ghosts, and that the music has a crucial role in the matter.[470] Kramer's analysis of the child as a central figure and not just through the oft-referred theme of 'corrupted innocence' is, however, of crucial interest. Kramer investigates the centrality of the child and its aesthetic manifestations: in a child-like music, a child-like textual organisation, and a child-like perspective. To sum up, by focusing more on the concept of enigma, Kramer solves the definitional stalemate of the concept of ambiguity. Moreover, the riddle-like element implied by 'enigma' manifests a childlike quality which helps Kramer to present a new perspective on the centrality of childhood in Britten's *Screw*.

Before Kramer, Philip Rupprecht used the concept of utterance which links the analysis of text and music to communication studies, and as such, to semiotics. His close scrutiny of vocal utterances in relation to musical topics (in the voices as well as in the orchestra) opens to Rupprecht the doors of a powerful and compelling consideration of the *Screw*'s elusiveness and allows him to encapsulate the contradictory statements of the scholarship which preceded his own. In particular, his focus on diegetic issues leads him to consider the ambiguity of the topical scenes of play:

> Children's play, in everyday life, may be dismissed as trivial, nonsensical even; the opera, though, presents the children's performances as empty signifiers into which the Governess's worst imaginings can flood (and the reader's or audience's too). [...] Play, whether solitary or social, gives the child an imaginary mastery of the environment, and

[469] *Ibid.*, 173.
[470] Even in James' novella, the Governess-only perspective can be nuanced (see the discussion to follow on David Lapoujade's analysis of James' perspectivism).

> that offers, in the symbolic realm of fantasy, a rectification of some real-life experience of displeasure.[471]

To this double-sidedness of play analysed by Rupprecht may be added a more recent study by Nicholas McKay who published an inspiring semiotic analysis of 'The Piano' scene.[472] McKay's considerations of children's performance in connection and conflict with modernist aesthetics gives much insight to the study of childlikeness in Britten's music. I will review and expand on his analysis in the exploration of 'The Piano' in this chapter. In another vein, but still manifesting a close-study attitude (a pragmatic one, in William James' terms), is David Crilly, who uses cinematic techniques to understand the conflicts which operate in the motivic layering of the music.[473]

These introductory reviews clarify important matters for the sake of the following discussion. Firstly, ambiguity, especially in music analysis, cannot be confused with vagueness, complexity, or subjective interpretation; a study of the *Screw* should bear in mind these distinctions. For the sake of clarity, and inspired by Kramer, I will thereafter use 'enigma' as a general term which encapsulates ambiguity, vagueness, and complexity (respectively understood as unsolvable contradictory meanings; elusive meanings; and multi-layered entanglement of meanings). Secondly, most of the methods displayed by Britten scholars do not give sufficient insight and workable tools to analyse enigma in this opera. Thirdly, some close-analysis studies (especially Kramer and Rupprecht) bring to the fore the inherent ludic component of the formal and semiotic organisation of the text and the music of the opera. All these points bring me to my central claim: that in this

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[471] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 164.
[472] Nicholas P. McKay, "Britten and Stravinsky's Neoclassical Operas: Sign, Signification, and Subjectivity", in Esti Sheinberg & William P. Dougherty (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Music Signification* (Routledge, 2020), 78-88.
[473] Crilly, David. "Britten and Cinematic Frame", in Lucy Walker (ed.), *Benjamin Britten, New Perspectives on his Life and Work*, The Boydell Press, 2009, pp. 56-72.

opera, *the playful aesthetic of Benjamin Britten boosts the story's enigma*. On the one hand, play (i.e. the autotelic tinkering and toying with musical or textual elements) creates a variational world of constant metamorphoses which lends to the work its shifting polysemy and semiotic fluidity. On the other hand, Britten develops in the *Screw* a peculiar 'lusory' game (i.e. a 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles', see chapter 1): to create the most enigmatic semiotics out of lesser means.[474] To these plastic manipulation and games of self-constrained material with polysemous and multifunctional forms, can be added a profusion of child-inspired musical material, and the presence of playful topics. Confronted with ambiguous mysteries surrounding children, child-art takes in this opera a central importance: with children songs, child composition or child performance (see, as an example for each of them: 'Lavender's Blue', 'Malo', and 'The Piano' scene). This chapter argues for the centrality in Britten's *Screw* of playful mechanics and playful topics, as musical and operatic adaptations of Henry James' own enigmatic tale. In a nutshell, this chapter puts the previous chapters into practice, and exemplifies how analytical, theoretical, and historical conceptions of play and the playful can be applied fruitfully to form a re-reading of one of Britten's operas.

4.1 Layers of playfulness: Britten, Henry James, and the pragmatic method of William James

The creation of maze-like processes in Britten's *Screw* (a manifestation of the mechanics of toying identified in Britten's compositional procedures throughout this

[474] As developed in chapter 1, the definition of games showcasing a 'lusory attitude', and being "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" is drawn from the work of Bernard Suits (esp. *The Grasshopper*).

thesis), echoes the game of perspectives set up by Henry James, as analysed by Shoshana Felman, Jane Thrailkill, and David Lapoujade, as shown below). Concomitantly, James' play with patches of experiences finds its equivalent in the theories of his brother William, especially pragmatism and radical empiricism. Consequently, it is indispensable to begin the analysis of play in Britten's *Screw* with an exploration of play in the works of the James siblings.

To begin with, there is a toy-like aspect to Henry James' spinning with meaning, as analysed by Jane Thrailkill:

> The experience of oscillation, of flipping between understandings, of (temporary) resting places, of instances of the uncanny: this is the nature of the play, as [Henry James]'s ingeniously affordant narrative device enlists our perceptions and interpretations. As with any toy, we can stop the spinning and arrest the play of ambiguity—this happens when we embark on a singular reading or interpretation. [...] Stopping the motion isn't a misuse of the story; just as it isn't a misuse of the thaumatrope to inspect both sides, independently, to understand how it works.[475]

This manipulation is found in the very title of Henry James' novella. To 'turn the screw', as an expression, means "to apply moral or psychological pressure" (*OED*), derived from the literal sense, "an act of turning or twisting something; *spec.* an act of tightening or loosening something held by a screw mechanism" (*OED*), i.e., to operate a screw. To screw is a *mani*pulative act (in its literal sense: used with the *hands*). And so, there is a mechanical play in the movement and limitation in turning a screw. However, and this is a paradox, the screw is what fixes an object, what reduces the play of the parts of a mechanism. The screw symbolically encapsulates the notions of movement/process, and of ineluctable fastening, which metaphorically becomes the psychological pressure in James' title. The literal act of turning and manipulating an object, of revolving a screw, opens to a polysemy of possible meanings which condense the main issues of the

[475] Jane F. Thrailkill, *Philosophical Siblings, Variety of Playful Experience in Alice, William, and Henry James* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 224.

interpretation of the novella. No-one knows for sure who is turning the screw and who is screwed. James' novella is therefore a story of *manipulation*, a *twisted* tale where characters are puppets, handled by enigmatic forces. Nothing, however, testifies that this turning of the screw is a tightening one. Indeed, perhaps the screw is loosened by mysterious forces, only increasing the play which destabilises what was the steady scaffolding of a moral education. What is more, this is the title of a novella in which Henry James aimed to "make (the reader) think the evil, make him think it for himself".[476] Accordingly, the title might be understood as an innuendo, which makes one fear what this story may be about. Anyway, the 'screw' metaphor gives a vast array or interpretations about who is pressurised in the story (the protagonists, the readers?) and who is the enigmatic force behind the screw (the same ones, plus Henry James?). In that sense, Henry James' toy-like manipulation acts on the story as much as on the reader. In the words of Thrailkill: "Henry James toys with the improvisational middle ground defined by affordances, where things once made can be put to a (vast if not limitless) array of other uses. [...] James innovates on the art of 'spinning a tale': he sees his role, crucially, as taking something up and then turning it, an action that suggests manipulation and transformation."[477] If the readers are played by H. James' screw, their imaginative readings is the key to play the screw in return, and explore its spinning affordances. Once more, playful art leads to games of playing and being played.

Shoshana Felman has linked the readers' situation with the endless scholarly speculations on the novella, which play the same game set up by Henry James: "The scene of the critical debate is thus a *repetition* of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it

[476] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Deborah Esch & Jonathan Warren (Norton, 1999), 128.
[477] Jane F. Thrailkill, Jane F. "Play Is the Thing: Affect and Affordances in Alice, William, and Henry James", *The Henry James Review*, 40/3 (2019), 213-222.

dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*".[478] As mentioned in the title of Felman's article, the critics are 'turning the screw of interpretation'. "The readers and the critics" are "*actors*" of the game, "no less than the characters"[479] Each scholar expresses an attitude similar to the Governess of James' story. They are confronted with objects, facts, actions which are enigmatic because they are decontextualized. They try to reconstruct the missing context which gives *an explanation* to the observable elements. On the contrary, far from helping the reader, Henry James gives a set of hints which cast doubt on the Governess' sanity. The apparition itself becomes an ambiguous and unfalsified fact, which divides the literary critics in two opposing teams: first story vs. second story. "It is the very 'falseness' of the readings which constitutes their 'truth'".[480] With such a formulation, Felman touches on the playful gound of pragmatic philosophy.

In *Fictions du Pragmatisme*, David Lapoujade describes Henry James' aesthetic as a play of perspectives.[481] In literature, most of the novels present a central character whose experiences are followed and observed by the reader. But, in James' novels, the reader does not just observe the world through the subjective eyes of the characters. On the contrary, "it is not a matter of subjectively seeing the world through a consciousness, but of *objectively seeing a consciousness* through the image it has of the world."[482] This perspectivism, for Lapouade, "is less in the relativity of observers than in the variation of observed profiles for a given observer. With perspectivism, the object becomes a procession of profiles or a 'conjunctive object' in the words of William James. The unity of the object is now nothing more than the *continuous connection* of its profiles."[483] In

[478] Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation", 101; her emphasis.
[479] *Ibid.*, 114; her emphasis.
[480] *Ibid.*, 117. Felman's use of the concept of truth is very close to William James' (see discussion below).
[481] Lapoujade, David. *Fictions du pragmatisme: William et Henry James* (Éditions de Minuit, 2008).
[482] "[I]l ne s'agit pas de voir subjectivement le monde à travers une conscience, mais de *faire voir objectivement une conscience* à travers l'image qu'elle se fait du monde". (*Ibid*., 31; my translation, his emphasis).
[483] "Le perspectivisme consiste moins dans la relativité des observateurs que dans la variation des profils observés pour un observateur donné. Avec le perspectivisme, l'objet devient une procession de profils ou

other words, one object can be observed in many ways, and in Henry James' fiction, one can witness a character observing an 'object' on a certain angle only. Perspectivism is thus a constant variation of perspectives, a game of observing and being observed.[484] In addition, Henry James' characters are confronted with only patches of experiences. It is even *why* they are chosen as a central character, for being only able to have a partial perspective on the world: as the telegraphist of *In the Cage* (1898) who only gets bits of information on the couple exchanging telegrams; as the young Maisie (*What Maisie Knew*, 1897) who, as a child, presents a limited understanding of the pettiness of her divorcing parents; and of course as the Governess who can freely wander in the house but who, as a newcomer, has no understanding of what really happened at Bly. According to Lapoujade, "The focal character's function is not to reflect the secret; what they must reflect is precisely their inability to reach that zone where the secret is finally decipherable. It is precisely by not perceiving anything that they make the most perceivable."[485] James plays a game of lusory self-limitation. These 'obstacles' (the lack of perspective of the characters' viewpoints) only trigger a more thrilling set of ambiguities, mysteries and misunderstandings. In consequence, truth is a difficult thing to discover in James' novels (especially the ones from the 1890s). The characters' attempt to do so by interpreting unstitched patches of experiences.

This epistemological attitude presented by Henry James' characters in researching truth via fragments of experience, recalls his brother William James' pragmatic method, which considers the relation between actions and thoughts. Pragmatism refutes abstract

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un 'objet conjonctif' selon les termes de William James. L'unité de l'objet n'est désormais rien d'autre que le *raccordement continu* de ses profils." (*Ibid.*, 87; my translation, his emphasis).

[484] This answers to a previous footnote of this chapter. In Henry James' work too, the perspectival possibilities are much broader that what Kramer's claims implied.

[485] "Le personnage focal n'a donc pas pour fonction de réfléchir le secret ; ce qu'il doit refléter, c'est justement son incapacité à atteindre cette zone où le secret est enfin déchiffrable. C'est précisément en ne percevant rien qu'il fait percevoir le plus." (*Ibid.*, 47-8; my translation).

speculations which do not produce any practical difference. Thrailkill links this radical approach to a childlike attitude to the world, as an "embeddedness in a world of persons and things."[486] The child is a pragmatist, and the pragmatist is a player: "If pragmatism could be viewed as a sort of an umpire, the pragmatist—on the ground, battling it out—may have more in common with the figure of the player. Both set ideas in play, in concrete and experimental terms."[487] Too often, 'pragmatic' is debased as a synonym of 'practical', but the real pragmatist does not reject the construction of a thought. On the contrary, the pragmatic method proposes a 'radical empiricism'. In the words of William James:

> Nothing shall be admitted as fact, [...] except what can be experienced at some definite time by some experient; and for every feature of fact ever so experienced, a definite place must be found somewhere in the final system of reality. In other words: Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real.[488]

According to William James' method, truth (which is a process: an idea *becomes* true only because it can be verified through an experience), is discovered via an 'ambulatory process'. The process is 'ambulatory' because it wanders from patches of experience to other patches of experience. Truth is what allows one to explain all these successive experiences. This is why William James, via his theory of pragmatism, conceives truth as a process, because truth only becomes truer and truer, with the constant solving of conflicting experiences. In other words, pragmatism is a play-testing method. In consequence, William James' method is paradoxically so powerful to analyse fiction, where the pragmatic relation between thoughts and actions has been tampered with. Tampered with, or deliberately undergoing a removal of some of its elements to create an inscrutability. In this world of tinkered reality, the ambulatory process of William James becomes with his brother Henry the realm of paranoia:

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[486] Thrailkill, *Philosophical Siblings*, 161.
[487] *Ibid.*
[488] William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Longmans, 1912), 160.

> Two children walk away along a path under the gaze of their teacher. The garden, the tranquillity of the place, the charm and innocent cheerfulness of the children, all form an orderly, familiar world; each new perception blends into this harmonious whole and reinforces its cohesion. We are in the field of 'familiar' knowledge. But perhaps the teacher remembers the strange spectral 'presence' she thought she saw on top of a tower? It is not certain that she is aware of this somewhat distant solicitation. But then a suspicion creeps into her mind: why are the children whispering away? Why do they suddenly seem to be plotting? What if they are doing it to escape her surveillance? What if they were complicit in this 'presence'? Suddenly another world appears. It is the same garden, the same children, but everything has changed.[489]

There is a direct link between the radical empiricist perception of the world as a succession of patches one's mind tries to make sense of step by step, and the constant transformation of the limited musical material played with by Britten through ongoing variations. In that sense, pragmatism might not only be powerful for an appraisal of Henry James' playful world-making, but it may also have a lot to offer as a playful method for a musical analysis of Benjamin Britten's aesthetic of play. This triangle between the play-manipulation of an 'object', its semiotic pragmatic consequences, and the creation of multi-directional clues are at the centre of the *Screw*'s mechanics of enigma.

4.2 Play and enigma: 'Malo'

Scenes with children in Britten's *Screw* convey the perspectival complexity of being seen through the eyes of a child and of adults at the same time. In this situation of enigmatic ambulatory processes, the music and the text of the libretto (and as presented in the last section of this chapter, the staging too) play a central role by its tinkering with words and motifs, its game of lusory limitations, and its use of topics. The musical

[489] "[...] deux enfants s'éloignent le long d'une allée sous le regard de leur institutrice. Le jardin, la tranquillité de l'endroit, le charme et la gaité innocente des enfants, tout cela forme un monde ordonné, familier ; chaque nouvelle perception vient se fondre dans cet ensemble harmonieux et en renforce la cohésion. Nous sommes dans le champ de la connaissance 'familière'. Peut-être l'institutrice se rappelle-t-elle cependant l'étrange « présence » spectrale qu'elle a cru apercevoir en haut d'une tour ? Il n'est pas sûr qu'elle soit consciente de cette sollicitation un peu lointaine. Mais voilà qu'un soupçon s'insinue dans son esprit : pourquoi les enfants s'éloignent-ils en chuchotant ? Pourquoi ont-ils soudainement l'air de comploter ? Et si c'était pour échapper à sa surveillance ? S'ils étaient complices de cette 'présence' ? C'est brusquement un autre monde qui apparaît. Il s'agit bien du même jardin, des mêmes enfants mais tout a changé." (Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*, 125; my translation)

variation which introduces 'The Lesson', the sixth scene of Britten's *Screw*, conveys the carefree energy of Miles and Flora. The fugal diffusion of a simple nursery-rhyme-like tune creates a bamboozled and frolicsome set for the Latin lesson to begin. This topsy-turvy music, with its playful references to fun, energy, and childlikeness, may recall once more Roger Caillois' concept of 'paidia', i.e. the unruled and capricious free play.[490] After Miles and Flora made a jumble out of the orchestra through this *paidian* fugue, time freezes when Miles sings his mnemonic song 'Malo'. At that point, the boisterous orchestra is scaled down to the most economical means: a voice, and three instruments (harp, viola, and English horn).

Malo: I would rather be
Malo: in an apple-tree
Malo: than a naughty boy
Malo: in adversity

The song *plays* with the polysemy of the Latin word 'Malo'. The word is presented successively through different sides (Jamesian patches of experience) and its different meanings are juxtaposed in a game of variation (a game, in the sense that it explores the limitation of the word 'Malo' only). There is a nonsensical organisation in the succession of the meanings which creates semiotic tensions between the different verses. Indeed, the apparent nonsense of the juxtaposition produces, paradoxically, parallel syntactical possibilities: "I would rather be in an apple-tree than a naughty boy in adversity". This is typical of a manifestation of the 'cleverness' displayed in playful games: a self-limitation regarding the objects dealt with (here, the word 'Malo') combined with a lusory attitude which tries to position the object and its own variations to create an unexpected outcome. The combination is new, surprising, and creates 'accidental' associations which are at the same time meaningless and meaningful.

[490] Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 13.

Besides, 'Malo' echoes Miles' own name, and suddenly, the idle mnemonic exercise flips into worrying for Miles' situation. Indeed, the text may be a cypher to be interpreted but whose meaning can never be pinned down in any satisfactory way. In Lawrence Kramer's words, it is a "paradigm of semantic fluidity".[491] There is, as explored all along the different chapters of this thesis, a puzzling relation between the motivic play and games (toying, self-limitations), and its semiotic impact for the spectator. The nonsensical juxtaposition, the play between the listed meanings of 'Malo', creates unexpected semiotic meetings which result from a playful manipulation. "As a naughty boy" implies guilt (sexual? towards whom?); "In adversity" implies an adversary (but whom again? Quint or the Governess?). Astutely, the text plays with the loopholes offered by the nursery-rhyme and creates a succession of confusions. Wittily, and with very few means, the textual play makes the understanding of the situation vaguer. "I would rather be" presents a typical Jamesian "blank" (as studied at great length by Ralf Normann).[492] Indeed, if these four words make sense when considering their mnemonic function, the structure of the sentence, however, seems to be unfinished: 'I would rather be [...]'. In this blank, the imagination of the spectator (and the Governess') is unleashed in speculations: 'at school', 'an adult', 'Quint', 'innocent', 'different', 'away', and so on. In consequence, there is a double game of agency in motion. On the one hand, between the librettists (Piper and Britten himself) and their self-limitating game with the meanings of Malo; on the other hand, between this playful organisation of the text and the game of interpretation in which in listener/reader is framed (like the Governess faced with interpreting the ghosts). "The song [Malo] is a virtuoso exercise in deciphering — but to what end?" asks Kramer.[493] Similarly, according to Rupprecht,

[491] Kramer, "Another Turn of the Screw", 170.
[492] Normann, *Techniques of Ambiguity*.
[493] Kramer, *ibid.*

> In its profligate conjuring of verbal meaning, the doggerel of the schoolboy mnemonic could stand for the wider confusions of reference that confound our attempts to interpret the situation of the tale as a whole. If a single Latin word can encapsulate so many competing senses, then what are we to make of the opera's wider ambiguities, whether regarded as duplicities or multiplicity?[494]

This confusion, emerging from play, provides maze-like ambulatory processes. Indeed, W. James' ambulatory process describes the creation of sense and truth via the constant integration of new patches of experience in our understanding of the world. Those patches can confirm our conceptions or create a tension with them, generating doubt, which in turn pushes an individual to find a way to include these new and conflicting experiences within the frame of their own conceptions. For the Governess, as much as for the spectator, whose previous scene-experiences of the opera led them to consider that something is afoot at Bly (while not being able to put their finger on it), the mnemonic song becomes a potential confirmation of suspicions. In sum, the spectator is caught between, on the one hand, the semiotic confusion created by formal play, and on the other hand the ambulatory processes which occur all along the opera and which forces them to cast a suspicious mind on any textual (and as shown below musical) detail.

Besides, references to childhood situations enhance the play-world of 'Malo'. The "naughty boy" evokes the figure of the trickster. Likewise, to go "in an apple-tree" is typical of a children's game. At the same time, these evocations of child-bound situations enter in conflict with the two other verses, darker in tone: "I would rather be" and "in adversity". There is a tension between the idle and the serious, a paradox typical to play. What is more, the Latin mnemonics also make reference to the child-world of the schoolroom. The wordplay around *malo* (by Miles and Myfanwy Piper) is itself full of childlike attitude.

[494] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 168.

To clarify, Miles' game (the diegetic mnemonic song) corresponds to a textual toying (by Myfanwy Piper) which fosters semiotic confusion and vagueness for the spectator. Besides, the ambulatory process in the succession of the scenes creates a fundamentally ambiguous perception: the mnemonic song is either a mere didactic game, or it is a clue to the mysteries of Bly. Additionally, the text itself conflates playful and serious topics which intensify this ambiguity of play (as either tragic or harmless). In summary, toying with textual material, in situations of enigmatic context, and with material which is itself a game or which refers to playful topics, creates a complex web of semiotic confusion. These issues, at stake within the textual treatment of 'Malo', have their strict equivalence in the music.

The music too toys with material, plays with self-limitations to overcome, and bears references to child-art. The enigma which results from these plays, games, and childlikeness, multiplies the confusion created by the similar features of the text. This is where Myfanwy Piper's playful libretto (with its lusory games of limitation), Benjamin Britten's music, and Henry James' enigmatic (and playful) story, mix into a jarring cocktail.

The motivic organisation of 'Malo' is made of a superposition of three musical playthings (or PTs): the vocal line (PT1), the harp chords (PT2), and the long notes of the viola/English horn (PT3 3) (fig. 4.4). The main melodic object (the melodic line or PT1) is elementary in its basis: it is a succession of thirds. The plasticity offered by this limitation creates a permutation of ascending or descending thirds, visible on the following paradigmatic presentation:

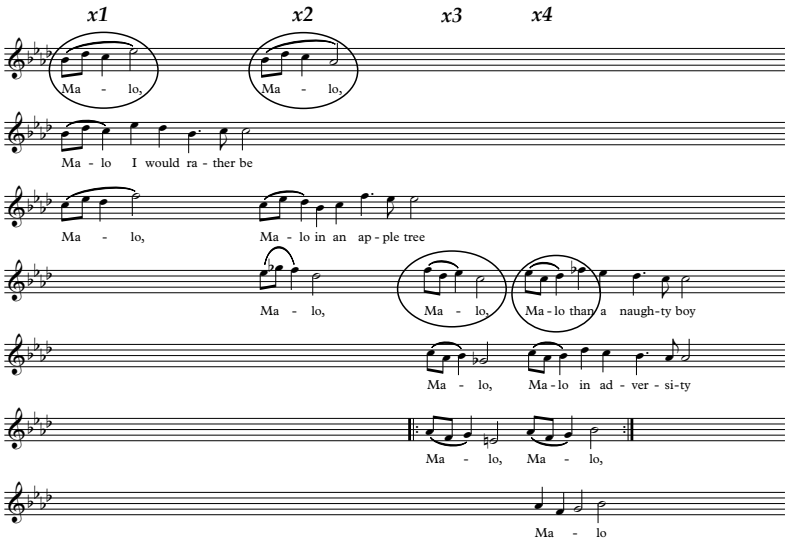


Figure 4.2 Paradigmatic analysis of 'Malo'

The simplicity of the core cell (*x*) is indeed malleable enough to be manipulated in varied positions (see figure 4.2: *x.1, x.2, x.3, x.4*). This micro-variation does not follow any strict logic. On the contrary, the plastic aspect of *x* gives an unpredictable quality to it: while clearly recognisable as a variation of the word 'Malo', *x* is displaced, moved, and kneaded. As presented in figure 4.2, *x* is progressively moved towards the right-hand side of the paradigmatic graph, and is presented more and more insistently in downward shapes (*x.3* and *x.4*). This manipulation exemplifies the tension and contradictions which operate in the text. The malo-cell (*x*) is metamorphosed by play, little by little, into a series of inversions. This fiddling with the micro-variations of the cell, echoes the variational playing upon the meanings of the word 'Malo'. This fragmental aspect of PT1 is besides organised in five musical phrases (fig. 4.3). The first four phrases set the verses of the song, when the last phrase repeats the word 'malo' over and over. The following paradigmatic graph presents these five phrases, which I have labelled as variations of PT1: PT1-1 to PT1-5



Figure 4.3 Paradigmatic presentation of the phrasal construction in 'Malo'

Moreover, the relation between the play-objects (PTs) presents a succession of matches and mismatches (fig. 4.4). The three PTs manifest stratified logics, a play on thirds at PT1, wandering triads at PT2, and pedal notes at PT3. The collision of the three layers creates a 'tonal' ambivalence typical of Benjamin Britten: a music based on triadic relations (PT1 and its thirds, PT2 and its root chords) and polarities (pedal notes and recurrent patterns), but non-tonal in its syntax. For example, the seventh chords between the harp and the voice (between PT1 and PT2 all along the first phrase) is more accidentally (as unexpected encounters of layers) than properly tonal. Additionally, the slightly dissonant collisions take on a diegetic meaning in the scene.[495]

[495] The criteria for the taxonomy of dissonances presented in figure 4.4 is the following: the more the dissonance can be integrated into a tonal vocabulary (e.g. an unresolved seventh chord), the slighter the dissonance will be considered. And conversely.



Figure 4.4 Play-analysis of the motivic matches and mismatches in 'Malo'

Therefore, one is faced with a diegetic children song, with didactic purposes, composed by Miles in order to memorise his Latin, and bound to a school-world of nursery rhymes. The child composition, as a musical topic finds here its epitome. The writing of the three elements has a gauche aspect which reminds one of the clumsiness and the lack of experience of a child's art. The fragmented melody in particular lends a repetitive aspect and a non-developmental quality. There is a kind of pretence lack of sill in such melodic unsophistication (something, once more, quite Stravinskian). As well,

the harmonisation of the bass looks like it is issued from a process of trial and error on a piano or a harp. Its 'basic' and 'unrefined' succession of root chords, as well as the non-functional wandering harmony, emphasises this idea. For a Victorian composition (if one follows the diegetic logic), a more 'refined' harmonisation (i.e. standard for adults) could have been as follows (fig. 4.5). Figure 4.5, and its 'imaginative analysis' (to follow the method of Clemens Kühn[496]), reveals by contrast how much Britten's pitch organisation cannot be limited to tonal terms.

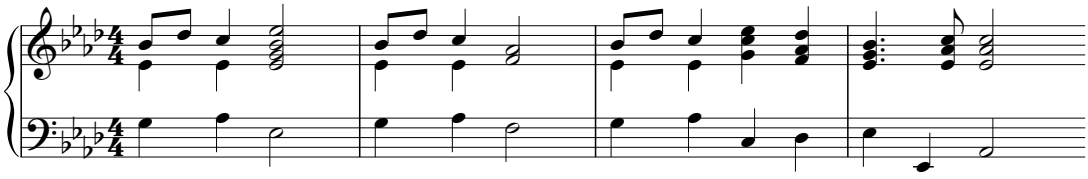


Figure 4.5 'Malo' revisited in tonal ways

The instrumentation itself, and the solo harp accompaniment in particular, gathers images which supplement the topical aspect of this child song. On the one hand, the harp, with its lute-like sounds, refers to Renaissance music (reminiscent of Britten's previous opera *Gloriana* composed just one year before the *Screw* and in which can be found two moving 'Lute songs' accompanied by the harp). On the other hand, it brings to mind the image of the child David playing the harp to King Saul: "He had never, at any rate, been such a little gentleman as when, after our early dinner on this dreadful day, he came round to me and asked if I shouldn't like him, for half an hour, to play to me. David playing to Saul could never have shown a finer sense of the occasion."[497] This extract from Henry James' original novel presents the development of the Governess' imagination before Miles' piano playing (see the following analysis of 'The Piano' scene). For her, Miles is

[496] Clemens Kühn, *Musiktheorie unterrichten, Musik vermitteln: Erfahrungen, Ideen, Methoden* (Bärenreiter, 2006), 7-14.
[497] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, chapter 18.

like David, playing on his instrument to heal one's soul, allowing a lingering doubt on whose soul exactly it is healing in Bly manor. To sum up, the music conjures on one side a youthful world, through nursery song, through the image of David, while using, on the other side, modernist child-art-like techniques. Combined, it creates a playful topical sphere which only accentuates the actual motivic toying at work.

This reference to children composition, and to the modernist aesthetics it implies, gives another insight to the pseudo-tonal matches and mismatches of the three layers analysed in figure 4.4. Rehearsal 51 on the score (see 4.4) shows these childlike nonsensical juxtapositions at work with a play-testing harmonisation which clashes with the tune's tonal implications. At rehearsal 53 (see also 4.4), Britten goes further. The mismatching false relations (between E and Eb, A and Ab, B and Bb) result from the layered logics (PT1's thirds, PT2's wandering root chords, PT3's interval widening as demonstrated in figure 4.6). This time, the amount of conflicts between layers generates a darker atmosphere, which may point towards secrecy and suffering. These collisions may also exemplify the conflicting situation of Miles. Similarly, the development of PT3 may hint at a hidden (ghostly?) presence in the background of the song.

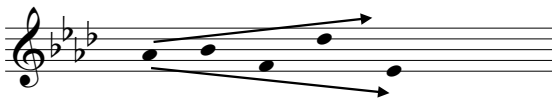


Figure 4.6 PT3 at rehearsal 53.

These conjunctions and disjunctions of the three layers, the nonsensical relations designed out of their variational manipulation, and the enigmatic semiotic it generates, is

the musical equivalent of what has been analysed in the text of 'Malo'. By toying with material and exploring the room between their limitations, Britten gives here again another example of his play. These playful and gameful manipulations happen furthermore in childlike topical contexts: children song, children composition, playground-like fugues, and schoolroom lessons. These two aspects—the motivic toying and its inclusion within play-situations on stage—produces, in James' elusive story, an increased sense of enigma. Why is Miles singing this song? Is it to express his distress, or is the song really a mere didactic exercise? Who composed it: Miles, Quint, or even the Governess ("Did I teach you that?")? The lack of clarity about what is actually happening only emphasises the enigmatic aspect of the text. The nonsensical juxtaposition of different prepositions ("I would rather be"; "in an apple-tree"; etc.) looks as if one is facing a haiku or a cryptic crossword. Moreover, the music itself works as a web of quotations (fig. 4.7):

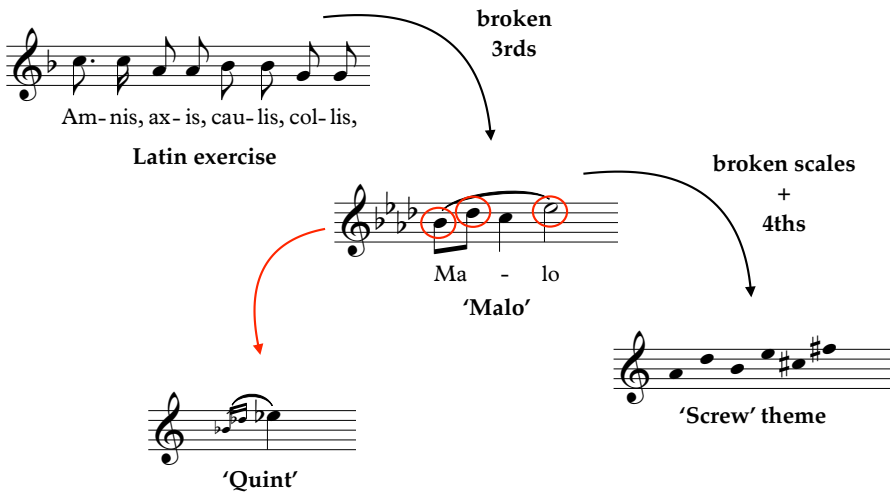


Figure 4.7 Web of references in 'Malo'

Many parallel relations are encompassed in the simplicity of 'Malo' (another manifestation of Britten's lusory attitude). The third-like interval has a direct relation to

the previous Latin song 'Amnis, axis, caulis, collis'; the hidden fourths refer to the permeating aspect of the screw theme, which drives like a ghost any utterance of the opera;[498] three notes of four are a quotation of Quint's celesta motif. Besides, one has to note the uncanny relation between the *fifth*-focused 'screw' theme and the very name of the ghost, Peter *Quint*. The artistry of the *Screw* creates many semiotic interpretations in a dense web of intricate possibilities. This is the case of James' original novella, as analysed by Lapoujade or Thrailkill, and also with Britten and Piper's opera, whose playful aesthetic reinforces the complex elusiveness of this enigmatic story.

4.3 Uncanny toys: Flora's lullaby

Miles' song has its symmetrical counterpart in Flora's lullaby in the following scene ('The Lake'). This scene opens with a series of bitonal trumpet-call-like arpeggios in the woodwinds, on a steady pizzicato line (which is a variation on the fourth-ridden screw theme). The rocking pizzicatti have a barcarolle quality as much as the 'trumpet calls' evoke a military soundscape. The barcarolle genre and the military topic trope together into a warship connotation. If one adds to this Britten's toyful manipulation and combination of self-constraint layers, these naval evocations take on a toy-like symbolism. Concomitantly, this toy-warship parallels Flora's toy boat that she builds out of pieces of wood. In James' description, Flora's construction of her toy happens by *bricolage* of surrounding objects. More, her gestures are not dissimilar to turning the screw:

> She had picked up a small flat piece of wood, which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place. (Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, end of chapter 6)

[498] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 179-180.

The way in which Flora makes her boat symbolises the two aspects of the construction of enigmatic clues through play, as already encountered in the analysis of 'Malo'. Firstly, her manipulation of objects resounds with the musical toying of Britten (and the textual toying of Piper), with the confusing semiotics which emerge out of this autotelic play. Secondly, the activity of play itself is double-faced and ambiguous: it is unclear if Flora really plays, or if this is a reaction to the putative apparition of Miss Jessel on the other side of the lake (she plays either to distract herself from the danger, or to distract the Governess from noticing it).

Another toy, however, takes a central symbolic place into Flora's *manipulations* (literal handling of toys, and figurative manoeuvring of adults through play). This object is Flora's doll, an anthropomorphic mirror to the body of the little girl, through which the scene takes an uncanny turn. According to Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, the uncanny is expressed by a "duplicity [...] with the familiar", and presents, among other things, the following forms: repetition, odd coincidences, animism, anthropomorphism, automatism, death drive, or ghosts.[499] The 'un-*canny*' (etymologically, beyond one's *ken*, un-*known*), is reinforced by the screw-like fourth-intervals which infuse the melodic line of the song. In front of this serene scene by the lake, as in Lapoujade's words quoted earlier, "Suddenly another world appears. It is the same garden, the same children, but everything has changed."[500] Flora's doll acts in a polysemous way. It is Winnicott's "transitional object" and Vygotsky's "pivot" which offers security and comfort; the object she paradoxically comforts herself through her lullaby, mimicking a mother's care.[501] Besides**,** the doll symbolically reveals how much Flora is herself a puppet in the situation,

[499] Andrew Bennett & Nicholas Royle, "Uncanny", in their *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Pearson, 2009), 41.
[500] Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*, 125.
[501] Winnicott, Donald, W., *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock, 1971); Lev Vygostky, *Mind in Society, The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978).

under pressure from the adults, the Governess and Miss Jessel. But, as always in the *Screw*, the reverse might also be true: when Flora lulls her doll, does she not lull the Governess out of her suspicion of the presence of Miss Jessel? Indeed, for Rupprecht, "the ghosts may be luring the children; but the children's song too may be a lure for the adults."[502] Flora mesmerises the audience with a beautiful song of innocent display; she may also be conjuring the ghost through her malicious song. 'Who is the doll?' seems to be the fundamental question of the scene. It could be Flora, the Governess, Miss Jessel, or even the spectator (who, like a doll, is alternatively cajoled and pushed around).

A close look at the text of Flora's lullaby (see 4.9) reveals, as in the case of Miles' mnemonic song, the presence of vague and ambiguous clues. 'Vague' because their meaning is totally inexplicit, and 'ambiguous' because it is unclear if these are actually clues or not. In Miles' song, this uncanny system took the shape of a didactic exercise (which fosters, I argued, a nonsensical formal playfulness). Here, it takes the form of a lullaby, and relies on narrative descriptions, images of sleep, and the fantastical fluidity of dreams. Indeed, this dreamlike narrative is based on a constant transformation of the central character (the doll) and of its surroundings. The doll becomes an eastern queen and the lake a palace. As in 'Malo', the ambiguity lies in the status of the text: is this simple child-imagination or does it hint to Bly's mysteries? Cleverly set up by Piper, many textual elements act as potential pointers: the lying doll may represent the dead ghost; the Turkish guard may be Jessel, Flora, Miles, or the Governess; "the sea may change" can imply the hidden presence of the ghost in the lake; "nothing shall stay the same" opens to many elusive interpretations; even the name of the doll (the traditional Dolly) might be Miss Jessel's own (perhaps short for Dorothy, or more fitting for her

[502] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 182.

gloomy character, Dolores). The most disturbing mention, however, is to the "dead sea", which refers directly to Flora's mistaken naming of the lake in the previous dialogue. This misidentification is either a childish error (thinking the lake bigger than it is), or an insinuation that Flora cunningly alludes to Miss Jessel's death by drowning in the lake (and perhaps her presence still). Altogether, the whole lullaby narrative about sleep is hinting at ambiguous and symbolic references to death.[503]

The rocking music, made of clashing seconds and glittering sounds of harmonics, calls to mind the lullaby on the one hand, and the barcarolle on the other. This oscillation is ambivalent, for it evokes at once the rocking of the doll and watery gestures. Interestingly, these watery gestures are variations on the initial falling three-notes motive which appeared at the first mention of the "dead sea" in the previous conversation between Flora and the Governess.[504] In consequence, at the crux of the lullaby, the very motive on which most of the accompaniment is constructed, makes an oblique reference to one of the most ambiguous textual elements. Moreover, this accompaniment slowly metamorphoses into Miss Jessel's dreadful motif when the lullaby ends; an uncanny 'odd coincidence', in Bennett and Royle's terms. This simple transition might imply a true correlation. Besides, the omnipresence of the screw theme in the intervallic organisation of the tune raises a central question, observed by Tzetan Todorov: "[T]he secret in Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and powerful force which set the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion."[505] This secret-keeping, according to Christopher Chowrimootoo, is like a Gothic game, "a Radcliffean secret, in which underlying meaning and logic is

[503] To this sleep/death ambiguity (enhanced by the fact that the doll is actually lifeless) may be added an other *solar* symbolic: the "queen of the East" with "short-lived daylights".
[504] These three notes are themselves a result of the closing three-note flicked formula of the accompaniment of the Latin song ("Amnis, axis, caulis, colis", scene 6) and the geography song ("Adriatic and Aegean", scene 7), which both found their source in the subject's closure of the Lesson fugue (variation V).
[505] Quoted in Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 171.

constantly toyed with, and just as constantly undermined."[506] Mixed with the fourth-interval writing, the diatonic tone also evokes the children's musical exercises. Again, it resonates with the Jamesian atmosphere described by Philip Rupprecht: "In fashioning children's songs as naïve diatonic music that interacts with a far more complex-sounding orchestral backdrop, Britten finds an aural equivalent for the double-sidedness of Jamesian screens, curtains, and tapestries. We hear childhood simplicity, and we hear too a mendacious undertow that speaks of corruption."[507] The rocking accompaniment looks like it is an improvisation on the white keys of a keyboard. Once again, Britten builds up the whole accompaniment of the song out of very limited means, i.e. clusters of three diatonic notes going up and down. Britten unfolds this game through a variational exploration of those wandering clusters. Figure 4.8 gives a summary of the conflicting relation between Flora's tune and the meandering two-tone cluster. The play between the two elements creates a pseudo-tonal interaction, typical of Britten. If the encounters between the layers are too volatile and unstable to establish any secure tonality, one cannot stop either to hear patches of tonal implications. But, once again, tonality is not the system which organises pitch relations: it is play which drives the variational layout of the few musical elements, *from which* a pseudo-tonality emerges serendipitously.

[506] Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (University of California Press, 2018), 108.
[507] Rupprecht, *op.cit.*, 167.

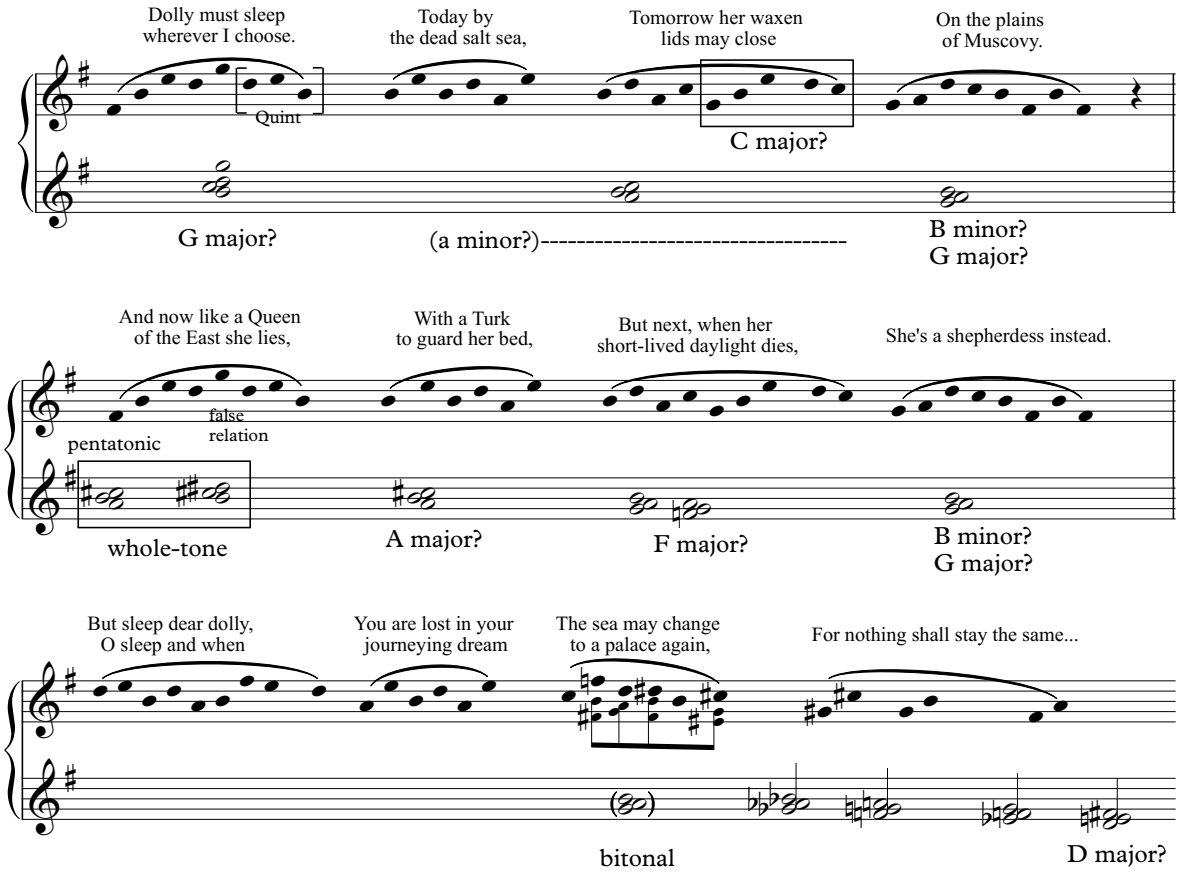


Figure 4.8 Pseudo-tonal relations in Flora's lullaby

Additionally, with its clusters, the accompaniment may remind one of a child experimenting on their household piano, which brings us back to the notion of 'wrong' note explored in chapter 2. These didactic 'errors' take on even more sinister undertones in a ghostly context. Something uncanny is at play. The uncanny is a doubt, not a certainty. It is situated where an object is both familiar and alien, like the doll is to Flora. It develops in a world of ambiguities and ambivalences, with double-faced objects and polysemous symbols. For Freud, when fiction plays with the boundaries of the real and the supernatural, the uncanny finds a powerful valley.[508] And this scene, with its diatonic colours, indeed pretends to be realist. Therefore, 'wrong' notes produce in the *Screw* a

[508] Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny* (Penguin Books, 2003 [tr. David McLintock; 1st ed. 1905]), 155-6.

startling and uncanny atmosphere. The fourth intervals and the Screw-driven vocal utterances are central to it. They also pervade in the orchestral line. The orchestral commentary for example (fig. 4.9b), shows the uncanny effect of 'wrong' notes implied by fourth relations (Britten's version is above; a more traditional G major counterpoint is proposed at the bottom). Similarly, the introductory chord (fig. 4.9a) installs a disturbed G major, with added C, and summarises many topical tropes of this piece: the accompaniment of a lullaby, with watery references (and linked to the "dead sea" utterance), written like a simple diatonic music practice-like piece with uncanny undertones given by dissonances and fourth-and-fifth relations. The apparent innocence of Flora's games only accentuates a terrifying situation. The lullaby (like the lake) hides terrors which might emerge at any moment.



Figure 4.9 Flora's lullaby, Act 1 Scene 7. (a) first bars. (b) Britten's and tonally-'corrected' version of the orchestral comment

To sum up, Flora's lullaby presents many traits in common with Bennett & Royle's list of potential forms the uncanny can take: repetition and automatisation (in the obsessive pseudo-tonal mechanism of the accompaniment), odd coincidences (of musical material with previous and following occurrences), ghosts (Miss Jessel), death drive (the 'dead sea' and the lying doll), and, last but not least, anthropomorphism (fourth-ridden toy-like tunes and perplexing dolls).

4.4 Play with diegesis: cryptic bells and prayers

Several passages from *Screw* show Britten 'toying' with diegetic processes. This is the case of 'The Bells' (Act 2, scene 2). In this scene, the children sing in a churchyard, in front of a tomb, and their song is accompanied by the diegetic bells from the church. As identified by Rupprecht, the children's prayer contains an array of references to other earlier passages of the opera (to the lake scene; the Latin lesson; to the text of Quint's and Jessel's duet. Indeed, according to Rupprecht,

> Aside from the naughtiness of the children, their disrespectful rewriting of the Anglican liturgy, we note their allusion to Quint and his usual haunts in the text [...]. The praise, moreover, is for *him* (Quint?) while the prayer for protection is for her ('[...] May she never be confounded')[509]

Play, here again, boosts the enigma, "The idea of play" for David Crilly, "functions to create an air of disquiet in the scene"[510] It is unclear if the children are just playing; if play is a façade used to hide reality; or more, if play is a cryptic display, a deliberate clue left to unravel the enigma: a revealing mask. The text of the prayer, offers a series of cryptic references which deepens the hermeneutic game of the opera. Less often noticed, however, is a similar strategy in the background bells which accompany the children' prayer.

[509] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 166.
[510] Crilly, "Britten and the Cinematic Frame", 69.

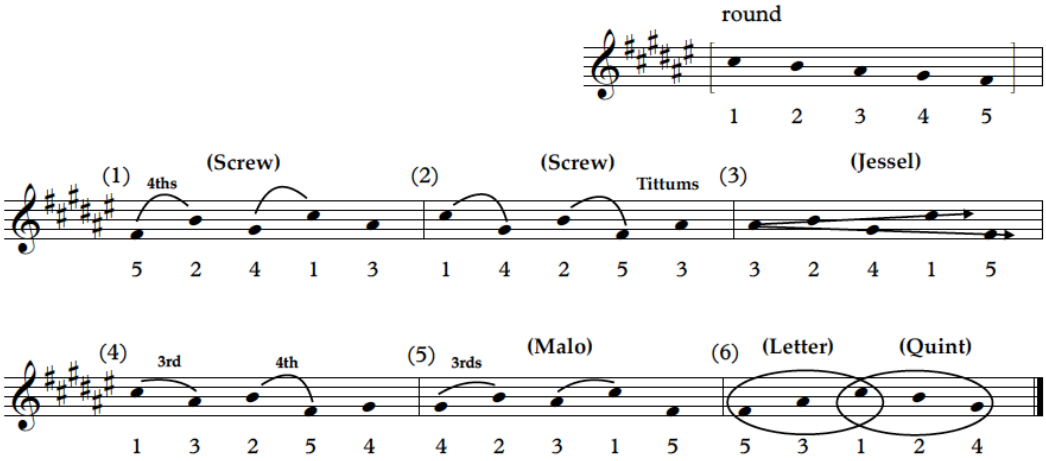


Figure 4.10 Cryptic hints in the change-ringing method

Figure 4.10 summarises this background (the numbering of the bells follows the change-ringing type, with 1 being the treble, and 5 tenor). The traditional 'method' of change-ringing, the British art of ringing bells via a series of permutations, is here distorted to offer a succession of hints towards motifs of the opera. A web of quotation emerges from the six permutations (each row is heard twice, in a traditional handstroke/backstroke ringing fashion). As the children's prayer, whose text equivocated the scene with obscure references to a series of textual parallels, the bells are here hinting at several musical motifs previously heard. The rows rung on the bells remind of the 'Screw' motif (whose fourths becomes ringing 'tittums'), of a Jessel-like mirrored-widening, or of the song 'Malo', among others. As in many scenes of *Screw*, quotations bubble at the surface of diegetic music. There is a coded message inscribed in the bells, as in Dorothy L. Sayers' novel, *The Nine Tailors*. But, it is unclear to whom it is intended. The bells seem to hide a secret: "a secret sign is a sign that we understand was not

intended for us" explains Lapoujade.[511] The Governess, thus, suspected 'horror' in the apparently harmless prayer of the children. A closer listen to the bells would only deepen her doubts.

The foreground and the background (the song and the bells) converge into a cryptic complexity, into a game of hidden references. When scrutinised, those bell patterns let emerge an uncanny situation, because the only rational explanation left seems fantastical. Indeed, if the bells are diegetic and if the pseudo-method-ringing implies five ringers 'playing' in the bell-tower, how can those five people possibly ring 'Malo', 'Quint', or the 'Screw'? Or are these the five symbolic presences of a 'Quint = 5' equation? Uncanniness is the realm of coincidences, and in fiction, as described by Freud, coincidences can be easily multiplied.[512] The power of *Screw*'s uncanniness is to stay in an apparently realistic set up, and never fully confirm any fantastic option which could dissolve the uncanny in a world of magic. Change-ringing, children's song, and recitatives transpose into music this *realism* of the situation, a realm where ambulatory processes should lead to truth, according to the pragmatic method of William James. But, in fiction, these are chaotic processes in a complex but elliptic web of relations which lead to the coexistence of *several* pragmatic truths. The *Screw* traps the listener in a constant paradox where one is continuously encouraged to reconstruct what happens via thwarted patches of experience with a profusion of false leads, in a game of quotations. Yet, it is impossible to say which leads are the false ones. One thing is certain, however: that is that *not everything can be true at the same time*. Indeed, Britten's music here pushes pragmatism into a corner: by playing down many contradictory clues, it fosters different ambulatory processes. Because experiencing is necessarily a filtering of the

[511] "un signe secret est un signe dont on comprend qu'il ne nous était pas destiné", Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*, 139; my translation.
[512] Freud, *The Uncanny*.

profusion of pieces of information present in the music and the text, simultaneous ambulatory processes end up with different understanding of the situation. And these conflicting understandings may change with each new listening. This is a game which can endlessly be replayed, without exhaustion.

Britten, then, is playing with diegesis. Once again, his tinkering with signification happens in terms of toying: of manipulating the diegetic environment to create distortions, but not coherence. Only the collision of signifiers creates a potential for interpretation for the Governess and the listener. Crilly, who links Britten's art with cinematic techniques, offers a similar analysis when he compares Britten to Einsenstein's creation of meaning by colliding shots via juxtapositions.[513] For Crilly, 'The bells' is typically cinematic in its diatonic vs complex opposition between the different musical strata. The shifts of perspective described by Crilly recall on that matter the perspectivism of Henry James: "frequents shifts of perspective [are] similar to the shifts in depth of field on a camera lens, which enable the perceiver to alternately focus upon the foreground and background of a particular dramatic scene."[514] James and Britten share the same interest for shifting surfaces and sounds, and disposing them in order to provoke the most pragmatic elusiveness. In sum, Britten explores a zone of interaction between foreground and background sounds, via games of quotations which bamboozle semiotics and clouds the ambulatory process of interpretation.

4.5 Play with authorship: Miles' piano-playing

> We lived in a cloud of music and love and success and private theatricals. The musical sense in each of the children was of the quickest, but the elder in especial had a marvellous knack of catching and repeating. The schoolroom piano broke into all gruesome fancies; and when that failed there were confabulations in corners, with a

[513] Crilly, "Britten and the Cinematic Frame", 59.
[514] *Ibid.*, 63.

> sequel of one of them going out in the highest spirits in order to 'come in' as something new. (Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, chapter 9).

In the opening of 'Variation XIII' in the second act of *Screw*, another diegetic situation is played with by Britten. Miles practices his piano under the supervision and admiration of the Governess and Mrs. Grose. Nicholas McKay, in a study of this scene, questions the "dialogical exchange between twentieth-century tonal harmony (both neo-classic and serial) and eighteenth-century genres."[515] In his analysis, inspired from topic theory and diegetic concerns, McKay describes the "banal technical fingering exercise" status of Miles' playing.[516] In doing so, McKay detects the same music-exercise topic as scrutinised in chapter 3 of this thesis. In a similar vein, McKay questions the status of 'wrong notes' in this scene: "[Miles] neoclassic faux eighteenth-century harmony (itself a dialogized tonal style conflating eighteenth-century diatonicism with twentieth-century 'wrong notes', cross-matched harmony) is dialogized with faux twentieth-century serialism."[517] As in Flora's lullaby, I interpret these 'wrong notes' at the crossroad of child-art aesthetic, modernist non-tonality, and triggers of uncanniness. In that regard, McKay hints at the great ambiguity of Miles' piano playing: it is between diegetic and non-diegetic; composition, improvisation and exercise; eighteenth-century pastiche and modernism; salon music and soundtrack thriller. Ambiguous genres, ambiguous styles, ambiguous topics, situations, status and authorship, a semiotic analysis of 'The piano' unleashes the complexity of the music, of Britten's toying with signifiers. From that first observation, one can witness the extraordinary economy of means displayed by Britten's music. In Miles' piano playing (which might seem a trivial domestic scene for the

[515] McKay, "Britten and Stravinsky's Neoclassical Operas", 79.
[516] *Ibid.*, 80.
[517] *Ibid.*

inattentive ear and eye)[518] is encapsulated a rich semiotic reconfigurations according to the perspective taken. Once more, Britten's and Piper's adaptation deepen James' project.

"Oh, what a clever boy" claims the Governess and Mrs. Grose, "why, he must have practised very hard, I never knew a little boy so good". There is something Mozart-like in such a Victorian scene where a 'clever' child displays its talents on the domestic piano and is praised for it. The enigmatic Miles may well correspond in a way to the multi-faceted childlikeness of the figure of Mozart for Victorians, as described by Christina Bashford: "Mozart as the prodigy; Mozart the innocent and natural being; Mozart the genius in a constant state of childhood; and Mozart as the divine child."[519] 'Clever' also calls immediately to mind Britten himself, and how much this adjective was abundantly stuck to his music (with the deprecatory undertones shown in Introduction). Indeed, 'cleverness' rings a bell. Cleverness, with its double-faced skill and mischief, makes of Miles a figure similar to Britten. The parallel is drawn especially as the authorship of the two pieces played by Miles is uncertain. Miles might be the diegetic composer (or it might be Quint), especially from the moment one remembers he 'composed' the song 'Malo'. If Miles is the 'composer' of these pieces, his aesthetics of cleverness are comparable to Britten's, the child prodigy, criticised in the 1930s for being too 'clever'. The Miles-Britten compositional parallel may well be pushed further. In Britten's own juvenilia, for example, is found a manuscript which bears striking similarities with Miles' piece. This piece is the *Grand Sonata in C minor*, composed in 1926 by a 13 year old Britten.[520] Fascinatingly, when composing Miles' piano piece,

[518] "Of the sixteen short scenes one or two are rather superfluous, and one at least undesignedly comic—the one in which young Miles, quite the little virtuoso, gives us of his best at the piano; long before the recital was over I found myself wondering whether the scene of the dramatic action was really Bly Hall or the Wigmore Hall." (Ernest Newman, "Some Don'ts for Librettists", *The Sunday Times,* 10 October 1954).
[519] Christina Bashford, "Varieties of Childhood: John Ella and the Construction of a Victorian Mozart", in Dorothea Link & Judith Nagley (eds.), *Words About Mozart, Essays in Honour of Stanley Sadie* (The Boydell Press, 2005), 208.
[520] Britten Pears Art Archives: C4/7, juvenilia op. 34 (1926).

Britten went back consciously or unconsciously to the pianistic gestures he used to compose himself as a child. The following figure (4.11) draws a series a parallel between the two pieces.

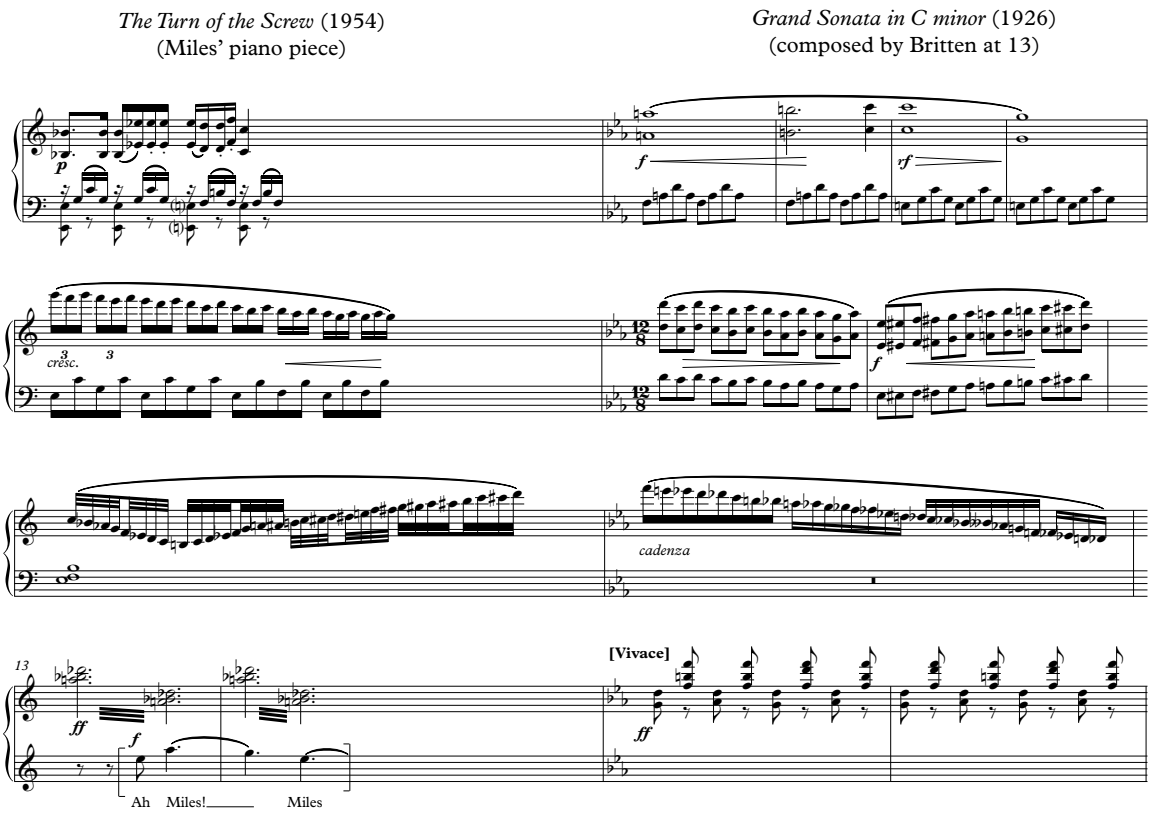


Figure 4.11 Comparison between Miles' piano piece, and Britten's *Grand Sonata in C minor* (1926, 13 years old). Britten Pears Arts archives: C4/7 (© BPA; Boosey & Hawkes, 1954)

After all, Miles' composition summarises the stylistic course of Britten's juvenilia: from eighteenth-century keyboard music to Stravinsky. In 'The Piano' scene is encapsulated the whole development of a child composer. Miles seems to grow into compositional adulthood right in front of our eyes. An adulthood in which the childlike flourishes.

The manuscript of Britten's *Grand Sonata* shows many crossings-out and harmonic anomalies which betray the youthfulness of their author. Such childish

'mistakes' invites one to consider the status of the 'wrong note', and more generally of the status and function of the 'mistakes' in Miles' playing.

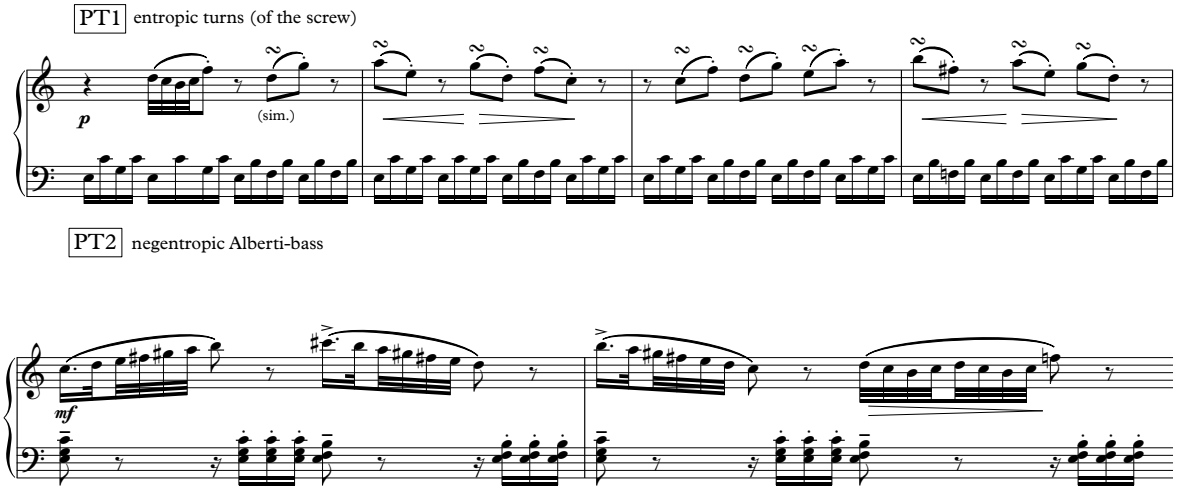


Figure 4.12 Miles' piano piece (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1954)

Peter Evans noted that in Miles' piece, "every detail of his diligently-played Diabelli (or whatever) is tuned slightly awry: neither in harmony nor scansion do the two hands quite correspond and soon little twists of key result in some poker-faced tonality."[521] Indeed, in terms of motivic play-analysis, the piano theme is constructed by the interlocking of two different elements, PT1 and PT2. Even if both belong to a traditional eighteenth-century piano writing, these two motifs (PT1 at the right hand; PT2 at the left, see fig. 4.12) are in fact acting according to two opposite logics. PT1 follows an entropic behaviour (i.e. towards disorder) and explores through variation the possibilities given by gestural displacement. Britten (and Miles) fiddles with the motif, testing the boundaries of its potentialities. There are adventurous dissonances, Prokofiev-like chromatic displacements, inversions, or again whole-tonicisations**.** On the contrary, the second motif (PT2) has a negentropic behaviour (i.e. towards order) and follows a simple two-

[521] Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 212.

chord alternation pattern in an Alberti bass manner. These alternations in PT2 have a flavour of nonsense. On one side, the E pedal at the bass clashes with dominant chord and creates an apparent 'mistake'. On the other side, the Alberti bass is rhythmically wobbly and unsteady. It sounds like Miles is not counting properly all the beats required by his score. The leeway (i.e. the play) between PT1's entropy and PT2's negentropy creates even more dissonances and false relations. Altogether, the exploratory behaviour of PT1 makes it sound modernist, while the negentropy of PT2 sounds mistake-full. The 'wrong notes' of PT1 seem like adventurous exploration of the keyboard; while the 'wrong notes' of PT2 seem to struggle keeping the eighteenth-century Alberti bass in place. The overall tension between these two different and paradoxical natures of dissonance creates a confused and mixed mood. This hybrid piano piece, half-sight-read, half-improvised, manifests the double-faced character of Miles, at the same time immature (making mistakes in the left hand) but also 'enfant terrible (a modernist composer in the right hand). Additionally, the general atmosphere of the piano piece is an elegant and serene music articulated with care by the young pianist. Again, this is in contradiction with the two natures of dissonance. After all, the score indication, "easy with care", sounds ironically opposed to left-hand mistakes (uneasy) and the right-hand modernist style (careless).

There is in the misalignments between the hands something of a mistake in the *performance* of a young boy (no matter how 'clever' and 'good' he is). After all, the fictional score might be different from a boy's realisation, and free of dissonances. There might be a mis-*take*, a default in the manipulation which generates the wrong notes. Here again, this 'wrong' manipulation, might not be much were than a 'playful' one. The 'wrong notes' emanate from the lusory attitude discernible in the composition. For example, at rehearsal 87 (fig. 4.13), bitonal relations emerge from the obsessive logic of

the right hand to extend further and further its scales. It looks like Miles imposes on himself a challenge, the rationale of which is to be found in the upwards/downwards physical opportunities given by the keyboard. The resultant increase in tension is echoed in the Governess' vocal line, which plays the same game of extension (fig. 4.13).



Figure 4.13 Parallel extensions between the Governess' line and Miles' piano-playing (© Boosey & Hawkes, 1954)

In the same vein, the 'wrong notes' refer to a certain exuberance, which links back to what has been discussed earlier about the *enfant terrible* figure and the virtuosic display (see chapter 2). Dissonance and exuberance go hand in hand: they like to shock, and be different. Therefore, Miles' playing has links not only with the modernist futurism of Shostakovich's or Prokofiev's piano-playing, but also with romantic associations between virtuosity and demonic possessions. Virtuosity (*virtù*-osity) posits a notion of virtue.[522] But then, it is unclear if the exuberance points towards freedom (a free body),

[522] Joseph Kerman, *Concerto Conversations* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

or more oppression (a ghostly manipulation). There is indeed a queer aspect to Miles' playing, rightly pictured by Marco Emanuele when he says that "The Governess seems the spokesperson for late-Victorian common sense: a boy must be let loose and a certain amount of exuberance is expected of him."[523] Queerness and exuberance, mixed together, hint at a moral questioning of Miles' identity, may it be ghostly or sexually. After all, such a piano scene has links with stereotyped Romantic fantasies of ideas of genius, spirit, and inspiration. Music, in this neo-Romantic conception, has a spirit; but a spirit with ghostly attributes referring as much to the Victorian Gothic than to a ludic modernism with playful aesthetics.

After all, the 'wrong notes' are a way for Britten to give a Jamesian perspective to the scene. Britten's adaptation does not just focus on the Governess' perception and understanding. On the contrary, it broadens the perspective to include the conflicting experiencing of the situation by the children, Mrs. Grose, and the putative ghosts. Firstly, contrarily to other diegetic/non-diegetic superpositions in Britten's operas (as in 'The Bells' or *Gloriana*), such a relation is here crystallised in the diegetic element itself. In other words, the diegetic piano part is infused with non-diegetic 'wrong notes'. What is more, these 'wrong notes' are diegetic distortions of the reality. There resides a critical ambiguity, between diegetic and hallucinatory sounds. There is oddity in what the characters are 'hearing' because, after all, it is strange that a Victorian Governess praises the boy for his Stravinskian playing. The diegetic situation fosters a fundamental anachronism, which confuses the 'realism' of the scene even more. To stay on this perplexing note, one can only be even more befuddled when one realises that Miles' playing doubles the melodies of the singers, which implies either that they know the piece

[523] "La governante sembra la portavoce del senso comune tardo-vittoriano: un ragazzo deve essere lasciato libero e da lui ci si aspetta une certa dose di esuberanza." (Emanuele, *Maschi all'opera*, 339; my translation).

beforehand (but Miles' is listening to them too, during the 'recitatives' sections) or that more uncanniness is at stake.

Finally, all these elements (the entropy/negentropy between the hands, the gestural mis-take on the piano, the self-limitation and obsessive logic, the queerness and exuberance, the perspectival diegetic ambiguity) contribute to an uncanny hunch about these 'wrong notes'. After all, the Governess' claim that "there is no mistake" is a surprising statement on Miles' performance. Modernist, child-art-like or uncanny, the dissonances displayed by Miles' piano-playing stand at a semiotic crossroad. Only one thing can be said for sure: they betray once more Britten's extraordinary lusory economy of means, which finds in the abstruse world of James, its perfect field for action.

As in 'The Bells', the diegetic treatment of 'The Piano' is infused by cryptic references, may they be textual or musical. A close analysis of the the Governess and Mrs. Gross' discussion, which accompanies and is accompanied by Miles' piano-playing, offers a series of textual patches. This play of utterances in the scene hints at various meanings, whose interpretation is left to the listener.

"O what a clever boy" say the Governess and Mrs Grose, while listening to Miles. That sentence can be understood on a direct level of meaning: the boy is 'clever' because he is talented at playing the piano. But that word triggers other possibilities. By being 'clever', he knows too much, and the whole point of the story is to understand what he knows and what we (the Governess and the audience) do not. The Governess and Mrs. Grose carry on: "Yes, there is no mistake". Although, it evokes a first level of meaning which confirms how 'clever' he is (i.e. 'he is very talented'), we cannot help to linking such a claim about how discordant our actual experience of the music is, with a music made of piano-exercises interspersed with wrong notes. So, something is definitely

wrong, and there are mistakes (mis-*takes*), which can be linked to moral issues about Miles' behaviour. His music seems infested by the ghosts' demeanour. "They've come on wonderfully well with you, Miss", declares Mrs. Grose to the Governess. This sentence, again, is at odds with the scenes we are experiencing in Act II, especially 'The Bells' and 'The Bedroom', where the relation between Miles and the Governess is made of mistrust, manipulation and fear. "With such children, anything is possible". This line, expressed by the Governess, is full of implications. For, if the ghosts are real, the impossible seems actually possible. The Governess refers to Miles' piano skills, but keeps hidden horrors ready to be unveiled. "Go on dear, Mrs. Grose is enjoying it. We're all enjoying it." says the Governess as an encouragement for Miles to play even more confidently. Yet, 'all' suggests many perspectives. This word is a crossroad, as many people might be enjoying this song indeed: the Governess, Mrs. Grose, Flora, the audience, or the ghosts. As it appears, the whole text is polluted by ghostly implications and conflicting perspectives on apparent casual scenes of domestic life. The text acts like a polysemous web. As expressed by Lapoujade,

> [The characters] are on the lookout for the slightest hint, the slightest innuendo that will enable them to decipher the system of meaning that others possess implicitly or covertly. This is why all of James' stories are invariably woven with elusive meanings, little vibrations on the edge of imperceptibility.[524]

Affected with such a mystery, our paranoiac minds (as such as The Governess') are endlessly looking for clues in the minutia to understand what is happening. The *Screw* becomes a detective novel.

[524] "Ils [les personnages] sont à l'affut du moindre indice allusion, sous-entendu qui leur permettra de décrypter le système de signification que d'autres possèdent implicitement ou clandestinement. C'est pourquoi tous les récits de James ont invariablement pour trame des significations fuyantes, des petites vibrations à la limite de l'imperceptible." (Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*, 140; my translation)

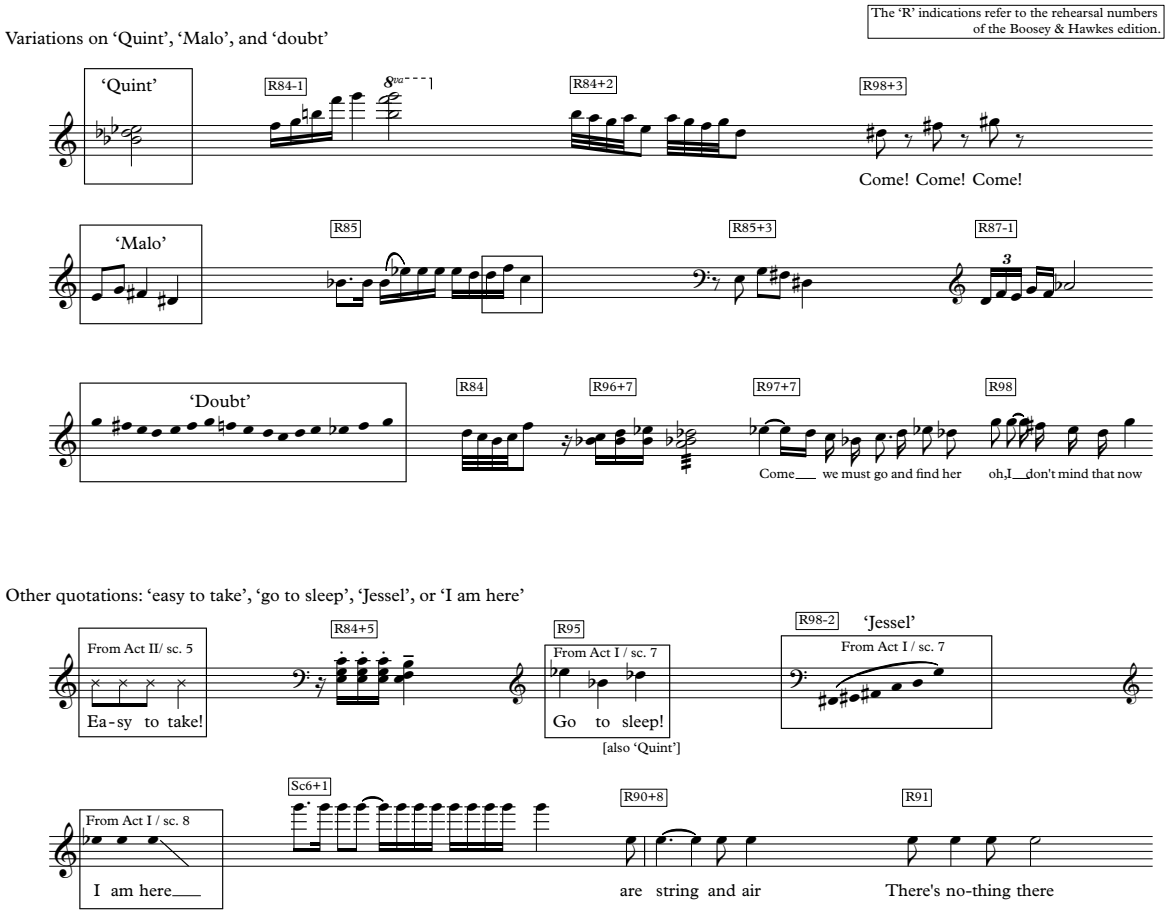


Fig. 4.14 Web of musical quotations in 'The Piano'

In the music too are found a series of hints which deepens the playful mechanics of the story's enigma (fig. 4.14). The music turns into a game of clues: 'Quint', 'Malo', the 'thread or doubt theme',[525] 'easy to take', 'go to sleep', 'I'm here', Miss Jessel's chord, or 'on the paths'. The scene's increasing tension is based in part on the unceasing accumulation of quotations which saturates the semiotic into abstruseness and confuses overmuch the interpretation of the experience in its unfolding. Moreover, there is a playful stylistic derivation of the fourth (or fifth) interval of the 'Screw'. This "thematic force", described by Rupprecht, permeates most of the characters' utterances, and runs

[525] Variably named 'corruption theme' (Evans), 'catalyst theme' (Howards) or 'tutelage theme' (Hindley), or 'thread theme' (Rupprecht), which shows the different conflicting perspectives this theme holds.

through the stylistic variety in this scene.[526] As presented on figure 4.15, these styles vary from 18th-century gruppetti (1); Alberti bass (2); a classical-style tune with repeated notes (3); prayer in organum, praising Miles' virtuosity (4); voice-leading discrepancies, where the pitches which emanate from the fourth intervals create a contrapuntal line of their own (5); or recitative inflexions (6). In a few moments, Britten gathers many stylistic references from a variety of historical periods, all variations on the Screw's fourth interval.

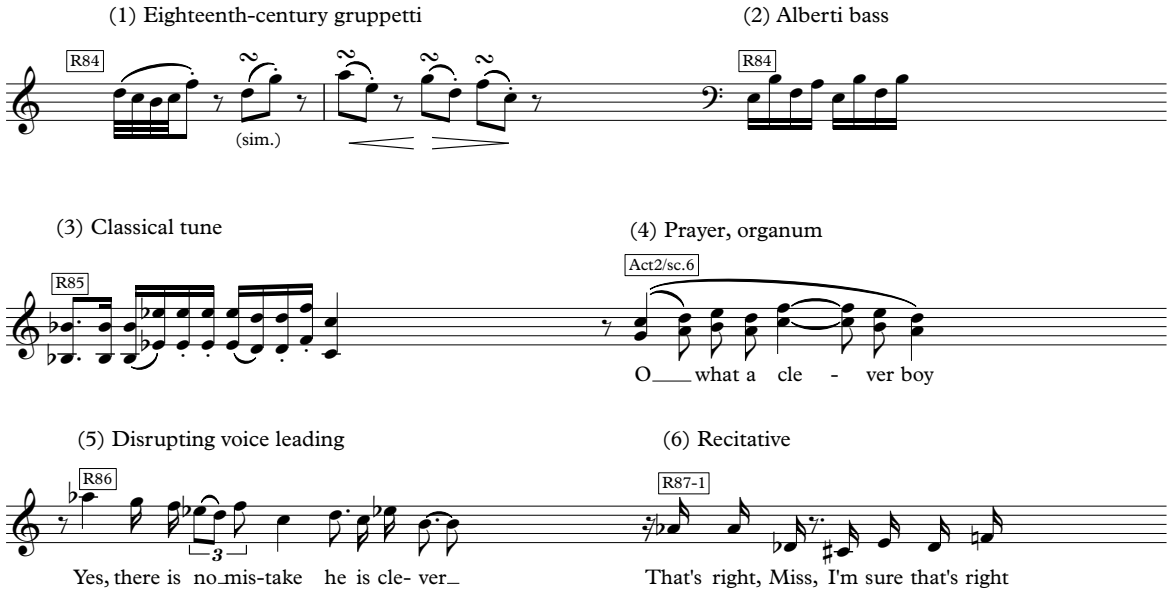


Figure 4.15 Range of styles emerging from the play with a fourth-interval in 'The Piano'

Such a proliferation of clues makes it impossible to hear all the quotations, textual hints, bamboozling diegetic treatments, ambivalent status of the dissonance, cross-fading of genres, and vagueness about the authorship of the music at the same time. Britten's *Screw* tricks the listener with an extremely saturated experience where the process of understanding (as described by William James) is thwarted, making it impossible to embrace altogether the multifarious and contradictory elements of such experience. In

[526] Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 186.

truth, *each new listening of the music can be felt as a radically different experience*. In the end, next to motivic play, vague diegesis and uncanniness, the open-ended authorship of Miles' piano-scene boosts the uncertainty of *Screw*'s ongoing process of discovery and of its playful enigma. Let me now add a last element to that list, and consider how Britten plays with gestural processes with a similar aim in mind.

4.6 Play with gestures: cat's cradle

If the first part of 'The Piano' puts Miles under the spotlight, the second part of the scene focuses on Flora and her cat's cradle game (while Miles carries on practicing his piano). She plays with Mrs. Grose this two-player game in which strings are manipulated and handled into different shapes (see fig. 4.16). There is something akin to Britten's mechanics of play in the manipulative and convertible aspect of the string handling in a game of cat's cradle. The neatness of Britten's music, when accompanying Flora's game, finds a visual and gestural match for its motivic playfulness and its game of ongoing variation on restricted material. The string in cat's cradle, like any toy, offers three crucial elements to consider: movement, limitation, and imagination. 'Movement': as the game is based on the constant transformation of the string. 'Limitation': because the string can only be transformed into a set of shapes which can be handled and tightened up by the hands. 'Imagination': because each form can take a polysemous array of shapes. It shows "a myriad of configurations [...] to fidget with" and is akin, in all these aspects, to 'Hix', the toy analysed in chapter 1 (see fig. 1.6).

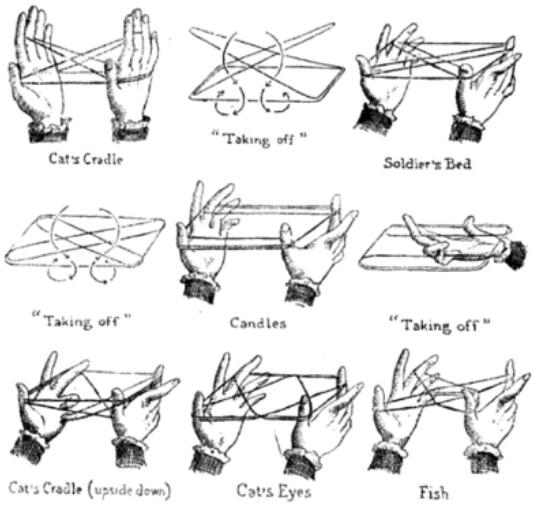


Figure 4.16 Cat's cradle, a game of manipulation[527]

Furthermore, cat's cradle is a game of endurance, where the goal is to carry on the turns as long as possible. There is an excitement in delaying the inevitable failure. Laughter, bodily tensions, nervous shouts, all accompany the moments of unsteadiness which threaten to end the game by undoing the string. Speed is in that sense essential to the game. The faster the game is, the more failure looms, the more thrilling the playing becomes.

The song which accompanies the cat's cradle (initiated by Mrs. Grose with Flora repeating the end of the phrases) is generated from the musical material of the first part of the scene. "O what a *clever* boy, I never knew a little boy so good" becomes "There's a nimble-fingered little girl", then gives place to the cat's cradle song:

> Cradles for cats are string and air
> If we let go, there's nothing there
> But if we're neat and nimble and clever,
> Pussycat's cradle will go on forever.

[527] Reproduction from Alice Bertha Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland With Tunes, Singing-Rhymes, and Methods of Playing According to the Variants Extant and Recorded in Different Parts of the Kingdom*, Vol. 1 (David Nutt, 1894), 62.

The song describes the rules of the game. Funnily enough, it also sounds like a manifesto of Britten's own playful aesthetic. Music is sounds and air. But if we're neat and nimble and clever, music will go on forever. The playful lusory mechanics of Britten's music are indeed a clever toying; a game of problem-solving which echoes Mrs. Grose and Flora's words. The variational aspect of Britten's motivic play too can make a music endlessly go on. And so does Miles on the piano. The following paradigmatic presentation exposes the variations of Miles' piece (fig. 4.17). The left hand plays an ostinato (a triad in arpeggio) while the right hand wanders on the keyboard with sixth chords (another case of left-hand negentropy and right-hand entropy, as in Miles' piano piece discussed above).

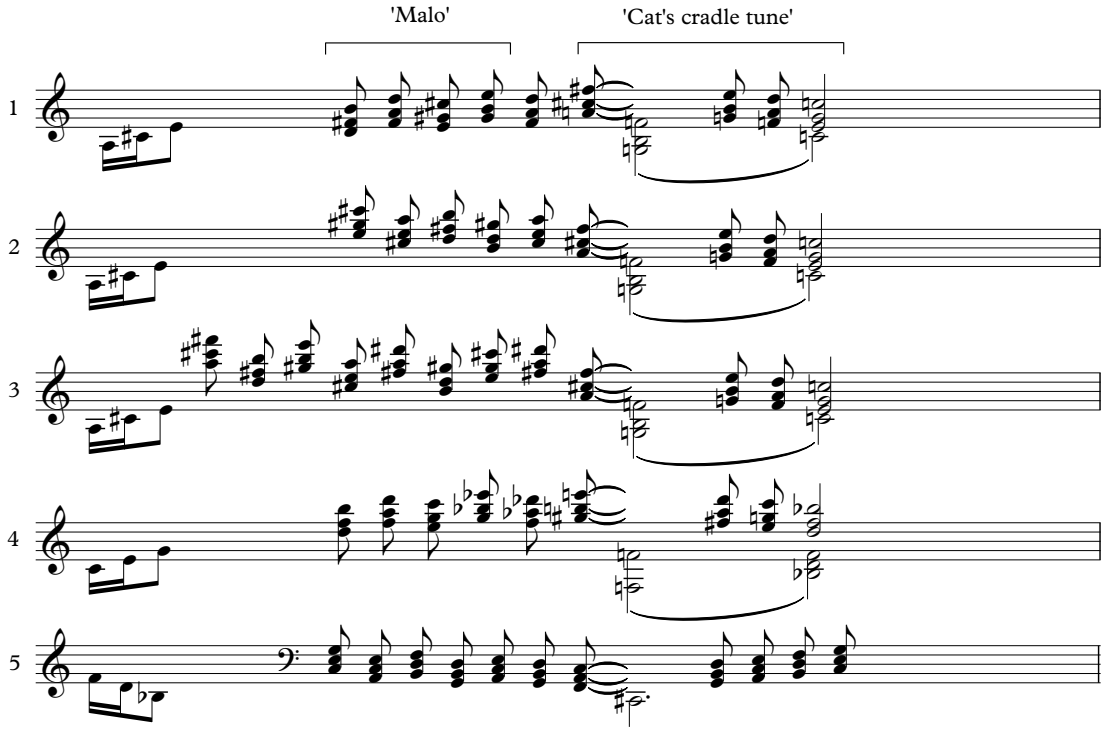


Figure 4.17 Paradigmatic analysis of Miles' piano piece during cat's cradle

Additionally, this muddled A major (then C) comes from the physicality of Miles' piano playing. The musical logic (tonality) surrenders to the logic of the 'pianistic' movements (or perhaps more accurately harp-like). The ascending broken thirds (and

descending ones), refer to the piano study where the physicality of the technique is put forward. The study, as a genre, shares many of the characteristics of motivic play. It is a game of constraints, close to Britten's economy of means and playful toying with material, based on variations. Indeed, in Miles' playing, the right hand is displaced on the keyboard, and the variations emanate from the hand-gesture logic. There is a play in this physicality, a play of inversions (as well as of prolongation). After ascending in the first phrase, the right hand explores chordal broken thirds downwards. Then, in the fifth phrase, the two hands are crossed, in a clever play with the body, an unexpected move which pushes the constraints further. In short, Britten plays with the bodily limitations of his material. Furthermore, this play with bodily constraints takes a symbolic turn. When Flora puts Mrs. Grose to sleep, the pianistic body of Miles is freer and freer, his virtuosity unleashed, his modernism at hand. Miles frees himself from the limits of his game by pushing it constantly further. Symbolically, he frees himself from his Victorian education, from his disciplined body shaped by bows and studies for piano. After all, if Quint is the inspiration of that liberation (the true 'composer' behind Miles' freedom), this bodily liberation symbolically becomes either a sexual liberation (Quint as a liberator) or a lure (Quint as a menace).

If this was all, it would not be the *Screw*. Observed differently, the study-like parallel sixth-chords are a hidden reiteration of 'Malo'. As in Miles' piano piece, the quotation of 'Malo' (composed by Miles) casts doubt on the authorship of the piece played, which opens up a myriad of speculations: is it Miles' composition / it is an uncanny presence of Quint / Quint wrote the piano pieces and 'Malo' / Miles composed 'Malo' himself, inspired by the piano exercises he daily practises / and so on. Again, the screw carries on turning. Let me go even further. If 'Malo' is present at the beginning of the motif, the cadential move which ends each phrase/variation is inspired from the cat's

cradle melodic line. If this is the case, the speculation turns towards a more improvisatory skill displayed by Miles, who throws together in his piece the song he hears around him, used as an occasion to play on the keyboard.

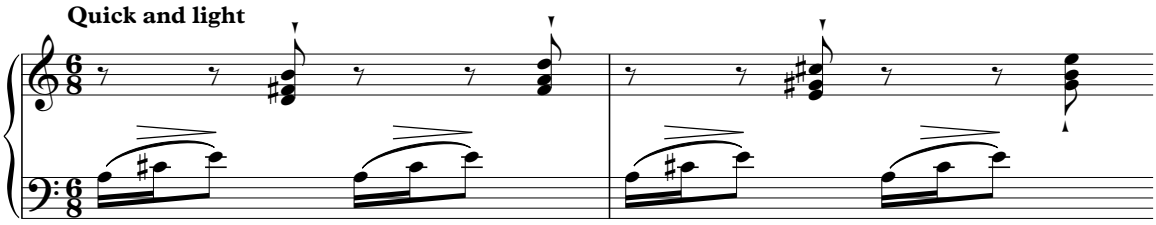


Figure 4.18 Miles' piano gestures as evocations of cat's cradles

The cat's cradle and the piano-playing both present playful and lusory gestures. Their juxtaposition by Britten and Piper encourages an analogy to be made between the two gestures (fig. 4.18). If Miles' piano playing is analogical to manipulating a cat's cradle, a certain number of parameters can be put forward. Miles' hands inversion exemplifies the hand inversions of the cat's cradle players. Similarly, the left-hand motive of the piano (a quick triadic arpeggio gesture) exemplifies the curved cursory movements of cat's cradle. Likewise, the tempo indication, 'quick and light', exemplifies the agility and the manoeuvrability of the string game. The piano writing, with its arpeggios and parallel sixth-chords also recalls a harp writing. The harp exemplifies a nimble-fingering of strings, like cat's cradle. In the same way, there is in the music itself an excitement similar to the failure-avoiding attitude of the game of cat's cradle. The sudden hurried rhythms and the play of prolongations are one aspect of it. The cadential false relation is another. Indeed, the cadence which concludes Miles' roguish variations presents a F#/F♮ conflict between the hands. The danger looms, happily solved into the C major chord stability. At last, the cadential clash, and the chord displacements on the keyboard which introduce bitonal relations, exemplify another characteristic of a string: its elasticity.

The cat's cradle gesture and the sonic gesture of Miles' keyboard playing are analogical. These are playful gestures (i.e. which manipulates constrained objects in a lusory attitude); mimetic gestures (of one another); gestures of creativity. All things considered, the string of cat's cradle becomes as powerful a symbol as the screw itself. It is the string of manipulation; the instrument of the puppeteer; the strings of Miles' piano; a spider's web. Flora's game is a manipulation indeed, because she hypnotises Mrs Grose with cat's cradles as Miles distracts the Governess with his piano playing. More frighteningly, Flora, accompanied by Miles Quint-like arpeggios, sings to her housekeeper the same lullaby she sang in 'The Lake' to her doll. As earlier, an ambiguous game of agency is afoot. Once more, the identity of the puppeteer stays enigmatic.

Through these diverse snapshots of *The Turn of the Screw*, I have described how Britten's playful aesthetic reinforces the enigmatic experience of this opera. There is, to start with, an abundance of topics of childhood and play (child-art, children games, children songs) which are typical of James and Britten's worlds. There also are many pivotal objects, malleable elements from the text (words, sentences) and the music (sounds, styles, topics, errors) which create ceaseless polysemy. These convertible objects crystallise in them many conflictual meanings, and the juxtaposition or intertextual reference between these objects throughout the opera deepens the confusion. Therefore, a game of agency is played by the characters of the opera, the audience, and the critics, in the impossible discovery of truth. As shown above, the opera makes extensive use of ludic material: motivic toying; uncanny toys; cryptic hints in the diegetic material; unclear authorship of the variety of child-art performed by Miles and Flora; or gestural playfulness of piano writing in analogy with cat's cradle fiddling. Britten combines here many lessons learned from his ludic-modernist masters like Ravel,

Stravinsky, or Prokofiev. Playful mechanics and playful topics are fantastic generators of mobile signifiers; they are powerful tools to give life to enigma. And play, conversely, is a powerful tool to analyse these processes.

4.7 (Conclusion) Carrying on turning the screw: Jonathan Kent's Glyndebourne 2006 production

Altogether, this chapter gave a new perspective both on what *Screw* means and how this is achieved. It explored, via play, the ambivalent shift between the first and second story. It has shown how both coexist playfully, and that no choice is really to be made between the two alternatives. I also accentuated the playful shift of perspective in which the listener is invited, looking at the scene alternatively through the eyes of the different protagonists. Play led equally to discussing the game of identification at work in *Screw*: if Miles is Britten; if Miles is a composer too; who is composing the music of *Screw*; and asking for a pragmatic consideration of the spectral presences. The opera, via play, breaks the boundaries of the stage, and breaks the boundaries of being, turning humans into ghosts, and ghosts into humans.

To question the legacy of Britten's play in *Screw*, and to query how such a play can be carried on aesthetically on stage, the present chapter now turns to a study of Jonathan Kent's 2006 Glyndebourne production of *The Turn of the Screw*, which found a way to match on stage the ludic aesthetics of the opera and novella. For Kent, the opera presents "an absolute economy of means. It rings endless changes. [...] it is a phenomenal musical achievement, a sort of perfect artefact."[528] Kent's staging, which transposes Bly manor into a 1950s set (the decade when Britten's *Screw* was created), discloses a playful

[528] Jonathan Kent in Glyndebourne's promotional video, "Introducing the Turn of the Screw", YouTube (26 August 2011) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kavFPZHCBHg]. Accessed the 15 April 2024.

aesthetic: a dollhouse style, a polysemous use of props, a room for play in a variational rotating set, a general economy of means, and a child-like world of schoolrooms, drawings, toys, model trains, and hobby-horses.

To start with, there is a dollhouse-like aspect to the staging, as observable on figure 4.19, conferred by the disposition of the props. These tables, armchairs, sofas, or hobby-horses, are like islands in a general emptiness, or toys in a box-like stage. The fourth-wall becomes the open wall of a doll-house; and a theatre in the theatre unfurls. Like toys, the props are in motion between each scene, being constantly reorganised in new configurations to depict new sceneries. There is a 'room for play' between these props. This room is the stage itself. But, there is also an uncanny aspect which emerges from it, as the rotating set gives the impression than some unknown force puts the house furniture in motion. Either some invisible child moves the props, or else the props have a life of their own. Conversely, the doll-likeness of the characters mirrors these animated object. All the elements of the stage, human and non-human, seem like trapped in a box, stuck into a cruel game.

At the centre of the staging is a glass wall (designed by Paul Brown), which, like Britten's screw-motif, rotates with each variation (fig. 4.19). The glass-wall rotates around two axes, can be lowered and raised, and its window-panels opened. All these possibilities of mechanical movement give a *play* to it. Indeed, Kent and Brown play with the limited and convertible movements afforded by the wall-glass, as Britten plays with the 'movement' afforded by the screw-motif. Once again, Henry James' 'screw' is made literal by the presence of a toy-like feature. Kent does on stage what Britten does with sounds. His playing provokes the emergence of a polysemy: the wall-glass becomes in turns a French window, a conservatory, a lake, a stained-glass, and so on (see the series of scenes show no fig. 4.19). The lightning, in particular, contributes to revealing the

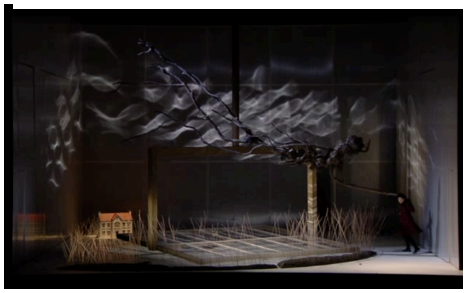
polysemous capacities of the glass-wall. Moreover, the glass-wall does not just set the different scenes and display a visual game of variations, it also bears more symbolic possibilities, as expressed by Brown: "The basic set is a rotating, revolving, and tipping glass-wall. It is aiming to be the membrane, the barrier between these different worlds, between reality and dream, between sanity and madness, between nature, the inside, and the outside."[529] The glass-wall epitomises the playful signifier, akin to the mobility of the screw.



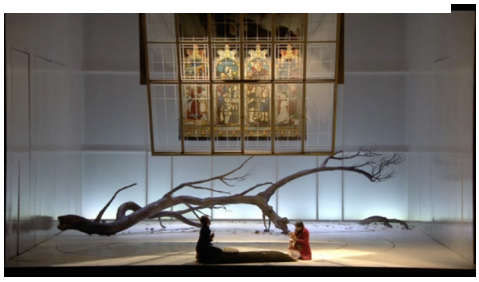
The glass-wall as a French window (Act 1, scene 2)



The glass-wall as a conservatory (Act 1, scene 4)



The glass-wall as a lake (Act 1, scene 7)



The glass-wall as a stained-glass (Act 2, scene 2)

Figure 4.19 Jonathan Kent's staging at the Glyndebourne Festival in 2011
(© Ducale snc di Marco Matalon e c.)

In these two aspects (the dollhouse impression and the central polysemous glass-wall) are found a spartan economy of means. On the one hand, the dollhouse style allows a stripped down set which focuses on few props. On the other, the glass-wall in constant metamorphosis is the epitome of toyful play. These two aspects also lend a non-realistic aesthetic where the machinery and the mechanisms of the stage are exposed. There is an

[529] *Ibid.*

assumed artificiality in the dollhouse staging as much as in the lusory semiotic game of the self-transforming glass-wall. There is an apparent handicraft which posits itself as a representation of reality, and not as an attempt to make the spectator believe that what is represented *is* real. This is the central aesthetic that Kent shares with Britten, and the next chapter sees the same process at work in the cinematic style of Wes Anderson in comparison to *Noye's Fludde*. In Kent's staging, the theatrical conventions are blatantly disposed in front of our eyes; a theatre in the theatre is disclosed many times (as when Flora plays with her dollhouse in this dollhouse); and there is a toylike aspect of those props and of their choreography in this room for play. In consequence, there is a childlikeness to this staging: with its dollhouse aspect; with its toying with limited props; in the actual presence of toys, drawings, and energetic children dancing and gaming. Economy of means, polysemous objects out of toying with them, and a general childlikeness: here are the points on which Kent's production and Britten's music merge together. Thus, Kent's aesthetic features take the similar function than Britten's in this opera: it endlessly boosts the enigma.



Figure 4.20 'The Lesson': Miles' song 'Malo'

The staging of ‘Malo’, for instance, emphasises Britten’s playful strategies and adds its own salt to the sport of textual and musical references, and to the nonsensical juxtapositions. The wall-glass is positioned and dressed as an educational wall. On it, a ludic poster represents a red hand-mark, the result of an art lesson, or possibly murder (fig. 4.20). There is a triangle of echoes between music, text, and staging. The three of them manifest forms of child-art: the non-academic, pseudo-tonal, and mismatching composition of Miles; the nursery-rhyme-like aspect of his poetry; the ludic painting exercises presented on the wall. At the same time, the uncanny reveals itself as soon as one notices that the red hand-mark on the canvas is adult-sized. Suddenly, doubt emerges. ‘Whose hand is it?’ And the ghosts invade our minds. Miles is not replaying the painting act anymore, but he now seems to be showing a love gesture towards an unknown hand. This ambiguous gesture resonates with the textual play of Miles’ poem. ‘I would rather be’ highlights the double aspect of the two ‘touching’ hands. ‘In an apple-tree’ makes the gesture look like the many representations of Eve extending her hand to pick the forbidden fruit (the red apple, the red hand-mark). In addition, every poster seems to add only uncannier relations with the plot (the married couple; the siren; the tree in the night with two fleeting shadows under it). Then, the third verse, “Than a naughty boy”: if this hand is an adult one, and if Miles’ gesture is a manifestation of love, then this child/adult-love display echoes the self-guilt implied in the poem. “In adversity” emphasises the otherness of the hand mark, and the danger that this clue might represent. The hand, like the screw, like the metamorphosing wall-glass, like the ‘Malo’ motif in the music, and like the word ‘Malo’ in Miles’ mnemonic poetry, is a pivot which crystallises an array of meanings. Those signs echo each other in a complex web. The hand, the gesture, only add more doubt and uncanniness. At the end of his song, Miles comes closer to the

Governess, and tries to reach her cheek with his hand: with his own hand, but with the mysterious red one on the wall too. This ultimate manifestation of love, guilt, or manipulation by Miles towards his teacher, turns the screw one step further.

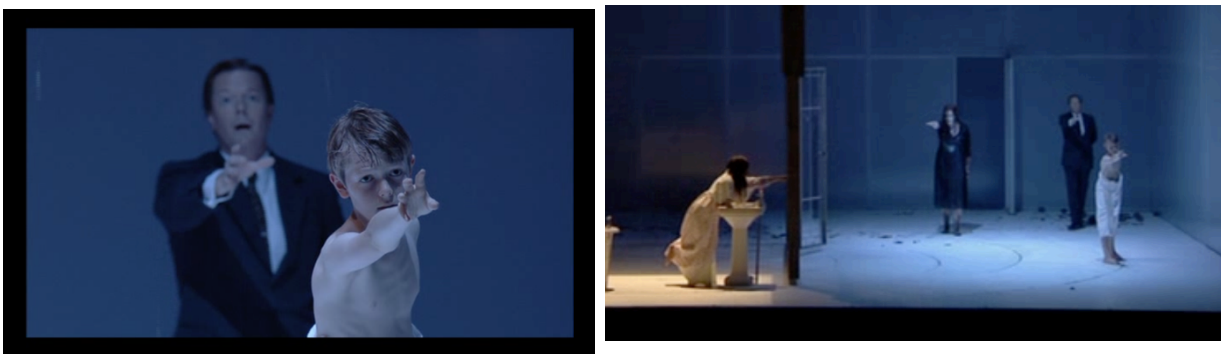


Figure 4.21 Miles' polysemous gesture in 'At Night'

There is a polysemy of that gesture: of the stretched hand reaching the hand-mark on the wall or the cheek of the Governess. It is a gesture of love; a gesture comparing hand sizes; the reaching for the apple. At the end of Act I, this gesture makes a crucial re-apparition and broadens its polysemy. As seen on figure 4.21, there is a complexity in such a tableau. The gesture is equivocal. It denotes longing, the attempt to reach and grasp a desired object. At the same time, it expresses power, manipulation, and possession. Love equivocally takes the shape of a choking gesture. On the left picture of figure 4.21, it is unclear who is longing and who is possessing. The gestures of Miles and Quint are similar, ambiguously desiring and possessing, while at the same time loving and violent. Quint performs the gesture towards Miles. Miles performs it towards us, suddenly less restful in our opera seats. We fear, suddenly, that we are being manipulated too. Or perhaps this is a call for help. The fourth wall collapses, and our comfortable security with it. Miles' gesture prolongs Quint's. Like a puppet, his hand is raised by Quint's invisible string. There is a game of poly-directionality of the gestures, as observable in

the mirrored complexity shown on the right-hand side picture (fig. 4.21). Kent's gesture encapsulates a polyphony of meanings. A polyphony within the tableau, and a polyphony through the opera: this gesture, which was present in 'Malo', is the same which will be brandished to steal the letter.



Figure 4.22 'The Lake': Flora's lullaby

The transition to 'The Lake' scene and to Flora's lullaby is a case in point with the polysemous use of the props. Flora's dollhouse, with which she played in the previous scene, rotates to the back of the stage and now represents the house in the distance (first a miniature toy, now small because of the perspective). This lusory device makes a clever transition from the indoors 'Lesson' scene and the outside 'Lake' one. The wall-glass too transitions from the educational wall of the schoolroom to a flat position which represents the lake (see fig. 4.22 left). The lighting, in particular, uses the glass to represent the reflecting glittering lights on water. Then, as in the novel, Flora plays with pieces of wood. When the crucial mention of "the dead sea" is pronounced, the two sticks are

assembled as a Christian cross, creating a sudden semiotic convergence. Later on, this cross becomes the mast of the wooden boat that Flora constructs. It does not lose, however, the Christian association which we witnessed earlier. These assembled pieces of wood stay at the same time a mast and a cross. Similarly, the boat symbolises the cradle as much as the tomb (see fig. 4.22 right), and hints to the death-related reading which may be made of the text of Flora's lullaby (see discussion earlier). All in all, the staging reinforces the uncanny effect of the text and music. The automatisation of the self-moving props; the odd coincidences of the cross-mast and the metamorphosing doll-house; the ghostly presence of Miss Jessel under the wall-glass/lake; the anthropomorphism of the lying dead doll (lying like Jessel): all concur to create a more intense uncanniness in the scene.



Figure 4.23 'The Bells': Stained-glass

In 'The bell' scene, I presented how Britten encrypts meaning in the pattern of the ringing bells and in the textual corners of the hymn sung by the children. Kent's staging pushes the idea further: the stained-glass itself is an ambiguous cryptic screen (fig. 4.23). On the two central panels of this four-panelled glass, one can see Jesus surrounded by children, a reference to the Gospel, when Jesus blesses the children brought to him and says to his disciples who rebuked them: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belong to such as these." (Matthew 19:14; Luke

18:16). In itself, the image is innocent. Juxtaposed with the ambiguous song and bells, however, it takes on a new array of possible meanings. In these blurred pragmatics, this sentence from Jesus to his disciples seems now addressed to the Governess from the ghosts: "Let the little children come to me, *and do not hinder them*." These are perhaps just coincidences, but the more these accumulate, the more the uncanniness of the situation is felt strongly, which leaves the Governess faced with three solutions: "That this house is poisoned, the children mad or that I am." The last solution offers a continuation of the 'second story' reading. Perhaps, actually, the Governess projects her own subconscious onto her experience and distorts the world which surrounds her into a constant hallucination in which the audience is trapped too. This produces on stage a the perspectivism of Henry James' novels. In the words of David Lapoujade, "the double appears, no longer as a result of a fight, but as a problem or a question that haunts the character."[530]



Figure 4.24 'The Piano': Miles' piano-playing and Flora's cat's cradle

To conclude, in 'The Piano' scene, the set of rotating props grants to the piano a toylike aspect. There is a mechanical symbolism of the piano which emphasises the manipulatory childlikeness, and modernist-futurist aspects identified above in the music. What is more, when the set rotates again and spins into the next scene, one may well see a strong parallel

[530] "Le double apparaît, non plus à la faveur d'un combat, mais d'un problème ou d'une question qui hante le personnage." (Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*, 85; my translation).

between this motion and Flora's manipulation of cat's cradles. Puppets or puppeteers, Miles and Flora express once more, via analogies and clever use of pivotal signifiers, the suspicion that something is afoot.

Again, like the glass-wall, like 'Malo', like the 'Screw' theme, or the stain-glass, those pivotal objects manifest a lusory attitude from their designer (Britten, Piper, Kent). They express a restriction in means on the one hand, and a polysemous broadening on the other. The same plaything points towards many semiotic directions at the same time and increases, via toying and games, the story's enigma.

Chapter 5:

The Behaviour of the Child as an Aesthetic in *Noye's Fludde*

In Britten studies, children are mostly depicted as ciphers for innocence.[531] As a consequence of all the playful elements scrutinised so far in Britten's music, the idea of the child as 'innocent to be corrupted' or 'innocent corrupted' being characteristic of Britten's symbolic use of children is a narrow interpretation of his art. This interpretation is based on a psychologisation of Britten's biography more than a study of the mechanics, thematic, and topics offered to the ear, a study of the reality of the sounds of Britten's music. This chapter shows a more nuanced view of the child in Britten's music, steeped in literary and modernist musical traditions. The chapter conceives the Britten child not in terms of innocence and corruption (with all the religious undertones such conceptions bear), but in terms of play and violence. This study states that there is a particular proximity of children to both violence and play, and that both are culturally intertwined in children's behaviours and in their relation to the world. Play bears a violent component, which is typically childlike. If the previous chapters considered the playful in Britten's oeuvre in general, there is an interesting overlap to explore in the application of playful mechanics and playful topics in *works for children*. Play and violence have been shown as having a close relationship in the previous chapters. In Britten's writing, the articulation between play and violence takes a particular childlike quality. That way, this chapter avoids the easy psychologisations of Britten's attitudes to children, based on the knowledge that Britten acted in ways that now would seem inappropriate towards

[531] See, for example, Stephen Arthur Allen, "'O Hurry the Fêted Spot of Your Deliberate Fall', Death in Britten, 1936-1940", in Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten*, 20-39; or J.P.E. Harper-Scott, "Miles Must Die: Ideological Uses of 'Innocence' in Britten's 'The Turn of the Screw'", in Kennedy, *Literary Britten*, 318-339.

children. In particular, I endeavour thereafter to show how much the playful articulation of cuteness and violence found in *Noye's Fludde* is typical of strategies which are at the core of children literature, music, or films (ranging from Lewis Carroll to Wes Anderson) where light-heartedness and cruelty are endlessly intertwined as traits of the childlike itself.

To start with, and to develop this perspective, I would like to make a short review of what has been said on *Fludde*. There is a relative lack of scholarly interest in *Noye's Fludde* which emanates from the difficulty linking such an opera for children to the traditional matters of 'corrupted innocence', or to themes of seriousness (political aspects, pacifism, queer reading, or oppressed-individual themes). This relative disinterest reflects a generally lesser concern for child-themed works. For example, Arnold Whittall's attempt to link *Fludde* to *Grimes* and other more 'serious' plots, sounds quite out of place when formulated as such: "*Noye's Fludde* is, of all Britten's dramatic works, the one most directly concerned with the theme of survival."[532] If Noah, his family, and their haphazard menagerie survive the God-provoked flood, one can hardly hear this divine rage as the principal aesthetic consideration of the opera, full of struck teacups and children blowing scout-like tunes on bugles. However, as this chapter endeavours to demonstrate, the light-heartedness of *Fludde* is linked with elements of childlike cruelty, symptomatic of children's literature, children's imagination, and children's behaviour. Yet, few elements may play in our hands for investigating the specificity of *Fludde* in Britten's playful aesthetics.

The first element is the mention of the limitating and challenging aspects of writing for children. Erwin Stein notes how Britten "must have felt very much restricted in the scope of the music that was to be composed" while stressing how he "delights in

[532] Whittall, *The Music of Britten & Tippett*, 164.

writing for the keen receptiveness of young players, and audiences; restriction in this field means inspiration to him."[533] Such a description calls to mind the lusory attitude I described in the previous chapters. Britten' self-restriction in means is what makes of *Fludde* a powerful game; because in that opera the limitation of writing parts playable by children is a challenge and a spur for novel compositional design. In the same vein, few studies question the didactics of writing for amateurs, linked to performance aspects,[534] or combined to religious interests.[535] In particular, Jim Coyle develops the noteworthy concept of 'poly-technicality', i.e. the instrumental and vocal writing for a mix of professionals and amateurs, to which *Noye's Fludde* is the "zenith".[536] This chapter pushes these approaches further, down the line of play theories. A case is made in the following sections that composing for amateurs was for Britten a game of self-imposed limitation (a lusory game according to Suits). And this pedagogical game engages with and fosters aesthetics of the childlike.

Then, the motley and heterogeneous aspect of the instrumentation has also drawn many commentaries. In particular Heather Wiebe astutely draws a parallel between the instrumental and stylistic composite quality of the piece, and the animal variety of Noah's ark, a "glorious [musical] hodge-podge, almost as stuffed with colorful diversity as the ark itself, with topoi and quotations that suggest diverse periods and cultural practices: sacred and secular, English and exotic."[537] Indeed, Wiebe describes how the variegated

[533] Stein, Erwin. "Britten's New Opera for Children: 'Noye's Fludde,'" *Tempo*, 48 (1958), 2. See also Eric Roseberry, "The Music of Noye's Fludde", *Tempo*, 49 (1958), 2; Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 273; or Rupprecht, *Tonal Stratification and Conflict*, 4. As well, for recollections from children players, see Wake-Walker, *Time & Concord, Aldeburgh Festival Recollections* (Autograph Books: 1997), 59.
[534] Mary Kennedy, "The Experience of Noye's Fludde: A Church and Community Adventure in Music-Making and Learning," *Music Education Research*, 5/1 (2003), 29-44; Joshua Hawkins Nannestadt, *Benjamin Britten's Noye's Fludde: An Analysis and Repositioning for Contemporary Use* (PhD, Boston University, 2014).
[535] Alessandro Macchia, "Noye's Fludde: L'arca come officina di musica," *Musica Docta* (2014), 134.
[536] Jim Coyle, *An Appraisal of the Poly-technical Works of of Benjamin Britten* (PhD, The University of Sidney, 2019), 106.
[537] Heather Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 172-3.

instrumentation is accompanied by a patchwork of genres: "There are hymns, toy-like dances and marches, the rattling of rigging and the sound of thunder, handbells and organs, bugles, recorders, and drums, pianos, gong, and 'Chinese blocks'."[538] Wiebe, in particular, emphasises the 'machinery-exposed aspect of the staging, linking it to toy-like features: "The sounds of nature – the flood and the storm– were artificially created by the most visible of means, almost toy-like in their effect".[539] When talking about toys, Wiebe puts her finger on a crucial component of Britten's music. This chapter, consequently, pushes such ideas further to perform a musical analysis of *Fludde* through conceptions of the childlike.

For, in terms of musical analysis, these considerations are limited by the same methods observed in the previous chapters: tonalism and top-down ideological thematisations. Interestingly, both methods are found in quite a few studies on *Fludde* in connection with Christian approaches to the work.[540] As in all Britten studies, much fantasist key symbolism is performed by analysts. For example, Wilfrid Mellers comments, "Ritual bells and bugles continue to sound in B flat, the major relative of G minor, which would seem to be Nature's (preconscious) key."[541] Or again: "Two by two the child-animals march into the ark; the Bb tonality of the bugle's summons, a tritone distant from the E minor of man's sinfulness, is perhaps indicative of their natural state of innocence."[542] As hinted at by this last quote, much Christian reading is conflated with key-symbolic analyses, allied with psychological dimensions. For example, commonplace 'dissonance-equals-conflict' presentations are found in connection with

[538] *Ibid.*
[539] Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts*, 172.
[540] Wilfrid Mellers, "Through 'Noye's Fludde'," in Palmer, *The Britten Companion*, 153-160. See also Frances T. Sinclair, *Benjamin Britten's Music for Children: Reflections on Youth and* Innocence, (PhD, University of North Carolina, 1997); Hilary S. Donaldson, *Modernism and the Sacred in the Music of Benjamin Britten*, (PhD, University of Toronto, 2021); on a more cultural note, see Wiebe, *op. cit.*
[541] Mellers, "Through 'Noye's Fludde'," 159-160.
[542] Seymour, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 217.

religious considerations: "The devilish, bitonal F naturals initiate the conflict—between good and evil, between guilt and redemption—which the drama is."[543] Philip Rupprecht's approach counters those tendencies. His description of the tonal stratification in *Noye's Fludde*[544] shows how much key symbolism and tonalism are an over-simplification of the pitch organisation of Britten's opera. In Rupprecht's words, "it is a misleading analytical claim simply to describe the bugle F naturals as 'natural harmonics' or Mixolydian flat sevenths. Both designations mislead by suggesting the relation of all areas of the texture to a putative controlling tonic pitch or modal final."[545] In other words, "such a texture presents a delicate resistance to tonal unity",[546] and "tonal stratification in Britten's music implies a critique of tonal unity itself. The security of a single key center is subverted by the ambiguous presence of more than one center of tonal focus."[547] This again, emphasises the analytical attitude I defended so far in this thesis.

In a nutshell, the few existing studies on *Fludde* offer many elements close to the idea of playful aesthetics: the compositional limitations Britten faced are mentioned (albeit not fully explored), along with the writing for children, the heteroclite instrumentation, or again the toy-like aspect of the staging. In this chapter, through the theory of play, games, and the childlike in Britten's aesthetics, I propose a more comprehensive study of these phenomena and how they help to shape a renewed analysis of this crucial piece in Britten's *oeuvre*.

[543] Wilfrid Mellers, "Through 'Noye's Fludde,'" in Christopher Palmer (ed.), *The Britten Companion* (Faber & Faber, 1984), 155.
[544] See introduction for more discussion on Rupprecht's tonal stratification theory.
[545] Rupprecht, *Tonal Stratification and Conflict*, 10-11.
[546] *Id.*, 12.
[547] *Id.*, 20.

5.1 Cuteness and violence

> I don't want to learn my lesson. / I want to go for a walk / I want to eat up all the cakes / I want to pull the cat's tail / And cut off the squirrel's. / I want to tell everyone off / and send mum standing in the corner.[548]

These opening words of the child in Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* (1919-25) encapsulates much of what childlike literature is about. There is a nursery-rhyme aspect in the repetition of the verses, which expresses the verbal non-refinement of the child. At the same time, the structural repetition of the 'I want' follows a neat logic, at odd with the variety of desires expressed by the child. Some of these desires are harmless (going for a walk), while some are harmful (hurting animals). There is a strange mix of casualness and cruelty which emerges from these lines, and bits of violence become even more cruel for being casual. A pleasure to toy and disrupt anything emanates from the verses, with no real consciousness of the harm done. Lastly, there is a mirroring of the child into the adult, and a reversal of the discipline imposed upon the child into a discipline he wants to impose on Maman. This child dreams of being an adult, with all the adult's agency, and their power to act on their environment.

Such articulations of over-logical grammatical displays, naïve mixtures of playfulness with cruelty, of jolliness with brutality, in a blurring of the distinction between children and adults, is typical of works for children and young teenagers, like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), or Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series (2008). Violence and brutality range in various degrees in these stories, but they are always present as instances of the childlike. Britten's work, especially when dedicated to children, child performers, or child listeners, follows the

[548] "J'ai pas envie de faire ma page. / J'ai envie d'aller me promener. / J'ai envie de manger tous les gâteaux. / J'ai envie de tirer la queue du chat. / Et de couper celle de l'écureuil. / J'ai envie de gronder tout le monde !/ J'ai envie de mettre Maman en pénitence..." (First lines of Ravel's *L'Enfant et les* sortilèges, on a libretto by Colette; my translation).

same pattern. *The Little Sweep* (1949), *Golden Vanity* (1966), or *Noye's Fludde* (1958) are no strangers to these childlike rhetorics. In the last of these, the mixture of natural disasters, storms, floods, and the annihilation of most of the living beings by drowning, contrasts with the ongoing cuteness of the staging and the music. In particular, the human-animal crossover, blended in the childlike, crystallises much of the cute-but-slightly-violent aspect of the opera. Once more, there are many modernist counterparts to *Noye's Fludde* which engage with the animal-like in pieces for children, such as Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, or Janáček's *Little Cunning Vixen*. Cuteness and violence too are entangled in these works. Altogether, violence in Britten's music creeps all over the place, and in particular around children. Many saw there a desire to corrupt children's innocence but, in fact, this violence is the expression of the childlike itself. After all, is not Peter Grimes akin to Lennie, the character from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, who crushes mice by mistake when he tries only to stroke them? The violence of Britten's Peter Grimes, Steinbeck's Lennie Small, or Tournier's Abel Tiffauges emanates from the childlike residues in these characters; from their inability to grow up and discard the naïve mixture of childlike casualness and brutality of the child. To understand Britten's works for children, and the articulation of the cute with residues of casual violence, one must therefore consider the child not as a passive actor, but as a playful-but-dangerous agent. In short, one must take children, and their play, seriously.

In *Noye's Fludde*, the childlike is expressed first of all through the aesthetic category of the cute. Cuteness itself takes in *Fludde* several characteristics: miniaturisation, helplessness, zoomorphism, and a certain form of handcrafted theatrical artificiality. The following paragraphs consider these features in turn. To start with, cuteness emerges out of the elements of miniaturisation which permeate the opera,

especially with conflations of child and adult roles. Miniaturisation is another staple of art for children, from the incredible celebrity of Shirley Temple (whose movies Britten saw with his mother when he was a child), to the toy-soldiers of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. First of all, as in Britten's opera for child performers *The Golden Vanity* (1966), *Fludde* displays child singers impersonating married adults. As seen, Britten delights in such blurring of the adult/child boundary. This mix of children and adults does not just concern matters on stage, but also members of the orchestra. For there, child performers sit beside professional musicians. This assembly emphasises the difference between the two groups (children and adult performers); yet, Britten's orchestration merges them together both stylistically and symbolically.

Some traits of 'adultness' are conveyed by military denotations. The mix of military traits and cuteness (and the emerging tension between these two signifiers) gives to *Noye's Fludde* much of its characteristic taste. This is true of the bugle playing in particular. David Layton, a Gresham friend of Britten famously heard in *Fludde*'s bugles the sounds they use to hear when the military-band of the Officer Training Corps was practicing on the grounds while Britten and Layton were cricketing. For Layton, "Most other English ex-public schoolboys would have similar memories, while others would think of a boy's brigade band marching past on a Sunday morning. The bugle, then, is an instrument evoking boyhood."[549] This typically military instrument, when played by children as in *Fludde*, becomes a military pretence. There is a conceptual dissonance between the military reference of the bugle on the one hand, and its being played by children on the other. As it appears, soldier-like elements come to highlight paradoxically the childlikeness of *Fludde*'s instrumentation. On that account, there is something of a similar military-like display in the children/adult orchestra itself. Its ranks of violins and

[549] Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 382.

recorder players, backed up by drums and percussions, have an army-like association, emphasised by the strange discipline and order of those ranks of children (see pictures on fig. 5.1). Next to the percussion, the descant recorders take on an air of military flutes. In any case, their shrill and 'piccolo'(/small)-like sound are another instance of miniaturisation. The drums too mirror the paradoxical mix of childlike with military, especially with the 'slung mugs', a set of teacups hung on a string and struck with a wooden spoon; a DIY set up which brings to mind scout-like problem-solving not foreign to Britten's playful mechanics of composition.



Figure 5.1 *Noye's Fludde* orchestra for the Orford premiere (Britten Pears Arts archives, PHPN/11/1/13A & PHPN/11/1/15) © Britten Pears Arts archives

Indeed, in addition to the exploration of the child/adult symbolic threshold, Britten's stylistic economy of means highlights too the impression of miniaturisation which transpires in *Fludde*. This economy of means, felt in the instrumentation and the spare contrapuntal texture is linked, as explained in chapter 3, to Britten's playful compositional mechanics. In particular, the permeating presence of simple tunes and motifs work hand in hand with the overall childlikeness of *Fludde*. The many examples to follow in this chapter all epitomise this spare design.

Overlapping with notions of miniaturisation, the cute is also promoted by a certain form of helplessness.[550] There is indeed, in the very nature of children performing, a rawness and unskilled quality of sound. Most children do not play as well as professional adult musicians. However, they are doing their best, and the application children give to their endeavour (notwithstanding the often imperfect result of that effort) creates a sensation of helplessness for those children; it creates a sensation of cuteness. There is in *Fludde* a praise for the amateurish performance. Britten engages with those sounds in terms of creativity. As accounted for by John Bridcut,

> [Britten's] extraordinary talent was to allow for some imprecision and errors, which somehow came to belong to the weft of the work. [...] At one of the first performances, the bugle boys attached to a local Army barracks were not available, owing to prior military commitment, and professional brass players were brought in instead. Mackerras remembers this as a disaster: the adults were of course far better players than the bugle boys, but they brought a professional precision which made the fanfares sound quite wrong.[551]

There is then in *Fludde* a feeling of what Daniel Albright analyses in other pieces by Britten: the wrong becomes right, and the right becomes wrong.[552] In particular, Britten

[550] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
[551] Bridcut, *Britten's Children*, 2006, 234.
[552] Albright, *Music's Monisms*, 144.

uses the helplessness of children's performances as a spur for refashioning his musical drama. This is the case when the motifs played by children resemble music-exercises, therefore opening a semiotic breach and blurring the distinction between right and wrong: the out-of-tune quality and rawness of sound becomes embroiled with the topic of the music-exercise itself (and 'wrong notes' flicker symbolically between aesthetic intent and diegetic mistake). Britten also makes use of the less-skilled quality of children performance to create elements of awe. This is the case of the climax of the 'Alleluia' (R110 on the Boosey & Hawkes score) where bugles, piano, and strings strike a B flat dominant seventh chord (on a E flat bass). This chord is the one uttered several times earlier on by the bugles. This time, however, it is joined by a mass of string players. The rendition of this chord ("*ff* marked" on the score) is in all the recordings terribly out of tune (especially due to the high-pitched A flat). But, this is the point. By playing with the out-of-tuneness of amateur performing, Britten creates a sudden sense of awe. The unexpected massive chord comes as a shock, and its unskilled rendering by children emphasises the blow. In other words, Britten creates via the children's performance a sense of the sublime, in the Burkean understanding of the terms: something titanic and monumental which strikes awe in the listener. Thus, Britten uses the childlike sound for its frightening potential too, and makes of unskilled performing a refashioning of sublime. Writing parts for child musicians is therefore to engage playfully with performance as a risk-taking activity, and to conceive performance as a game. In games, failure and mistakes looms, but there is an enjoyment which comes from the risk of failure.[553] This risk-taking on the composer's part echoes a similar risk-taking in the listener's experience. Indeed, the listener is caught in *Fludde* between two opposites. On the one hand, there is a sensation of security and control from the listener, emphasised by the

[553] See for example Greg Costikyan, *Uncertainty in Games* (MIT Press, 2013); or Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (MIT Press, 2013).

aesthetic elements of the cute by which the child is belittled and put in a symbolic position of being controlled. On the other hand, the out-of-control disruptiveness of the child threatens this security of the listener and its sense of command.

Miniaturisation and helplessness correlate with the zoomorphism of the animal costumes worn by the local schoolchildren. To the child-adult blur is overlapped a playing with the semiotic threshold between the child and the animal. The human-animal/child-animal boundary is fascinating. There is a symbolic frontier to explore between the zoomorphism of humans and the anthropomorphism of animals.[554] Due to their smallness and their neotenous features, children are particularly apt symbols to explore this human/animal relation. Even more, the cute/mischievous symbolism of the child merges with the anthropomorphic appreciations of animals. Of course, animals vary greatly in nature and size. For example, a child costumed as a mouse (see fig. 5.2a) offers many opportunities for blurring signifiers: the child and the mouse's common cuteness, their common clever mischief, their high-pitched noises (on which Britten plays in his 'Kyrie Eleison'), their common smallness (even if the child embodies an enlargement of the animal). Conversely, a child disguised as a lion or an elephant offers very different semiotics. The discrepancy of size between the elephant and the child creates an amusing shrinkage which is a common characteristic of the cute, in link to the process of miniaturisation evoked above. Likewise, the reduction in size accompanies a reduction in threat which accentuates the cuteness of the costume. Similarly, the monstrosity of the lion, of the man-eater creature, contrasts with the helplessness of the child. Here again, threat is transformed into cuteness, as much as cuteness was transformed into threat in

[554] James A. Serpell, "People in Disguise, Anthropomorphism and the Human-Pet Relationship," in Lorraine Daston & Gregg Mitman (eds.), *Thinking with Animals, New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 121-136.

the bugle awe-inspiring example mentioned above. The articulation between the cute and the violence is inscribed in these variations of size. A small animal is cute, when its larger version suddenly takes on frightening features. Indeed, the variation in size offers a childlike play with fearful features. After all, the lion, transformed into a child costume, becomes a harmless creature: it becomes a child.

Ceri Richards' costume design for the first production of *Noye's Fludde* engages with these types of discrepancies between the childlike and the animal-like. Richards' costumes consist of head-dresses only. That is to say that, apart from the economical aspect of this design (which matches many of Britten's economical stylistic concerns), these costumes do not try to hide the child, but emphasise the identity of the carrier as much as the mask they wear. Figure 5.2a shows how these mask/head-dresses highlight the child/animal dichotomy. What can be seen in these costumes are not only the animal, but how the symbolic of the animal confronts and compares the symbolic of the child.[555] Figure 5.2.b manifests how elements of the stage direction draw further parallels between childlike behaviour and animal behaviour. Indeed, the girl on the picture is practicing her one-leg standing bird-like pose. Consequently, there is in these masks and behaviours a revelation of the child/animal threshold. The play with theatrical conventions (the costume visible *as a costume*) echoes the cardboard cut-out of the pasteboard staging; the "selfconsciously artificial props" described by Wiebe.[556] As such, the animals are shown for what they are not (children), as much as the movable set of prop waves are visible for what they represent (a theatrical re-enactment). There is in these theatrical conventions an aesthetic of the apparent, which exposes in plain sight the social-gathering purposes of *Fludde*. Similar strategies are visible in *Let's Make an Opera* and its theatre-in-the-

[555] The use of mask may be parallel to Britten's *Church Parables* composed a decade later, but of which the medievalism of the church-bound *Noye's Fludde* is a predecessor (see Sheppard, *Revealing Masks*, 115-154).
[556] Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Pasts*, 172.

theatre procedure. *Let's Make an Opera* and *Noye's Fludde* share a comparable inclusion of the audience within the performance, via participatory singing which too breaks theatrical realism and exposes to the audience the artificiality of the play.



a



b



c

Figure 5.2 (a) Ceri Richard's sketches for animal headdresses (1958) (b) "Rehearsal photograph of Noye's Fludde, the dove leaves", PHPN/11/1/12, Britten Pears Arts archives (1948) (c) "Production photograph of Noye's Fludde, in the ark", PHPN/11/12/2, Britten Pears Arts archives (c. 1970-1980)

© Britten Pears Arts

After miniaturisation, helplessness, and zoomorphism comes the machinery-exposed feature of the cute. The non-integrated stylistic material of *Fludde* combines with the rawness of sound (and its reference to the miniature, the helpless, and the animal-like). Besides, there is in the assumed artificiality of the staging a non-organic aspect which is typically playful. By 'organic', music critics often mean (often quite cryptically) a form of plant-like arborescence, made of parts linked together in a common biological entity. The different parts of the organisms described by these critics are united by common roots from which their vitality comes. *Fludde* (and perhaps most of Britten's music) has nothing 'organic' of this sort. Indeed, not only does the material come from manifold styles and various social functions (bugles, handbells, hymn-singing,

Sprechgesang, school-like recorders, and so on) but the non-integration and the failure to synthesise this array of material is staged musically. Britten forces the listener to hear the discrepancies in his material. The final eight-part canon (R188), for instance, offers a superposition of handbells, bugles, and hymn-singing, where false relations are deliberately left in to highlight that the integration of the different layers is only partial. The theatrical tricks, and the non-realist artificiality of the music, is made to be heard because the listener is meant to spot the conflicts between layers. Each layer interacts with the other, but the music has its stitching exposed. This has major consequences for the methodological attitude of any analysis of *Fludde*: one must resist tonal integrations of these patches if one wants to understand the strength and particularity of Britten's pitch-organisation and aesthetics. Unsurprisingly, this canon (R118) is one of the very examples on which Philip Rupprecht first introduces his theory of tonal stratification and semi-autonomous strata analysis, required according to him for a fuller appraisal of Britten's music.[557] In *Fludde*, Britten's pseudo-tonality has a direct link with the machinery-exposed aesthetic which in turns points back to cuteness and the childlike. As presented above, the staging also plays with the more or less apparent convention. When in the ark, the head-dresses are in evidence but the faces of the children are not visible anymore (fig. 5.2c). In the ark, the presence of the child disappears, but the trick of this disappearance stays visible. This clever disposition presents, through play from the stage directors' part, another play-apparent disposition which promotes a playful behaviour.

In the music, a similar strategy is played out with the machinery-exposed use of the scalic topic. As explored in chapter 3, the scalic topic refers to the activity of practicing music, with scales and arpeggio displays at their core. This topic is used in many pieces by Britten to refer to the child, its disciplined and school-like exercising.

[557] See discussion of that analysis in introduction, and earlier in this chapter; Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty."

Like the animal costumes, didactic scales (in particular in the strings and recorders) infuse the music, only to emphasise further the threshold between the child performer and the adult one. Wrong notes, in particular, take on an array of significations, from the trick to the didactic error. Together with the bric-a-brac instrumentation, the 'wrong-note' signifier expresses similar features to what I described earlier while analysing Britten's *Psalm 150*. In sum, miniaturisation, helplessness, zoomorphism, and machinery-exposed non-organicity are crucial features of *Noye's Fludde* and participate in establishing a sensation of cuteness, which in turns emphasises the central childlike aesthetics of the piece. As seen, cuteness is entangled with other aspects of violence and danger, via animal impersonations, paradoxical agencies, and childlike elements of disruption.

The articulation between cuteness and casual childlike violence, is found in processes of toying. As described by Ngai, there is a strong connection between the ideas of cuteness and compactness.[558] Shortness and compactness offer to toys the possibility to express cuteness. The cute is therefore a semiotic affordance of the small. If something is small and compact (and Ngai makes parallels with poetry) it is easy to bring it about towards the cute. Consequently, toyification (the act of transforming and simplifying an element of one's environment in order to play with it) intrinsically bears the possibility of the cute. Britten's motivic toying does not make an exception. More accurately, Britten's toying delves into this possibility towards the cute offered by his playful mechanics of composition. In a work for children, especially, Britten's economy in means, reduction in sizes, compact orchestrations, and motivic handling exemplify the cute: the short, the compact, the miniaturised. At the same time, toying exemplifies forms of childlike violence: in its determination to fix things, its anal mismatching, and its stiff over-reliance on absurdist logic. Linked to 'casualised' violence and the cute, this

[558] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 3.

childlike attitude towards toying creates, in turn, a new puzzling articulation at the heart of *Fludde*, that is between order and chaos.

5.2 Order and chaos

Many features explored above articulate elements of order and chaos in balance. As with cuteness and casual violence, both order and chaos emanate from the child's playful behaviour. *Fludde*'s poly-stylistic bric-à-brac of genre and instruments is the first aspect of this order/chaos formulation. Similarly, the writing for child performers and the poor performance of child amateurs (with their inevitable looming mistakes) make of *Fludde* a constant risk-taking activity for any producer, musical director, or stage-manager. The pleasure and enjoyment of this potential for failure (of a potential for chaos) gives to *Fludde* its special flavour. In addition, Britten's playful toying with musical material, with its game of match and mismatch I theorised in chapter 3, unfolds on the verge of neat anal organisation and tendency to disruption; a co-presence typical of a childlike attitude.

In particular, the many tunes played with by Britten in *Noye's Fludde* (hymns, plain-chants, bugle calls, and so on) are as many opportunities to toy with this propensity towards ordering and disordering. For example, R85 offers the startling superposition of the congregational hymn "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" (written by J.B Dykes, son of a ship-builder himself) with the passacaglia bass of the storm. The superposition does not offer a full tonal integration and the presence of many loopholes in the counterpoint (false relations, wrong keys connections, and so on) stops the superposition from becoming a coherent whole. The porosity of this encounter, expressed through wrong notes, offers a rich poly-functional semiotics. The following example (fig. 5.3), presents three types of relation between the layers of the passacaglia/hymn superposition. The first type of

relation between layers describes a complete integration ('perfect match') and labels the full integration of the hymn and the passacaglia bass into a coherent tonal chord. The second type of relation ('tonal recontextualisation') is characteristic of when the layering of the bass and the hymn creates a common chord, however unexpected. This is the case in the first bar of the Bb at the bass which recontextualises the C major chord of the tune into a non-functional dominant seventh. As in the first type (full integration), there is a synthesis given by the fact that the tune and the bass create a recognisable and independent chord, albeit unexpected. The synthesis, however, is too fleeting and disconnected from tonal syntax (the dominant seventh is non-functional) to be described as fully coherent. The third type of relation between layers ('polytonal encounter') outlines an assumed mismatch which resists any coherent integration. This is the case of the last cadence, where the bass swirls around the cadential expectations (see fig. 5.3).

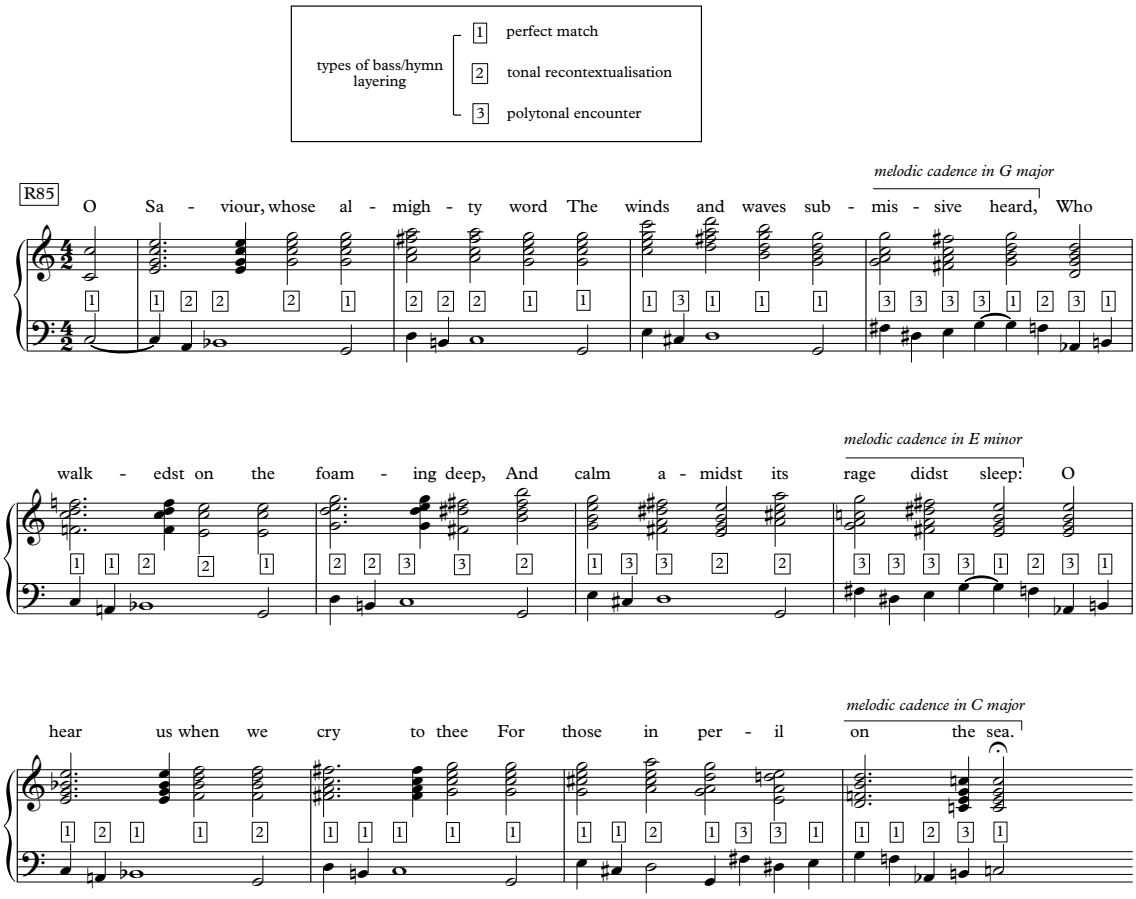


Figure 5.3 Bass/hymn encounters in "The Storm"

In summary, this example shows once more Britten's delight in playing with styles of pitch-organisation: the music constantly shifts from tonal or pseudo-tonal colours to bi-tonal or fully atonal ones. And Britten does so by playing out against each other the logic of Dyke's hymn and of the passacaglia bass. Once more, this interplay offers the analyst a puzzling compositional position from which to consider from Britten's part, who ambivalently plays and is being played. By activating the two logics simultaneously (the hymn, and the bass), Britten observes the creation of surprising outcomes, as much as the listener does. Like a child, Britten winds up the clockwork toy of his passacaglia/hymn layering and lets it go. There is thus a form of pleasure from Britten's part in playing with composition to see what comes out of a mischievous idea. A childlike excitement emerges from such playful mechanics. That excitement corresponds to the unsteady equilibrium between order and chaos that such a layering creates. In that sense, Britten's toying with musical material is akin to the nonsensical limericks of much art for children. Something slightly absurd materialises out of this layering; something at the same times brutal and cute; chaotic and neatly ordered. More precisely, these two categorial pairs are in semiotic interaction.

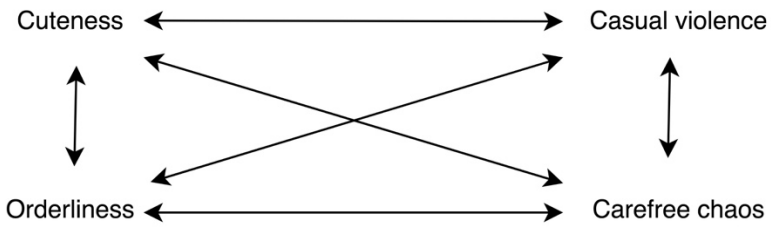


Figure 5.4 Aesthetic of the childlike in *Noye's Fludde*

The looming entropic chaos reinforces the childlike violence felt in the opera, but order does too. There is a form of violence in a logic pushed into extremes. As rightly phrased

by Albert Camus, "the absurd effect is linked to an excess of logic."[559] Indeed, the childlike drive towards too much order is a violence towards reality. All in all, disruptive brutality or anal neatness are in fact the two forms that childlike violence may take.[560] Conversely, order and chaos, along the lines of what has been said previously, are connected to the cute. Order does so because it highlights elements of simplification, miniaturisation, and compactness. Chaos does too by bringing the cute towards features of childlike rumbustiousness and carefree energy.

Such an intermingling of aesthetic categories finds its way in Britten's playful pseudo-tonal organisation. The range of more or less porous meshing between the hymn and the bass creates an ambivalent semiotic. By oscillating between tonal and non-tonal integrations, the music leaves room for hearing mismatching chords as mistakes. In a fully atonal context, it would not be the case, but in a playful back-and-forth between tonality and non-tonality, this feeling is reinforced, because the paradigmatic frame of reference is constantly shifting: a tonal paradigm of hearing leads to considering a mismatching chord as a 'mistake'; an atonal paradigm of hearing does not; a back-and-forth movement between paradigms creates an open ambivalence of hearing. This is to say that the listener is strongly encouraged to hear type-3 (and even type-2) encounters as haphazard accidents; as mistakes (see fig. 5.3) Crucially, pseudo-tonality correlates to the out-of-tuneness of child performing which blurs the child/adult distinction and offers a paradoxically redesigned sublime. The 'mistake'-like mismatching layering merges with the out-of-tune childlike aesthetic. Surely, the heralds of this sublimation of the flawed musical material are the 'slung mugs', the almost tuned struck teacups. To cut a

[559] "[L]'effet absurde est lié à un excès de logique" (Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 176; my translation).
[560] Such a consideration shows how much play and the childlike are powerful concepts to reappraise the traditional Apollonian vs. Dionysian opposition found in plenty in Britten studies.

long story short, the sublimation of the flawed in *Fludde* merges together the trick, the cute, the brutal, the awe-inspiring, the modernist, the neat, and the chaotic.



Figure 5.5a Opening of *Noye's Fludde*

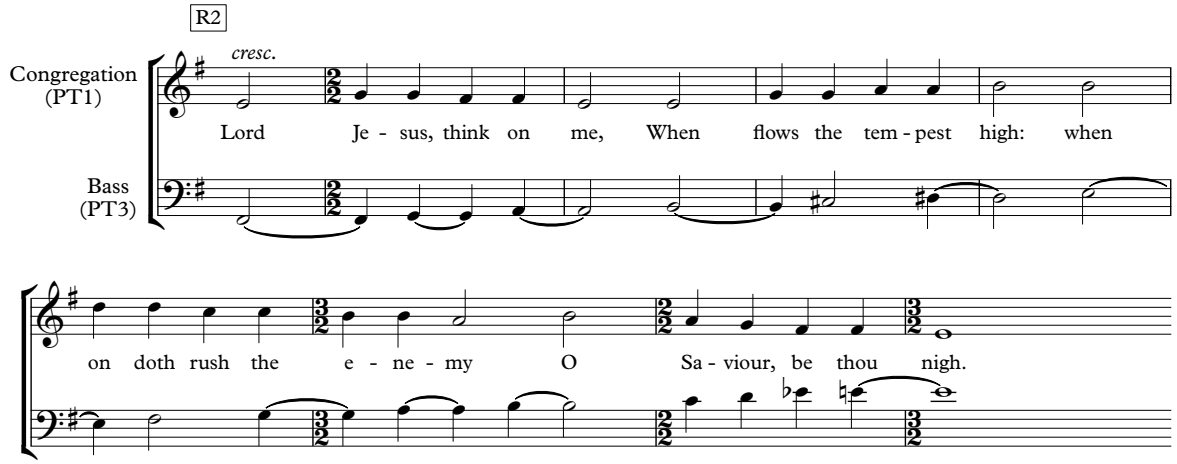


Figure 5.5b "Lord Jesus, think on me", second verse

Toying also has implications for accessibility, especially in a piece which aims at an adult *and* child public. In *Fludde* this simplification and general motivic economy of means fosters an accessible complexity (typical of using play as a technique of composition). This is remarkable straight from the opening of the piece. *Fludde* starts

with a two-plaything superposition (PT 1, the hymn "Lord Jesus think on me"; PT 2, the bass line) (see fig. 5.5a). PT 1 (the hymn) is by its very nature of a remarkable simplicity, remnant of the fact that a hymn is designed to be easy to sing for a congregation. In the very material Britten chooses, there is therefore already a form of educational-material economy of means (see below). The bass motif (PT2) is an ostinato of falling fourths (E-B-F) which creates a series of matches and mismatches with the tune of PT1. The tune of PT1 itself is harmonised in pseudo-tonal parallel motions. Altogether, this opening with a melody in didactic-like parallel motions on an ostinato bass, and the play that variations of dispositions of these two elements against each other creates, is a staple of Britten's writing. Besides, the second verse harmonisation of the hymn presents a typical play-generated pitch-organisation. Indeed, the bass (PT3) raises by steps no matter what logic follows the tune (PT1) (see fig. 5.5b).



Figure 5.6 Scalic topic writing in "Father, I am all readye bowne"

R8	R9	R10	R12	R13	R16
A major	B major	Ab major	Bb major	G major	A major

Figure 5.7 Tonal play of "Father, I am all readye bowne" (R8 to R17)

Furthermore, the pseudo-simplicity of Britten's toying is often allied with music-exercise-like material, hence highlighting its childlike features. This is the case of

"Father, I am all readye bowne" (fig. 5.6). The systematic displacement of triads along the scale plays with music-exercises. Allied with children's voices, these exercises give a childlike quality to the passage, once more at the boundary between the painstaking tongue-stuck-out discipline, and the propensity for untidy outcomes. The 'unsophistication' of the exercises have the unskilled quality of children's compositions, and comes hand in hand aesthetically with the treble voice, the theatre-exposed costumes, and with the tuneful pseudo-simplicity of the song. Britten's music-exercise motifs are therefore at the centre of a topic of the childlike, which permeates *Fludde*. Music exercises express a pseudo-tonal feeling. The music seems too tonal to be truly tonal. The simplicity of the displacement of triads does not establish any cadential element and the end of each section slips more or less awkwardly towards startling keys. Figure 5.7 presents the tonal plan of the passage and the childlike quality of its haphazard transpositions. In this passage, Britten uses transposition as a supplementary device to play. The economical motifs are toyed through simultaneous variations of the layers and the exploration of these layers' interlocking.

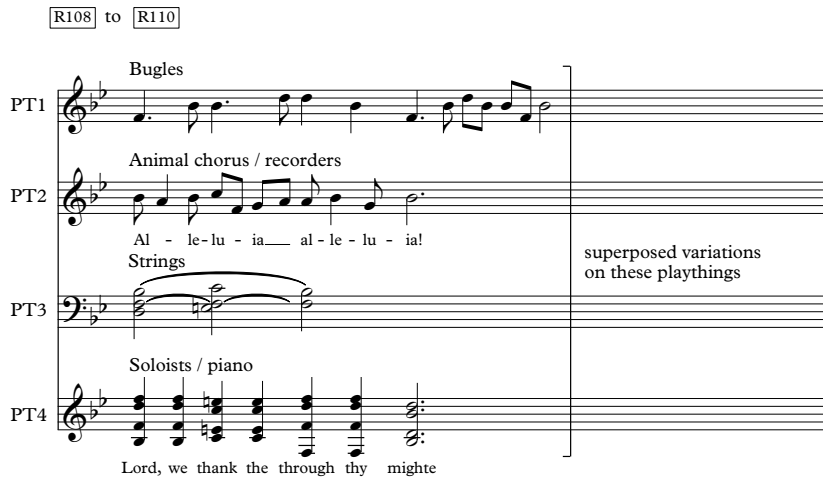


Figure 5.8 Superposition of PTs in the 'alleluia'

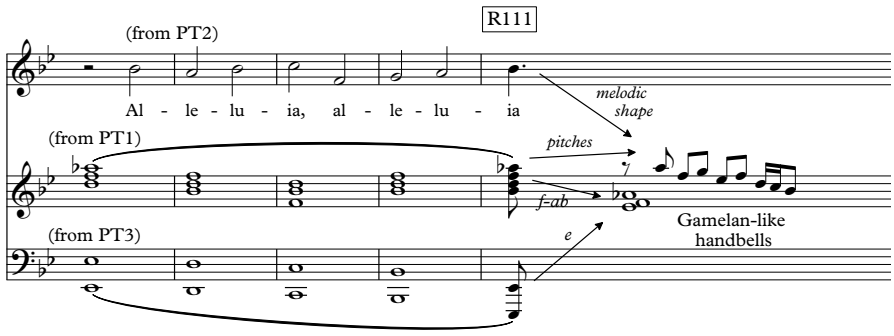


Figure 5.9 Play as creating a poly-stylistic (transition to R111)

Bugles and plainchant too are transformed into toys in *Fludde*. In the "Alleluia" (fig. 5.8) are superposed a two-part canon (PT1), the bugle band (PT2), and a hymn (PT3). All three elements follow their own logic, and interact through play: the three of them are very economical in means (as simple tunes); continually repeated or varied; with pitch-mismatching outcomes; and forms of correspondences which lead to a semiotic polysemy between those different genres and styles of music. The transition to the following section, with God speaking accompanied by handbells, shows how these correspondences and polysemy operate. The intermeshing of the layers creates pentatonic aggregates which lead seamlessly to the gamelan-inspired pentatonicism of the handbells (see fig. 5.9). Thus, in this passage, play links together a great variety of stylistic material.

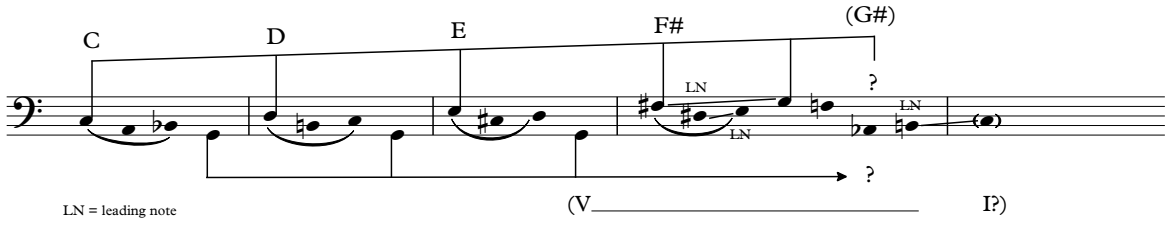


Figure 5.10 The storm passacaglia motif

The stylistic eclecticism of Britten, analysed in this thesis as a consequence of play, reinforces in *Noye's Fludde* the order/chaos co-habitation. Different stylistic

references hold together through motivic and topical toying, but threatens to disintegrate in a helter-skelter fashion, like a toy, into pieces. The passacaglia theme itself, even observed on its own, manifests a lusory construction which does not follow a tonal syntax, but constantly stays close enough to a tonal vocabulary (drones, leading notes, arpeggios) to create an array of ambiguous fleeting tonal references. As shown in figure 5.10, several logics are at work (again, typical of Britten's poly-object toying): a voice is raising in whole tones, while the bass stays on a G drone. Moreover, patterns of three notes complete the motif, composed of a whole-tone fall, with a semi-tone appoggiatura: D-(A)-Bb. This accumulation of internal logics, when played out, creates momentary combinations which points in different tonal directions, and the accumulation of these chance confluences of logics creates an overall nonsensical impression (where all twelve pitch classes are included). While the drone posits a polar G (or a dominant leading towards C), the semi-tone leading notes point towards other tonal understandings (C, D, or E). Similarly, the upper-line whole-tone displacement confuses the situation: the ongoing move creates more and more doubt over the G major or C major reference. The final bar, at the same time, complicates and destroys the game. The G1 drone is disturbed by an Ab1. The whole tone progression is surprisingly leading to a G and not G# (which would follow the whole-tone logic: C-D-E-F#-G#). At the same times, the Ab of the pedal layer only confuses the logic further, for ambivalently being the missing G#. And finally, the leading-note/appoggiatura system is thwarted by being shifted at the end of the bar (B-C). Again, these obsessive internal logics carried out in simultaneous layers create an unsteady harmonic world of pseudo-tonal mismatch and nonsensical relations. Linked to scalic progressions, they share a music-exercise quality, a childlike attempt to be neat which lacks of full tonal coherence.

Assuredly, uncertainty is at the core of the thrilling attempt to accomplish the challenging goal of a game and is revelatory of the 'lusory attitude' described throughout this thesis. In *Fludde*, Britten's lusory game takes the form of writing for child performers and of a play with the limitations that such writing imposes. Britten uses these restrictions as lusory means, as self-imposed challenges to confront, within a game of lusory didactics. Concomitantly, the game-bound pedagogical writing for child performers in *Noye's Fludde* is strongly linked to topical elements of childlikeness. This is so in particular because this game makes use of a whole range of exercise-material (scales, arpeggios, trills, and other study exercises) as motivic playthings. The very limitations of these elements (limited because of their educational quality; because they focus on only one technique to exercise) is played with by Britten. Motivic toying, on the one hand, and the school-bound reference to music practice, on the other, links back to an expression of the childlike. Britten uses the affordances of scales, arpeggios, and other exercise-material; he uses their didactic simplicity to make his music playable and accessible at the same time. Consequently, there is a considerable case for study of music-exercises topics in *Noye's Fludde* and of their multi-faceted function as playable elements for children, as topical references to children-music practice, and as vector of accessible complexity (especially for children listeners). They are, in sum, a rich source for Britten's game, being aesthetics of the childlike.

"Now in the Name of God" provides a first example of the form which Britten's lusory didactics take in *Noye's Fludde*. The song is based on an additive form where each motivic layer keeps accumulating at each round.



Figure 5.11 Motivic accumulation in "Now in the Name of God" (drums omitted)

The layers are dictated by the basic affordances of each instrument: open strings and pizzicato (strings), basic V-I alternations (basses), simple fingering oscillations (recorders), elementary rolls or two-hand alternations (drum section). Individually, all these elements look more as if they were out of a textbook than being opera-material content. Taken all together, however, a set of interactions akin to Britten's motivic toying emerges: the simplicity of each layer (economy of means) is used to play these layers against each other (with matching/mismatching encounters). The music, then, flirts with pseudo-tonality. 'Flirts' because the bass displays a tonal cadential syntax with its dominant/tonic alternation which makes of it an overly tonal contraption. The layering of didactic strata, however, each following their own logic, creates unexpected diatonic encounters (see fig. 5.11). The resulting aggregates are not dictated by a tonal integration of each momentary superposition, only by the playing on of the simultaneous didactic logics. By flirting with the tonal and the pseudo-tonal by consequence of motivic playing, this extract presents a Brittenian play with tonality. In particular, such play is linked in *Noye's Fludde* to the exercise-like shape of the 'simple' motifs he engages with in a playful manner. These exercises offer a series of gestural qualities (didactic gesturalities)

which dictates the pitch-organisation (plucking open strings, combinations of oscillations between two fingers, and so on).[561] That is to say that Britten is making use of the playful potential of music-exercises (via their focus on instrumental gestures and not on pitches) to create pseudo-tonal configurations. The simplicity of the logic makes it easily graspable (and playable) by children. Britten offers children a modernist yet accessible style, for musical logic is dictated by didactic and gestural processes.

Moreover, these didactics are organised in such a way that they provide the audience with a narratological counterpoint to the staging (the building of the ark). Noah and his sons find a palm tree, fall it, and build the ark from it. There is, first of all, an obvious mimesis between the accumulation of motivic layers in the orchestra and the process of assembling an ark. Both are forms of building. Then, there is in the timbre quality of the pizzicato and drums; a wooden property which exposes a second sort of mimesis. In addition to the building up and wood-like timbres, the mechanical ostinato of the motifs also denotes labour. As it appears, the repetition-based simplicity of the educational motifs (simple to be playable) are used by Britten to semiotically refer to the mechanic, being an echo to Noah's and his son's work at building the ark. Furthermore, there is a visual and gestural connection for the audience between the busy-playing children-full orchestra and the labour movements mimicked by the actor on stage. The very principle of the orchestra takes on the symbolic form of a factory.

This factory is full of children, and the music-exercise topic expressed via the didactic motifs (step motions, open strings, broken-third scales at the bass, and so on) is used by Britten as an unexpected parallel to ship building. The musical exercises, their discipline, and hard practice merge semiotically with the manual labour industry of Noah

[561] Pattern-like exercises of fingering, like Hanon's piano exercises epitomise the pseudo-tonal potential of music-exercises, because the melodic lines of these exercises hints at ever-changing keys which results from the logic of hand displacements on the keyboard, not from the tonal-cadential progressions.

and his sons. Both exercises (musical training and shipbuilding) enhance each other's semiotics. It is for this reason that Britten finds in childlike material a way to construct a complex set of denotations with what is happening on stage. Altogether, "Now in the Name of God" offers a typical instance of Britten's game of lusory composition with the motivic limitations and semiotic affordances of writing for child performers. Britten's playful repurposing of exercise-material equals Noah's repurposing of trees to create his ark; in a destruction-creation process akin to God's flood itself.

At the crossroad of these educational elements, pseudo-tonalities, and playful semiotics, stands the 'wrong' note and its multi-functionality. In *Noye's Fludde*, the wrong notes denote school-like mistake, childish trick, modernist pitch-organisation, as much as a stormy figuralism. Take the superposition of the bass with recorder and violin running scales at R79 (fig. 5.12).



Figure 5.12 Scalic mismatches in R79

This passage illustrates the semiotic fluidity of the wrong note as listed above: allied to the scalic music-exercise topic, the non-matching superposition evokes an out-of-synchronicity from the child performer's part. At the same time, associated with the childlike and animal-like of the staging they refer potentially to a disruptive childishness, while producing modernist pitch-organisation. It also creates a dizziness mimetic to a ship

rocking and to the rising angst of the passengers, and to the rising sea (another form of refashioned sublime). As figurations of ship rocking, these scales illustrate also a clear imaginary of school-bound recorder and violin practice. The dizziness of the passage is created by the un-matching superposition of scales, plus their conflict with the passacaglia bass. This passage is furthermore typically pseudo-tonal, because if patches of tonal vocabulary are presented (scales referring to keys), the whole patchwork does not offer any coherent tonal integration. Indeed, the "Storm" is another example of Britten's use of music-exercises. These types of music-exercises, surprisingly, are abundant in the storm scene, layered with the storm passacaglia discussed earlier. The music of the storm thus shows a series of exercise material (scales, trills, arpeggios, bariolages, leaps, chromatic scales, and so on).



Figure 5.13 Ripieno parts at R80

The following bars, R80, offer a striking example of Britten's determination to find ways to write music that even the more elementary players of the orchestra may participate in (a childlike obsession to fix things). A close look at the violin III part of the ripieno (written for the less advanced violin players of the orchestra) places us directly at the core of Britten's lusory challenge (fig. 5.13). His lusory goal is to write chromatic scales with an effect of speed to figure the rising waters and the increasing distress of the animals. These two techniques (chromatic-scale playing and speed) are beyond the reach

of the violin III players. It would be a shame, however, for both the density of the orchestral texture and for the pleasure of the child performers themselves to stop playing at such a crucial moment of the opera. Fig. 5.13 shows Britten's clever solution to this challenge. The trick is to write a tune which wanders through the pitches of the parallel-fifth chromaticisms; participating diatonically in the chromaticism without disturbing it. Similarly, by using various superpositions of speed as tension building, Britten creates a place for these violin III performers to share their part in the dramatic construction of the passage.

Another extract of the storm shows Britten's use of fingering as a game-like challenge to construct pseudo-tonal organisations. Fig. 5.14 shows how the harmonic progression of the violin I part (at R75) is based on a fingerboard progression: three open strings (D—A—E for violin I); two open strings and a low first finger (D—A—F); then with second finger (D—A—G); third finger (D—A—A), and so on. The violin II part is playing the same logic on a G string.

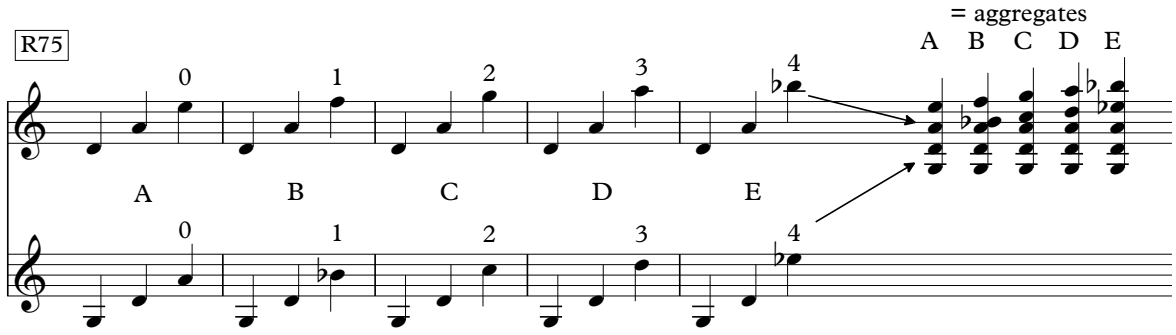


Figure 5.14 Fingering logic creating chordal aggregates

Combined, the fingering-driven pitch-organisation creates a series of haphazard aggregates. These aggregates, allied with the bass create a puzzling play with tonality.

Indeed, figure 5.15 gives a clear-cut example of play between different regimes of pitch-organisation: where pseudo-tonal hinting, tonal cadential structure, and atonal colours emerge serendipitously out of the play of interactive layering of independent logics.

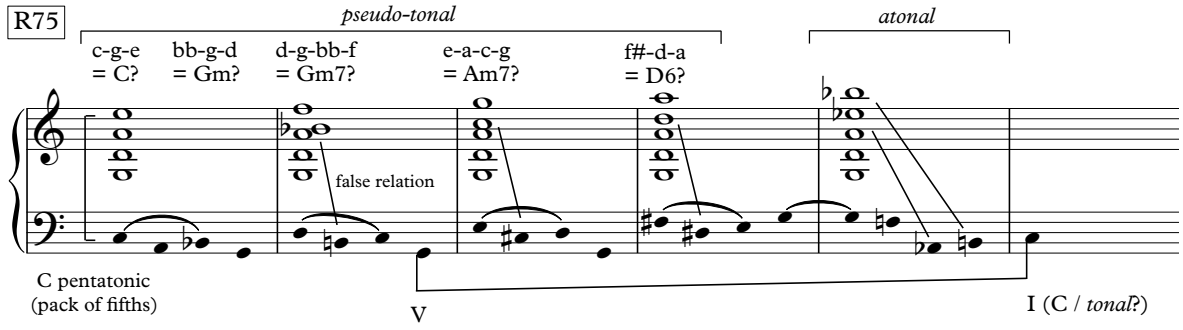


Figure 5.15 Fingering aggregates matching/mismatching the passacaglia bass: play between regimes of pitch-organisation

In particular, a series of false relations occurs (see fig. 5.15). At the same time, there is a certain element of obsession and anal neatness in the carrying out of each layer (the violins' aggregates and the passacaglia bass). The musical material has shapes which recall elements of the tonal style. However, the haphazard encounters between the layers create a network of nonsensical relations which renders any stable tonality impossible to define.

All these examples emphasise two claims. Firstly, that Britten's writing for child performers is a form of game using the limitations of this writing as a spur for imagination and new combinations of material. Secondly, because this game is based on exercise material (scales, arpeggios, didactic fingering, and so on), it is prone to create pseudo-tonality, i.e. the use of tonal-like vocabulary for non-tonal purposes of pitch-organisation, and therefore creates situations of play with different regimes of pitch-organisation (tonal,

pseudo-tonal, and atonal). Altogether, Britten's games reinforce the order/chaos childlikeness of *Fludde* because it uses the logic of educational techniques to disrupt them into modernist layering (while allowing amateurs to take part in such an activity).

Furthermore, Britten's derives his play with music-exercises to create a *tempesta* topic. Via scales, arpeggios and exercise-like motifs, in alliance with the bric-à-brac toy-like instrumentality, Britten re-creates a series of rhetorical figures typical of depictions of storms. In the *tempesta*, "[s]cenes involving storms, floods, earthquakes, and conflagrations had appropriately wild music, and the musical style is often reflected in scenes involving flight or pursuit, and even metaphorically in depicting rage and madness."[562] Indeed, the very components of the child-bound (the music-exercise) creates the path for this surprising rhetorical outcome via agitation, tricks of pseudo-fasteness, chromaticisms, and rawness of texture. Figure 5.16 shows the intermingling of these neo-baroque, stormy, and didactic rhetorics. The Latin denominations of the rhetorical figures are taken out of Dietrich Bartel's *Musica Poetica*.[563] In figure 5.17, I give examples of how these baroque figurations match the didactic elements of the children motivic material.

[562] Clive McClelland, "Ombra and Tempesta," in Danuta Mirka (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 282.
[563] Bartel, *Musica Poetica*, 439-443.

	Rhetoric 1: Neo-baroque rhetorical figures	**Rhetoric 2: Storm (hypotyposis & climax)**	**Rhetoric 3: Didactics in the children's parts**
R67 (Ground bass)	Passus duriusculus; saltus duriusculus, subsumptio; anaphora; auxesis		
R69	Tmesis; variatio; concitato	"Rain"	Percussion: Arpeggios (teacup)
R71	Fuga; circulatio	"More Rain"	
R73	Abruptio; auxesis	"Thunder and lightning"	Strings: Pizzicato Percussion: Dynamics and damping
R74	Tremolo	"Wind"	Recorders: Trills
R75		"Waves"	Strings: Bariolage Percussion: Rolls
R76	Circulatio	"Wind"	
R77	Auxesis	"Flapping rigging"	Strings: Staccato and broken scales Percussions: Accents
R78		"Great waves"	Recorders: Octave leaps Strings: Double stops and chords Percussion: Orchestral ensemble playing
R79	Fuga; tirata; catabasis; anabasis	"Ship rocking"	Recorders: Scales Strings: Scales
R80	Pathopoeia; tremolo	"Panic of animals"	Recorders: Chromatic scales Strings: Chromatic scales Percussions: Rolls and dynamics
R85 Hymn	Noema	—	
R86 Hymn on its own	—		
R87 Recess	[Recapitulation backwards]		

Figure 5.16 Poly-rhetoric in the storm scene

As shown, many figures contribute to link the tempest rhetoric (rhetoric 1) to the didactic one (rhetoric 2). This is especially true of the *circulatio* ("a series of usually eight notes in a circular or sine wave formation"), the *tirata* ("a rapid scalar passage spanning a fourth to an octave or more"), or the *pathopoeia* ("a musical passage which seeks to arouse a passionate affection through chromaticism or by some other means").[564] These figures

[564] *Ibid.*; see again for quotations to follow.

are pivots; they are traditional tempesta elements which are also staple of practice exercises. Their patterning (for building up tension, for producing an effect) meets the repetitive characteristic of the exercise, as best figured by the *auxesis* ("successive repetitions of a musical passage which rise by step"). Similarly, the *passus duriusculus* ("a chromatically altered ascending or descending melodic line") and the *saltus duriusculus* ("a dissonant leap") highlight the chromatic tension of the music. On a similar note, the anabasis is another tension-building contraption ("an ascending musical passage which expresses ascending or exalted images or affections"). Therefore, Britten develops via his gaming with the self-imposed limitation of writing for child performers a neo-baroque outlook. The music-exercise in particular, affordable for children because simple and familiar, is the vector of a double-sided rhetoric. The educational patterning of the music exercise pivots semiotically between the exercise and the baroque figuration; and is used by Britten to create a stormy tempesta topic.

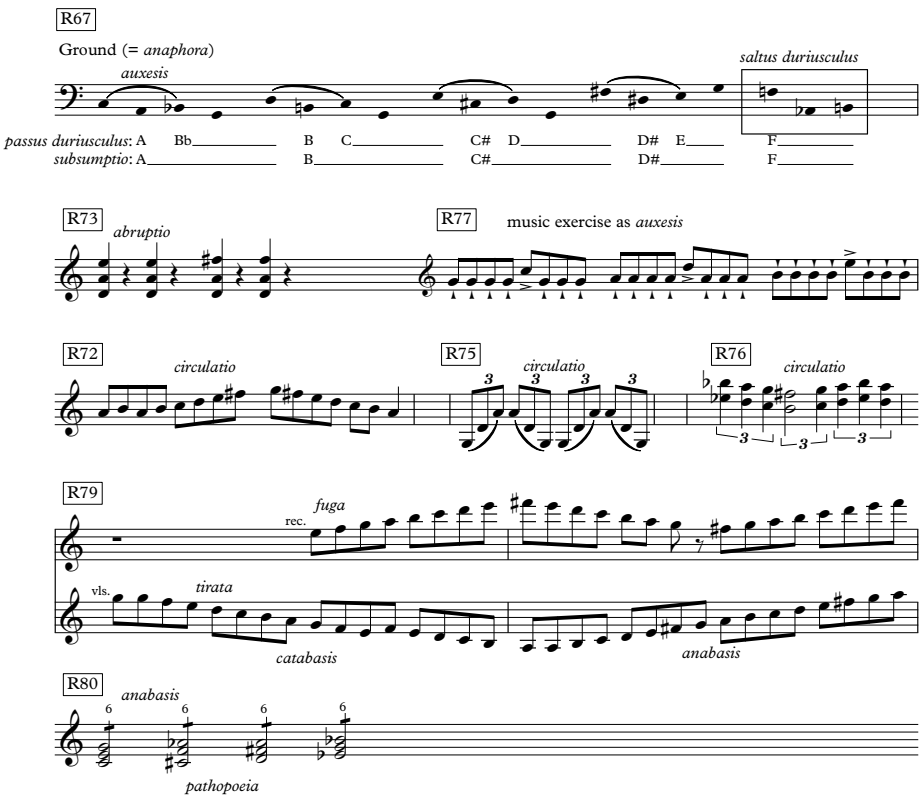


Figure 5.17 Neo-baroque rhetorical figures in the storm passacaglia

In sum, the topical construction of Britten's storm scene is in itself at the boundary between the neatly ordered (the meticulous music-exercise and smart rhetorical constructions) and a tendency to chaotic disruption where the music-exercise becomes a storm, teacups become the rain, children become animal, and so on, in a constant slippage of meaning.

5.3 (Conclusion) Toying with Britten: Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*

The previous chapter concluded with a consideration of Jonathan Kent's production of the *Screw* and showed how Britten's play may be toyed with to deepen the enigmatic game of James' story. In conclusion to the present and final chapter, I would like to take a similar step and show how Britten's *Noye's Fludde* is itself played with by the Texan film-director Wes Anderson, in his 2012 movie *Moonrise Kingdom*. In this movie are observable the same articulations between cuteness and casual violence; and between over-logical order and carefree disruption. In this respect, the striking convergence between Anderson's and Britten's styles are a final confirmation of the presence of playful components in Britten's aesthetics.

What is more, Anderson plays with the diegetic, topic, and aesthetic element of Britten's music, may it be in the soundratcking strategies or in the plot of his movie. There is indeed something childlike in the art of Anderson; and his early experiencing of Britten is not foreign to it:

> I came to Benjamin Britten's music through my school and church production of *Noye's Fludde* when I was 10. It was a huge event for us. I was an otter, my elder brother was an elk. I never forgot the hymns and the various pieces that form this wonderful opera/play. In [*Moonrise Kingdom*] I wanted to recreate some moments I remembered

> from this production and then I started to include Britten's music through the whole film and really set the film to Britten's music.[565]

Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* tells the story of two runaway children on the island of New Penzance (New England): Suzy Bishop and Sam Shakusky. Suzy struggles to find a healthy mental space in the Bishop family, Sam is an orphan spending the summer as a Khaki Scout at Camp Ivanhoe. Both met the previous summer during a local performance of Britten's *Noye's Fludde*. Suzy was part of the costumed children (a raven, as an echo to her dark thoughts); while Shakusky was a bored attendee who happened to roam around backstage. The movie is about their planned escape from the Bishops' house and the Scout camp to the 'Moonrise Kingdom' cove. Suzy and Sam are depicted as children taking their life into their own hands, like adults. Ironically, their behaviour contrasts with the panoply of childlike adults running after them: the Bishops, Scout Master Ward, Captain Sharp (the police officer), and Social Services.

Britten 's music thus has a central place in the plot; it also has a central one in the soundtrack. The latter is composed of many pieces by Britten, used diegetically (*Noye's Fludde* and *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*) or non-diegetically (as extracts from *Friday Afternoons* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). One finds in Anderson the same articulation of cuteness and violence, especially expressed by the pseudo-militarism of the costumed boy-scouts. The scouts also illustrate the coexistence of a tendency for meticulous absurdist order and boisterous chaotic disruption. As in Britten's aesthetic, this semiotic combination is linked to a blur between children and adults. The Khaki scouts epitomise this blur. In Camp Ivanohe, children behave like soldiers, according to plannified agenda, strict procedures, and body discipline. At the same time, their militarised activities are child's play: constructing a tree house, testing fireworks,

[565] Anderson in "Wes Anderson On Britten", (Britten 100, YouTube, 1 Oct. 2012) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIJEEc-OhCc] Accessed on 15 April 2024.

preparing baits with scoobies strings. Conversely, most of the adults from that movie offer the similar scout-like behaviour, by being stereotypically defined by their jobs and uniforms (the policeman, the scout master, or the social worker). In particular, such adults display the same attitude to reality than the scout boys: a fantastically over-rationalised relation to the world through procedures, categorical reasoning and tendency to toy with their environment. If the adults express a childlike toying with the world, children behave like adults: they marry or take on adult jobs (as when Sam becomes a policeman, a miniature version of his new adoptive father, Captain Sharp, fig. 5.18). All of these rhetorical strategies, of course, sound very familiar to the Britten listener.



Figure 5.18 Sam's new job as a policeman (*Moonrise Kingdom*)

(© 2012 Universal Pictures)

Another point of convergence between Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* and *Noye's Fludde* is the machinery-exposed aesthetic of these two pieces. For example, Whitney Dilley describes the importance of artificiality in Anderson's movies. For Dilley, "A key feature of Wes Anderson's films is that they are overtly staged: the director is clearly creating a unique world, an enclosed cosmos, and the characters are operating

within the rules of that world."[566] "[I]n Moonrise Kingdom", he carries on, "the Bishops' house is presented in a cross section cutaway so that it resembles a dollhouse, rather than a real house; the film invites the viewer into this dollhouse world."[567] Theatre in theatre and the use of dollhouse-like models express for Dilley "Anderson's penchant for old-fashioned filming techniques that reveal 'how the trick is done' is deliberate."[568] This "handcrafted atmosphere"[569] echoes in *Moonrise Kingdom* the staging of *Noye's Fludde*, made of cardboard props, fabric-based waves, and costumed animals (see fig. 5.19a). In brief, there is a theatrical aesthetic in Anderson's movies which matches the play-apparent conventions of the staging and music of *Noye's Fludde*. Anderson particularly plays with this machinery-exposed aspect of Britten's music when Sam wanders backstage. There, he encounters amidst the animals waiting to enter on stage a group of children rehearsing on recorders their *Fludde*'s parts (see fig. 5.9b). The scene encapsulates a great deal of the movie's aesthetic and of Britten's. The descant recorders, via their smallness, and via the smallness of their child-players, express elements of cuteness (the previous shot, with lined costumed animals waiting backstage, emphasises the idea). There is also a certain discipline expressed through the rehearsing recorders and their focus on music practice which seems at odd with carefree childlikeness. There is in fact an adultlike component to this dedication which increases the sensation of cuteness: these performers are not just child performers, but miniaturisation of adult ones. At the same time, the result of this rehearsal is cacophonic: there resides the carefree disruptiveness of the childlike. Next to them, Sam plays momentarily with the water-fountain. Sam the scout is interested by the interactive mechanics of the object. His

[566] Whitney Crothers Dilley, *The Cinema of Wes Anderson: Bringing Nostalgia to Life* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 41.
[567] *Ibid.*
[568] *Ibid.*, 42.
[569] *Ibid.*

behaviour echoes the ones of the recorder players, who seem to interact with their musical instruments in a similar exploratory manner. In other words, there is in the image and in the sounds a play with the symbol of the child performer, as a scout. These recorder players are used by Anderson to explore the threshold between the adultlike and the childlike, between rehearsing and playing, and between discipline and boisterous behaviour.


a


b

Figure 5.19 (a) The performance of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in *Moonrise Kingdom*
(b) Sam wandering backstage; recorder players rehearsing (*Moonrise Kingdom*)

The occurrence of bugles finds an astute symmetry in Anderson's movie. Britten's bugles become in *Moonrise Kingdom* the prerogative of the Khaki scouts. As in *Fludde*, bugles are played by children (in this occurrence, by the scout).[570] Both share a mediocre

[570] I refer here to the early scout camp scene.

quality of playing. In Britten, bugle-playing emphasises elements of cuteness, toy-militarism, and casual brutality and was exploited as a device to create pseudo-tonal organisation. In Anderson, the amateurishly performed bugle epitomises the childlikeness of the Khaki scouts of Camp Ivanhoe. As shown in figure 5.20, the scout bugle-playing is one more attempt to behave like an adult, akin to all the other activities of the scouts in the following sequences: ironing the scout master's neckerchief, taking notes from his commands, and so on. But the 'adult' mimicry only stresses further the very childlikeness of these kids. In many ways, these boy-soldiers mirror Britten's fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.[571] The scout boy (fig. 5.20), his bugle played, spits, turns his head, and reveals a left-eye patch. This bugling boy is not only the mimic of a disciplined soldier, he is also a brute who fights like a pirate (or, a boy with a lazy eye to cure on his summer holiday...). Later, during the church tower scene under the storm, Wes Anderson and Alexandre Desplat bring Britten's "Alleluia" into play. Here again they toy with the semiotics offered by Britten's music. Indeed, the different layers in the music (see fig. 5.8 as a reminder) encapsulate different significations at that stage of the movie. The alleluia layer symbolises the church. The bugle summarises the scouts of whom Sam is part. The sudden blow at R110 (see earlier discussion) exemplifies the thunderstrike. This moment becomes a polysemous mix, referring at the same time to the strike, the childlike, the scout-like bugles, and the religious song. Once more, Britten's music becomes the object of Anderson's toying, of his lusory play.

[571] The sergeantly note-taking of Florence in *Albert Herring* take from this military mind-set too.



Figure 5.20 Scout bugling at Camp Ivanhoe (*Moonrise Kingdom*)

Wes Anderson's design is also famous for its symmetrical shots, and much pastiche art has parodied this characteristic.[572] All the shots presented here on figures 5.18 to 5.21 confirm this centeredness. The delight in symmetry accentuates the anti-realist artificiality of Anderson's style. The symmetry, and its redundancy throughout the movie, is made to be seen. It is once more a machinery-exposed device which highlights the toy-like aspect of the visual style. At the same time, it expresses a childlike imagination through neatness and dreamed fantasy. This forced symmetry, which looks like a childlike toyification of the screen, echoes again Britten's music, especially his motivic toying and pseudo-tonal organisations. The *un*realism of Anderson's visual symmetries mirrors Britten's music: as the forced passacaglia with the "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" hymn (see fig. 5.3), which triggers a series of mismatching counterpoint; or as the bugle/plain-chant superpositions of the "Kyrie" and the "Alleluia" (see fig. 5.8). Once more, there is in those symmetries an absurdist element which pushes orderliness a step too far and renders the childlike for all its rigidity. At the same time, Anderson's symmetrical shots express a fanciful childlike point of view, with its own salt of disruption of conventions.

[572] See the pastiche *Accidentally Wes Anderson* series which imitates Anderson's symmetries and characteristic tones of colours. A web site (accidentallywesanderson.com) goes as far as establishing map of Wes-Anderson-like places, publishes bulletins, and sets up exhibitions. Anderson's style has then provoked a colossal craze; and its childlike component may well be one of its elements that fascinates so much.

Agitation, runs, sudden turns of the camera, are many elements of chaos which creeps behind the orderly symmetry of the shots. In Anderson as in Britten, chaos and order go on hand in hand.

There is also in Anderson's art an interest in emotional restraint, through "close-up shots [...] displaying little to no emotion, which creates an 'insect under glass effect'".[573] Symmetry boosts this feeling, as much as the machinery-exposed style. Adult/child blur emphasise this idea too by presenting most of the characters as helpless children (adults included) which display adult-like behaviour (children included). Events seem to play the characters as puppets which can do nothing about it, and this joins the general nostalgic style of Anderson's movies (through Technicolor and vintage costumes, among other things). Altogether, Anderson's movies engage with the notion of limitation: the paradoxically imagination-triggering limitation of play and toying; the theatrical limitations and exploration of the artificial; the absurdist limitation in agency of childlike characters. There is, in Britten's music, a similar emotional outcome to Anderson's film; a general emotional restraint, due to play. Here again, lusory limitations create an aesthetic in which cuteness, violence, order, and chaos are entangled.

In a semiotic approach to Anderson's and Britten's convergence in *Moonrise Kingdom*, Naomi Waltham-Smith concludes from both of their constant toying with references: "Beyond this capacity to act as a reference of musical signification, however, play also names the condition to which the topic aspires at his limits."[574] Indeed, Britten's and Anderson's art tests the limitations of the process of referencing. They engage with the leeway in reality described by Walter Benjamin (see chapter 1) in which play becomes a critical and revolutionary tool. Britten and Anderson's childlike aesthetics relies on a

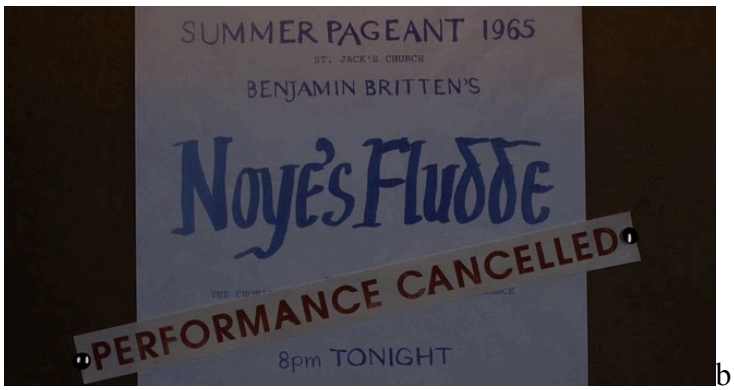
[573] Dilley, *The Cinema of Wes Anderson*, 53.
[574] Naomi Waltham-Smith, "The End of the Topic, or Indexicality at its Limit," in Nearchos Panos *et al.* (eds.), *Proceedings of the International Conference on Music Semiotics, In Memory of Raymond Monelle* (IPMDS, 2013), 214.

constant playtesting of boundaries (of the child/adult distinction and of the theatre/reality gap). Through play, Britten and Anderson's art reaches the threshold of semiotic references, and engages with such limits of topicality.

Overall, Anderson toys with what Britten's *Fludde* affords him narratively, best typified by the sudden cancellation of the performance of Britten's opera, due to heavy rains (fig. 5.21a). *Fludde* is cancelled due to floods and the church becomes a refuge for the children (who, like the animals they were supposed to impersonate, need shelter) while their animal costumes hang around next to the disc of Britten's *Fludde* (fig. 5.21b).



a



b

Figure 5.21 (a) Sheltering from the flood; disc of Britten's opera on the left

(b) Britten's *Noye's Fludde* cancelled by a flood (*Moonrise Kingdom*)

Anderson may well be in cinema what Britten is to music: an artist who uses games of limitation as ways to produce art, within a general interest for the childlike. On

that account, Anderson not only presents a Britten-like aesthetic applied to the screen, but *Moonrise Kingdom* is also inscribed in the continuity of the ludic-modernist rhetorics described in chapter 2. In Anderson's art, as in Britten's, the big is small, the small is big; the toy is real, the real is a toy; the child is an adult, the adult is a child; the cute is violent, the violent is cute; and order and chaos go along inseparably. These threshold explorations through play inherit ludic-modernist fascination for the curious and ever-changing symbolic of the childlike and the toy-like. Benjamin Britten and Wes Anderson share a similar goal: to create an art which is curious, interesting, lively, and disturbing with which both children and adults equally can engage.

Conclusion:

Playing and Being Played

I know it changes—of course traditions change.
But the human beings remain curiously the same.[575]

If I chose *The Turn of the Screw* and *Noye's Fludde* as two examples of how Britten's playfulness may be analysed, many other pieces from Britten's oeuvre would deserve similar close-observations through concepts of play, toying, or the childlike. This would be true, especially, of pieces less naturally understood as 'playful'. This is the case of *Peter Grimes*, where schoolboyish modes of expression exemplify Grimes and Ellen's inability to communicate, and where the chorus' part, full of light-hearted dances and songs, denotes a puzzling rejoicing in cruelty. In the same vein, the *War Requiem* expresses stylistically much of the economy of means which is at the heart of a game-like mode of composition. A consideration of toying and motivic play, in such a piece, would only emphasise the paradox of Britten's denunciation of the playful side of war and of its childlike violence. More broadly, playful reflections on Britten's aesthetics invite a more thorough-going analysis of ludic modernism more broadly as a key-note of the twentieth century.

Throughout this thesis, I developed the idea that Britten's music is a *trace* of a playful mode of composing; that Britten's music is the testimony of a game of 'playing at being played'. Using play theories, I cast doubt on the understanding of Britten's intentions, and proposed the idea that such a process creates a series of haphazard semiotics, of which Britten is only partially in control. Composition, for Britten, is a risk-taking activity, and the scores and sounds he offers to us, listeners, are the trace of such

[575] Britten, "Mapreading" (1969), *Britten on Music*, 329.

a game. Besides, Britten's own strange silence, his reluctance to discuss his art, his ideas, or even his personal feelings, highlights the impossibility of the analyst to fathom his intentions. When forced to talk about his art, Britten often opted for humour or witty comments to disarm the interlocutor and escape having to give any form of answer. This is the case, for example, in Donald Mitchell's recollection of Britten's answer to a question on the underlying seriousness of *Albert Herring*:

> I once pointed out this significant relationship [between *Curlew River*'s madwoman and Mrs. Herring] and the conclusions I drew from it to the composer. I have to be honest and confess that he did not say he agreed with me; nor, on the other hand, did he say he disagreed. He smiled and said, 'Well, Donald, I've always known *Herring* meant something special to you.'[576]

Such an anecdote is telling. Not only does it emphasise Mitchell's own obsessions with finding hidden depths in Britten's music; it also exemplifies the failure of such a project to excavate Britten's intentions. Behind Britten's smile who knows what is hidden? Britten's witty comments are typical of a playful attitude: they are answers which do not answer. They are strategies to keep the game going. When cornered, however, Britten would usually retreat back to his famous claims on music as being useful for the community, best expressed in his 1964 Aspen Award speech, turned by Donald Mitchell into an artistic manifesto.[577] Thus, there is something a bit puzzling in Britten's claim. If his music, as claimed, is to be used, why does Britten refrains from saying exactly how it should be used, and used for what? But perhaps this is it: the strength of Britten's music is to prolong his compositional game into a hermeneutic one. His music, in sum, is to be used, toyed with, played with, in a new game of 'playing at being played'. The trace of Britten's play is there, after all, to be engaged with playfully.

Indeed, my discussion of Wes Anderson's and Jonathan Kent's appropriation of Britten's childlikeness into his own childlike aesthetic, demonstrates how relevant

[576] Mitchell, *Cradles of the New*, 363.
[577] Benjamin Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* (Faber & Faber, 1964).

Britten's music still is today. Many of the playful themes exposed in this thesis offer potential meanings to the contemporary listener. For example, the contemplation of what it means to be an adult and what it means to be a child is more than ever relevant to our present-day fascination with youth. In a world where video games, *kawaii* culture, and cuteness have taken on a renewed high cultural value, there is more than a revitalised place for Britten's childlike and playful art to develop. Similarly, the playful denunciation of violence by showing that violence is itself rooted in play is no-less burning today for understanding the current bellicosity of our media and the dangerous and deadly games played by our politicians. I hope this thesis facilitates such a movement to reappraise Britten's art by reconsidering modernism beyond an Austro-German frame and by unearthing the playful and ludic sides of modernism.

For many, such an attitude may be accused of being only utilitarian; of only using Britten for my own purposes; of *playing* Britten. But, after all, what is there to do in music criticism, if not exactly that? For Richard Rorty, who follows the pragmatic philosophical method of William James and John Dewey, the literary critic (to which I unashamedly include music criticism, musicology, and music theory alike) designates someone who thinks that "the search for novel alternatives and coherence among those alternatives are coherence found by re-description rather than by argument." Rorty's critic knows that "the point of reading is simply greater sensitivity, greater sympathy, greater imaginative scope" and to engage with the "flexibility of the human being." Rorty calls this attitude an ethic of sensitivity, where a literary critic only cares about if their work is being "curious, interesting, lively, and disturbing."[578] In such a conception, the role of the Britten scholar is perhaps nothing more than to carry on enhancing the sensitivity towards

[578] Richard Rorty, "Ethics of Principle vs. Sensitivity," Conference, Carleton College (1990).

Britten's music. From such a perspective, Britten's art is a fascinating object to be endlessly re-fashioned.

One may try and draw up a list of the motley fashioning of the figure of Benjamin Britten and of his music made so far, as 'clever' by critics in the 1930s, as 'Viennese' by post-war scholars, as 'queer' by new musicologists of the 1980s, as 'religious' by a new wave of choir members and neo-Anglican communities, and so on. I proposed in the preceding chapters a few other orientations to consider: Britten as 'childlike', Britten as a 'gamer', Britten as 'Franco-Russian', as a 'trickster', as 'non-tonal'—in short, Britten as a playful agent. In the Introduction, I outlined the extent to which authors like Hans Keller, Donald Mitchell, or Philip Brett projected themselves onto Britten. Very recently, Peter Franklin's *Britten Experienced* recollects his own biographical encounters with the music of Britten, in an answer to what he considers in Christopher Chowrimootoo's *Middlebrow Modernism* to be a mirroring of Chowrimootoo's own "worry".[579] Such a debate shows how much Britten's music goes beyond its own aesthetics and resides mostly in what it plays in us, and what we can play in it. This thesis, after all, was nothing more than finding my own way to describe the thriving passion which took hold of me at 11 years old, back in Corsica, when discovering Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*; a passion which never left me since. And, surely, it also reflects my own interest in matters of play, as much as my studies in Paris. Claiming that the point of music criticism is inevitability to use the music to mirror ourselves in our studies, may sound like a spoilsport, by revealing the hidden game we are currently playing. Maybe. But at least it clarifies the kind of game being played. The music critic's endeavour is in that respect no different from every person's endeavour. Their activities are absurd, in the Camusian sense of the term, for there is nothing else to do than to play. This thesis was

[579] Peter Franklin, *Britten Experienced: Modernism, Musicology and Sentiment* (Routledge, 2024); Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*.

played by as much as it played with Britten's music, inasmuch as his music, all things considered, offers us with its own room for play to engage with.

> The absurd man begins where [the unconscious man] ends, where, ceasing to admire the game, the mind wants to enter it.[580]

[580] "L'homme absurde commence où [l'espoir de l'homme inconscient] finit, où, cessant d'admirer le jeu, l'esprit veut y entrer." (Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 108; my translation)

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