MUSIC IN THE 20TH CENTURY

BRITTEN'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE

PHILIP RUPPRECHT

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Britten's Musical Language

Blending insights from linguistic and social theories of speech, ritual, and narrative with music-analytic and historical criticism, *Britten's Musical Language* offers fresh perspectives on the composer's fusion of verbal and musical utterance in opera and song. It provides close interpretative studies of the major scores (including *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *War Requiem*, *Curlew River*, and *Death in Venice*) and explores Britten's ability to fashion complex and mysterious symbolic dramas from the interplay of texted song and a wordless discourse of motives and themes. Focusing on the performative and social basis of language, rather than on traditional notions of textual "expression" in vocal music, Philip Rupprecht pursues topics such as the role of naming and hate speech in *Peter Grimes*; the disturbance of ritual certainty in the *War Requiem*; and the codes by which childish "innocence" is enacted in *The Turn of the Screw*.

PHILIP RUPPRECHT is Associate Professor of Music at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. He has written on twentieth-century music in a number of journals and is a contributor to *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (1999).

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To my parents

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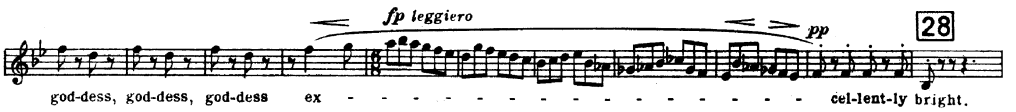
1 Introduction: Britten's musical language

Music, like speech, begins in the moment of utterance. As the cardinal act of performance, utterance is an externalizing of musical ideas in the physicality of vocal or bodily gesture. Utterance is a process of putting forth, emitting – an unbroken flow of sound emanating from a distinct source. Something is revealed, made manifest; utterance, to recall the word's origins, is a bringing "out."[1] For the listener, utterance names an experience of being addressed directly by the performer or (less directly) the composer. By a process both interpersonal and reciprocal, performer and listener make contact. A musical thought moves from "in here" to "out there," so establishing a chain of communication. Both music and speech impinge on the world in the living present of the utterance, whether as independent systems of address, or as paired discourses, acting together in the medium of song. And it is this composite musical utterance – a bringing forth of words and music meaningfully and vividly, as one – that is so clear in all of Benjamin Britten's work.

The phrase "musical language" in my title engages the moment of utterance in two distinct ways. In a first, metaphorical sense, Britten's music is itself a kind of wordless language – a characteristic way of presenting and shaping the interplay of essentially musical ideas (themes, rhythms, motives, or keys) within an unfolding discourse. The sounds of music, on this reading, themselves have properties usually ascribed to speech – expression, eloquence, a rhetorical force. Useful though the familiar metaphor of music as language may be, Britten's music acts as a musical language in a second, more literal sense. In opera and song, music and words encounter one another directly. The fusion of these two media in lyric and dramatic genres, or in sung liturgical ritual, is succinctly expressed in English as a "setting" of words *to* music, and yet the process is by no means a simple one (behind that "to" lies mystery). This musical language is anything but metaphorical, for its powers of communication depend on the material presence of words. At the same time, these words are tied, in their musical setting, to a precisely coordinated role in a composite utterance. My aim throughout this book will be to make the familiar interplay of music and words strange again and to reflect on the intricacies of their fusion in the single moment of utterance.

That the distinctive element in Britten's music is bound up with some quality of utterance (rather than specific details of technique) was a point

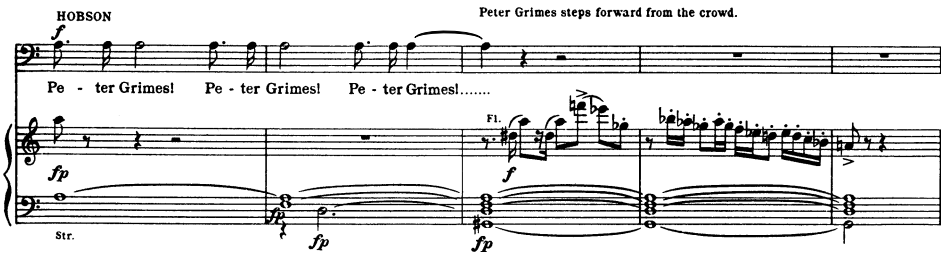
Ex. 1.1: Vocal utterance in a lyric setting: "Goddess, excellently bright," *Serenade*



quickly sensed by the composer's early listeners. Henry Boys, writing in 1938, singles out Britten's gift for "sincere lyrical expression of simple moods," a perception echoed by the composer's stated preference for "clear and clean" orchestral textures, and "perfect clarity of expression." Erwin Stein, in 1953, remarks simply that "Britten's way of expression is direct."[2] The music's spontaneity of utterance, Stein feels, is a matter of text setting, in particular the balanced and supple shift between "natural" speech rhythms and a lyric stylization called for by details of poetic imagery. In the Ben Jonson "Hymn" of the *Serenade* (Ex. 1.1), as Stein notes, "the voice announces the words with such lucidity, and the coloratura on the first syllable of 'ex-cellently' is so 'bright', that the poem appears to enhance the music as much as the music the poem" (1953b: 156). Here is the "sensibility, quick as a fish's fin, to a poetic image" that Edward Sackville-West praises in the *Serenade*, and a clear example of Britten's tendency to place the burden of musical expression in the vocal line itself, not in the accompaniment.[3]

In the early reception of Britten's works, utterance in the texted music is understood largely in terms of what Stein calls "musical diction." Questions of prosody and the "natural" speech rhythms of words – topics on which Britten's music was both praised and damned – remain central for his early critics, as too does his response, through word painting, to the semantic plane of language.[4] But such perspectives, however much they hint at a distinctive tone of musical "speech" – with or without actual words – fall short as a general model of musical utterance. If analyses of Britten's lyric songs tend to dwell, in a recognizably New-Critical vein, on diction and imagery, words on the operatic stage demand a different response. Texted dramatic utterances are *actions* – words and music forged, in the heat of a dramatic situation, into single, "multimedia" events. Hobson's "Peter Grimes!" call (Ex. 1.2) – to cite only the first two sung words of the opera *Peter Grimes* – is mechanical in rhythm and monotone in pitch, yet these features are not based in imagery or prosody but in social relations. This "Peter Grimes!" call is an order, an utterance addressed to Peter with a specifically juridical force in the courtroom, as he is called to give evidence. To recognize that all utterance is, to an extent,

Ex. 1.2: Vocal utterance as dramatic act: hailing the protagonist in *Peter Grimes*



social and interpersonal in nature, is to understand language as political. Utterance engages not only the linguistic ability to describe or signify (though the name "Peter Grimes!" does of course *refer*), but also linguistic powers of coercion. "To *say* something," as J. L. Austin suggests, "is to *do* something" (12; Austin's emphasis). Language, at the moment of utterance itself, is acting as much as signifying.

Returning the emphasis, as I will do throughout this book, to language as act or performance will help define a new set of questions for the role of words *in* music. The discussion raises issues that go beyond the specific case of Britten. If everyday speech can be "doing" as well as saying, does the same hold for words in a musical context? Do acts of song – a category that might include all sung vocal utterance, whether lyric or dramatic – draw on the coercive powers of conventional (i.e. non-musical) acts of speech? Does the social and institutional force of, say, a promise or a prayer function in *musical* promises or prayers, and if so, is this specifically linguistic agency acting independently, or is it supplemented, inflected, or projected by "musical" features of the utterance (melody, harmony, texture, and so on)? If the drama of opera may be said to spring precisely from an intensified enactment of everyday experience, in a more or less heightened vocal utterance, one might well appeal beyond traditional opera-critical concerns – motives, music as a response to "character," genre – to consider operatic drama primarily in terms of individual utterances in specific social situations. Operatic speech, for all its patent artifice, obeys laws familiar from the social world beyond the stage.

Chapter-length readings of four of Britten's operas are central to this book, and my interpretations of musical drama engage various developments in recent opera criticism, not least a renewed concern with codes of narrative and performance, and with representations of the ideological and psychological subject.[5] Little work has appeared, though, towards what might be called a performative understanding of operatic speech –

one that incorporates, say, the insights of linguistic philosophers into spoken utterances.[6] More frequently, utterance in vocal music is still treated largely in terms of textual "expression," locating an originary meaning that is primarily verbal, while downplaying the possibility that music might, as Nicholas Cook puts it, "participate in the construction of that meaning" (1998: 115). Even where music's powers to complement or contest a verbal meaning are acknowledged, Cook adds, discussion is conceptually loose.[7] But there are good reasons, as I will claim, to resist the familiar critical trope that pits words against music as separate media, and it is via the fused and composite notion of the utterance – rather than by an oppositional view of separate strands of the complex single event – that I approach the coexistence of text and music in Britten's case.

The view that linguistic utterance is actional as well as symbolic is common to a range of mid-twentieth-century theoretical positions, from anthropological accounts of ritual performance in tribal societies to J. L. Austin's philosophically tinged theory of the "speech-act" as the foundational unit of verbal exchange and Bakhtin's concept of "speech genres" – forms of discourse peculiar to a given sphere of human activity.[8] The polarity is clear in Saussure's classic distinction between the system of "language" and the event of "speech" as an "individual act of the will and the intelligence" (14). In Saussure's analysis, however, linguistic meaning is sought primarily on the semiotic level of the sign,[9] and Bakhtin, for one, attacks earlier linguists for "weaken[ing] the link between language and life" by excluding language's "addressivity" ("the quality of turning to someone"), and concentrating only on syntax and semantics.[10] The actional, operational view of language, on the other hand, is rooted in the contingency of situation, the primacy of exchange in verbal encounters, and the speaker's ability to accomplish things with utterance.

The first recorded concepts of music encompass a fusion of words and pitches, yet later music history has emphasized only an interplay of "master" and "servant" arts.[11] The tradition is apparent, for instance, in Christoph Bernhard's mid-seventeenth-century distinction between a *stylus theatralis* in which "language is the absolute master of music" and a *stylus gravis* in which the reverse applies (110). Such hierarchical oppositions are called into question by Bernhard himself, in the idea of a style in which "language and music are both masters" – the grandly named *stylus luxurians communis* – and yet Bernhard can be frustratingly brief on the central question of how this sharing of powers might be accomplished: "one should represent speech in the most natural way possible . . . render joyful things joyful, sorrowful things sorrowful, swift things swift, slow things slow" (111). The idea here that musical utterance effects one-to-one

representation of some univocal linguistic object (joyful things) seems quaintly mechanical as an account of musical speech, limited as it is to essentially grammatical concepts of subject and predicate.[12] Bernhard comes closer to detailing the moment of utterance itself with the mention of musical settings of "questions," which "according to common usage, are ended a step higher than the penultimate syllable":

> Musical repetition occurs when two successive utterances are similar in subject matter. Musical repetition a step higher occurs in connection with two or more successive questions, when their words correspond in subject matter [*Gleichheit der Worte an der Materie*], and when the last seems to be more forceful than the first. (111)

The passage exceeds the grammatical notion of "subject matter" to consider a discursive category of social exchange (the question), and even a specific context in which the question is reiterated, in conjunction with the musical technique of sequence, to convey the singer's "more forceful" attitude to what is being sung. Later writers, through the doctrine of *Affekt*, increasingly emphasize music's powers to express not only figurative detail but also the speaker's inner state, a matter of emotion and feeling, of which words are only the outer manifestation.[13]

That Britten himself showed more than a passing interest in Baroque models of text setting – notably in the Purcell realizations beginning in the 1940s – need not imply that his concept of musical utterance was bound by the overworked metaphor of music and words as "master" or "servant" arts. One sign of the composer's sense of the utterance as a "fused" event is the prominence, in the texted music, of moments that underline cardinal dramatic points in a single stroke. These gestures of epiphany – one thinks not only of Grimes's "God have mercy!" cry, but equally of Aschenbach's "I love you" and the Spirit's blessing in *Curlew River* – make their effect in ways that are both musically and verbally "new" in a given context. The most telling moments in Britten's work are just that – *moments*, single utterances whose uncanny reverberating force springs from a careful "staging" in relation to larger dramatic unfoldings, as well as on the distinctive profile of local gesture. Examining these moments, throughout this study, I elaborate a view of Britten's musical language as something all of a piece, a single mode of verbal-musical utterance. This foundational intuition is eloquently summed up in a comment of Myfanwy Piper's, on her experience of collaborating with Britten on opera libretti:

> Every word is set to be heard for its part in the unfolding of the story and for its quality as part of the human instrument. Speech articulated in sorrow or joy, in pain or ordinary conversational exchange is as much part of the music

> of the voice as the note itself: the word and the note is one thing, not two. (Piper 1989: 8)

Utterance, in all Britten's texted vocal music, is this "one thing," a point to be elaborated from a number of angles in the ensuing chapters.

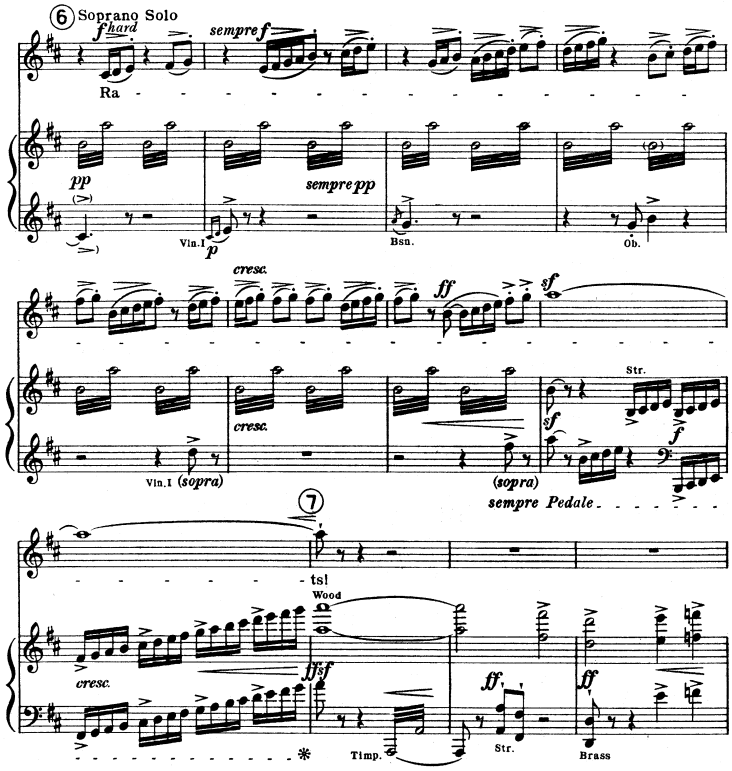
In order to explore further the conceptual field I am considering here under the heading of "utterance," the remainder of this opening chapter offers three case studies of works in contrasting genres from different phases of Britten's career. Turning first to Britten's 1936 "symphonic cycle," *Our Hunting Fathers*, I consider the identity of utterance and its functioning in the speech situation. A second study explores the possibilities of utterance in a purely instrumental work, *Lachrymae* for viola and piano (1950), whose unfolding is rich in discursive shifts suggestive of the change of speaker implicit in acts of quotation. To close, I turn to *Noye's Fludde* (1957–58), a staged dramatic spectacle in which the inherently social and interpersonal character of musical utterance is especially vivid.

1. Utterance as speech event in *Our Hunting Fathers*

The term "utterance" refers, in common parlance, to an unfolding process of vocal enunciation (the verb, "to utter") and to the discrete units of vocally realized thought or expression ("utterances") that result. For linguists, the utterance is a minimal unit of speech ("any stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of the person"),[14] a usage whose applicability to a musical event such as the soloist's entrance in "Rats away!", the second song of *Our Hunting Fathers* (Ex. 1.3), seems uncontroversial. As in speech, the silences around the edges of a musical utterance are a matter of tolerance, and boundaries here are simply those of the onset and cessation of vocal sounds (excluding, for the present, orchestral contributions to the texture). Identifying the utterance as one stretch of singing says nothing about its formal structure. Musical utterances may or may not correspond to recognized musical phrase types (just as spoken utterances do not necessarily form grammatical sentences, clauses, or single words). The vocal utterance of Example 1.3 expires without conventional melodic closure, curtailed by an instrumental interruption, and its text (one word: "rats!") is grammatically inconclusive. Even so, one hears an utterance, for this is a continuous speech event of defined extent.

To call the vocal utterances in "Rats away!" speech events is to understand them first and foremost as actions performed with language. The fusion of words and music in the song, I will suggest, makes its points less

Ex. 1.3: The first vocal utterance in "Rats away!"



[instrumental interruption]

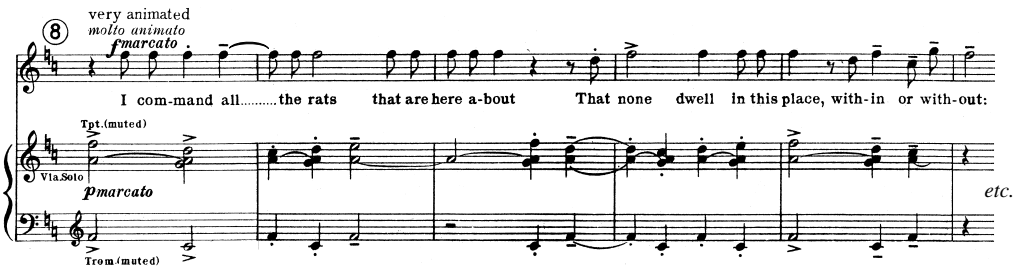
by projecting the semantic content of individual words, than through a bold interplay of distinct speech events – vividly contrasted utterances that constitute specific actions on the part of the singer. Highlighting a proximity of extreme contrasts in the character of each utterance, moreover, the song builds up a strong tone of parody – setting a mood that Peter Pears aptly dubbed "spiky, exact and not at all cosy" (63). The opening setting of "rats!" is a case in point, far surpassing in sheer exuberance any spoken intonation of the word one might imagine. In Britten's score, the word becomes a quivering series of breathless gasps, a stream of vowel sound that effaces its characteristic phonetic articulations. As a way of introducing the solo voice into the orchestral texture, this near-*vocalise* is a daring ploy on Britten's part (one that lies outside the main text as Auden has devised it). The "rats!" exclamation is a shriek, albeit a highly stylized one, comprising numerous rapid scalar runs that build to a penetrating high-register finish.

In the body of the song, the singer settles down to more conventional forms of syllabic text setting (Ex. 1.4), each quite distinctive in texture: a rapid, monotone chant ("I command all the rats") leads to more tuneful melodic contours ("the holy man"), then the voice drops, finally, to a kind of stage whisper ("Dominus, Deus"), at the lower end of the soprano range.[15] The chant, backed by the hurdy-gurdy sound of open strings (in solo viola), is a litany of holy and saintly names recited with a very distinct purpose. The song, a listener soon realizes, is a prayer of exorcism: "God grant in grace / That no rats dwell in this place." The chant is as mechanical, in its repeating melodic revolutions, as the opening cry was wild, and it is the sharpness of this contrast at the level of utterance within the song that generates its bizarre climax. At this moment, the pious chant and the near-hysteric shriek come together within the soloist's vocal part (Ex. 1.5). As the prayer shifts from English to Latin words for its formal Doxology ("Et in nomine . . ."), the singer reverts to chant, now against an orchestral backdrop more animated than before. But at the same time, as Britten's own 1936 program note puts it, we hear rats "creeping into the soloist's part",[16] scampering between phrases and words – even at one point finding their way *inside* words ("et Sanc – (Rats!) – ti Spiriti"). The voice part fragments, its attempts at formal delivery of the prayer undercut by the high-pitched "rats!" shrieks.

Has the exorcism failed, or are these "rats!" cries a sign of rodents leaving in droves?[17] One is not exactly sure, yet Britten's attitude to setting the text enacts the drama of the situation. The scene comes vividly to life in an experimental overlay of sharply distinct registers of utterance – a prayer, a cry of fright – to comic effect. The technique bears a resemblance, as an act of montage, to the inter-cutting of text and utterance types Britten was employing in his contemporary work on documentary sound film.[18] In its parodic caricature of ecclesiastic chant, moreover, the song looks ahead to the play with sacred and secular musical genres that informs several later operatic scores.[19] Capturing the song's vein of parody almost requires that one make utterance a central term of the analysis; foregrounding utterance, one attends closely to questions of enunciation and delivery – an exaggeration of some recognizable *way* of speaking – while downplaying the more familiar perspective on texted song that seeks only musical translations of meanings grounded in figurative verbal imagery. An utterance-based analysis need not ignore details of illustrative "expression," but it will direct attention to dimensions of the musico-verbal performance that lead beyond the local sphere of a word's semantic reference, and out into its function within the social world. "Rats Away!," as musical utterance, works above all by caricature, and – in a recognizably

Ex. 1.4: Three utterance types in "Rats away!": (a) chant; (b) tunes; (c) stage whisper

(a)



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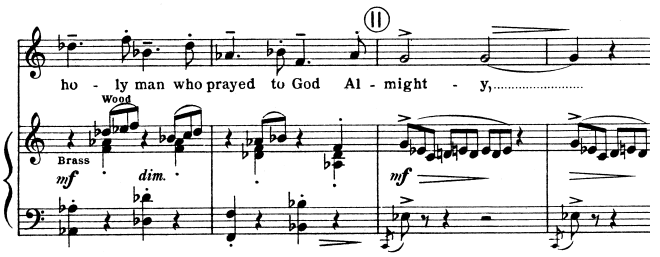

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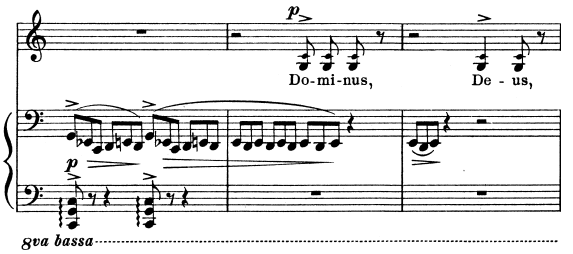
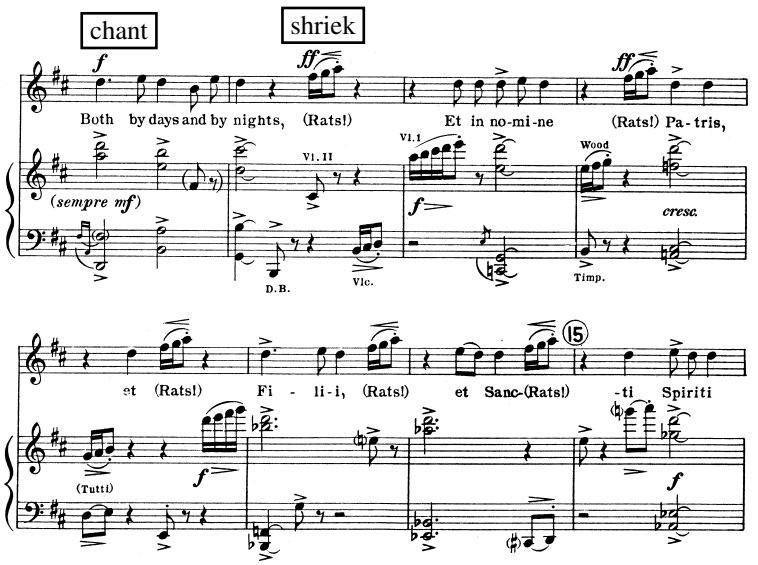


Ex. 1.5: Montage of chant and "Rats!" shrieks



Audenish touch – by subverting the expected solemnity of a familiar speech genre, the act of prayer.

Our Hunting Fathers places a vocal soloist within the environment of a full orchestra, so prompting questions on the relation of vocal utterance to a surrounding instrumental texture. If utterance connotes a psychological presence – a sounding of intent, rather than merely a noise – then vocal utterances are not simply happenings, but actions.[20] The vocal soloist in "Rats away!", I noted, casts out evil spirits with her ceremonial speech, but can the same be said for the song's orchestral component? Everything the vocalist sings is an utterance of some definable type (cry, chant, whisper), but do the instruments too have a "voice"? Glancing back to the interplay of voice and orchestra in Example 1.3, one might regard the orchestra as a kind of second, wordless speaker, capable of interrupting the singer. Britten's 1936 program note mentions "an emphatic protest from the wood-wind" here,[21] and this "protest" interrupts with a theme heard previously (also in the orchestra) at the climax of the first song of the cycle. The orchestra, like the singer, would appear capable of a form of speech governed by more than the local exigencies of a verbal text.

To suggest that wordless instrumental gestures, like texted vocal music, are a form of utterance might seem too broad a claim. But explicitly appropriating a general linguistic category in this way foregrounds the role of verbal language in Britten's music at levels beyond that of conventional text

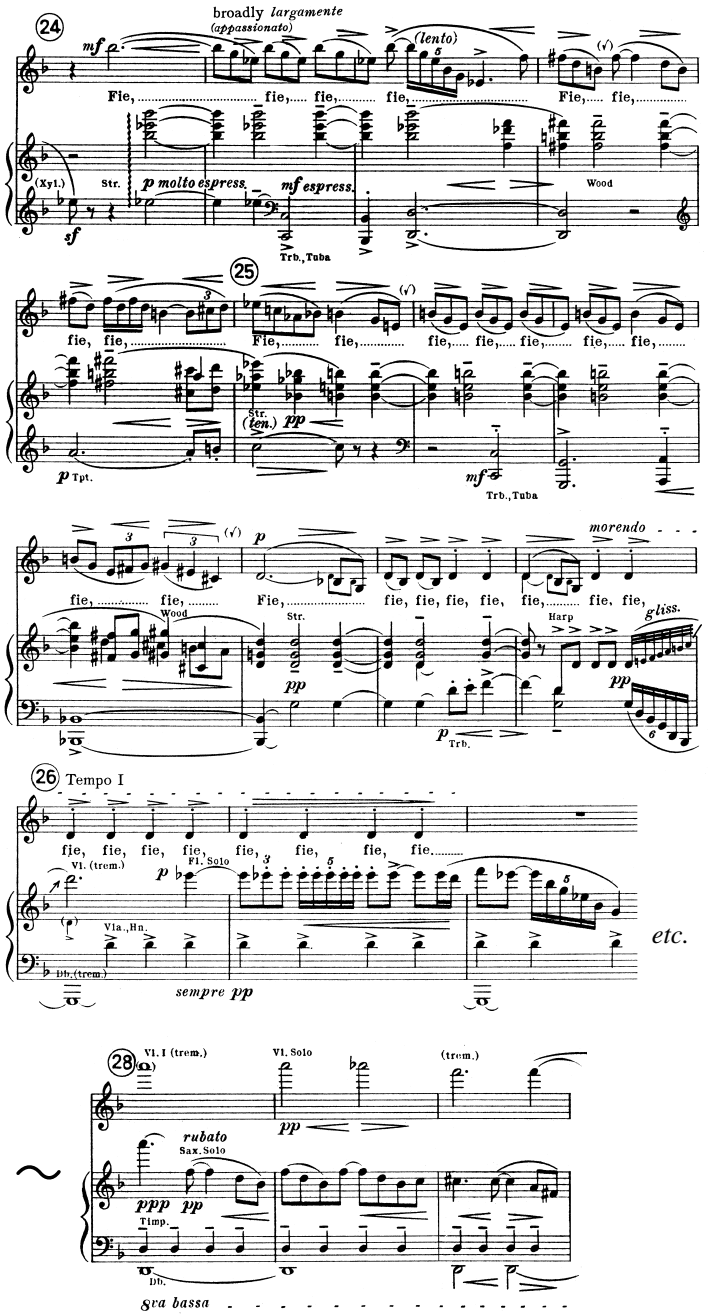
"setting." The language in Britten's music, as I will argue throughout this book, resides not simply in the fusion of words and music in texted vocal utterance, but also in a rhetoric of exchange *between* vocal and instrumental utterances, over the entire span of a work. An interplay of texted and "mute" utterance is familiar in the Wagnerian concept of orchestral leitmotive as a melodic or harmonic reference with a precise semantic dimension, and in related concepts of orchestral "narration" as a supplement to the scenic events on the operatic stage (to cite topics addressed in depth in Chapters 2 and 3 below). Returning to *Our Hunting Fathers*, this interplay between voice and instruments is particularly vivid in the second song, "Messalina," which closes with passionate cries of lamentation, first in the voice itself, and then in an extended sequence of instrumental gestures (Ex. 1.6).

The words here – "Fie, fie" – are weak in semantic potential; like the extraordinary "rats!" cry of the first song, their meaning depends on their place in a larger scene:

> Ay me, alas, heigh ho, heigh ho!
> Thus doth Messalina go
> Up and down the house a-crying,
> For her monkey lies a-dying.
> Death, thou art too cruel
> To bereave her of her jewel;
> Or to make a seizure
> Of her only treasure.
> If her monkey die
> She will sit and cry:
> Fie, fie, fie, fie fie!

The poetic speaker begins by reporting Messalina's grief-stricken wanderings, but ends more passionately. The opening line ("Ay me, alas, heigh ho!") retains the sense of sympathetic comment on Messalina's plight, but at the poem's climax, the singer slips into direct discourse, speaking *as* Messalina.[22] In Britten's setting, the force of this utterance goes beyond the detail of its stylized "sobbing" third-figures. As with the earlier "rats!" cry, the moment stands projected by the thematic return of the motto-theme familiar earlier in the cycle, shared now between both voice and orchestra (in Ex. 1.3, the motto "protest" is solely orchestral). From this climactic transcendence of actual voice, the song recedes into an orchestral epilogue. "Lamenting" woodwind solos – flute, oboe, clarinet, finally the saxophone – imitate the voice, drawing out the sobbing into a somber death march. Utterance, in this Mahlerian "Nachtmusik," passes from human sobbing to the wordless speech of the animal world (most notably in the flute's bird-like calls).[23]

Ex. 1.6: "Messalina," vocal and instrumental "lamenting"



Both voice and instruments seem to carry Messalina's lament, but the utterance encompasses a transformational rhetoric, as sung words give way to "mute" pitched articulations. The haunting epilogue of "Messalina" looks ahead to Britten's large-scale operatic dramaturgy, not least to those points where a decisive vocal utterance provides the basis for later, wordless instrumental developments (one thinks, for example, of Claggart's "I accuse you," in *Billy Budd*). The distinction between actual sung words and the wordless speech of instrumental utterance, at such points, is less a shift in the identity of what is communicated (the "message," as it were), than a change in the way performer and hearer maintain *contact*. Voices and instruments may utter versions of one musical message, but they do so through different channels. To restrict the song's utterance only to those passages that set actual words is to polarize artificially the distance between "words" and "music" as Britten construes it. Messalina's laments, instead, suggest that musical utterance is actually a category broader than traditional concepts of "text setting" or "musical diction."

With the idea of "contact" as basic to any speech, and recalling the perception – noted earlier in the case of both "rats!" and "fie, fie" cries – that verbal language need not always assert an explicitly semantic reference – discussion returns to the basic insight that language works as much by action as by signification. Nor is spoken utterance – the simple "stretch of talk" – limited conceptually by the basic need for contact between speakers or the possibility of verbal reference to some non-verbal context. As Roman Jakobson argued in a classic 1958 formulation, the speech event engages a multi-faceted system of interlocking factors:[24]

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER MESSAGE ADDRESSEE

C O N T A C T

CODE

The speech event balances relations among an addresser, an addressee, and a message; for communication requires physical *contact* linking addresser and addressee, and a shared *code* (English, for example). The act of speech will invariably engage an outside *context* for a message. Jakobson's influential scheme is a revisionary response to those earlier linguists who would restrict analysis of verbal language to a purely referential function – the position exemplified in Sapir's claim that "ideation reigns supreme in language" while "volition and emotion come in as distinctly secondary factors" (38).

Considering musical utterance as a Jakobsonian speech event, it is possible to go beyond arguments (familiar in Wagner's *Opera and Drama*)

that pit the referential precision of verbal language against music's lack of semantic potential. Analyzing Britten's music as a form of utterance, I aim not to overturn the argument outright – by denying the role of verbal signification, or by ignoring music's potential for "emotional" significance – but instead to reframe the discussion in terms that do not isolate questions of semantic reference from the other factors that make up the speech event. The extraordinary prominence, in *Our Hunting Fathers*, of words that seem, at first blush, devoid of reference – an interest continued in the violent "whurret!" roulades of the third song, "Dance of Death"[25] – is a reminder that the meaning of speech is always more than mere reference to the non-verbal "world," and that musical utterance, like its spoken counterpart, resists the separation of a verbally based meaning from the conditions of its sounding passage.

2. Beyond the voice: the song quotations in *Lachrymae*

Musical utterance, in *Our Hunting Fathers*, is neither exclusively vocal nor instrumental, but poised instead on a range of interactions between voice and orchestra. Each speech event echoes and supplements the others, so that the piece as a whole amounts to a composite utterance, made up of many single enunciations – themes and gestures – shared among solo and ensemble, verbal and "mute" (i.e. wordless) performers. In this kind of unfolding discourse, palpable shifts of speaking presence are easily heard. The cyclic returns, in *Our Hunting Fathers*, of the "protest" motto generate one such shift, a chain of instrumental themes binding the songs together, adding expressive depth at strategic moments in the texted song. In a comparable way, the leitmotives that thread their way through Britten's operas articulate a musical discourse operating in the gaps between actual singing. The very familiarity, within post-Wagnerian opera, of leitmotives as an articulate though non-verbal presence almost allows one to forget just how often plot events come to music by a move *beyond* the voice itself as the main channel of utterance (as, for instance, with the mysterious *Grimes* passacaglia, and the returning "interview" chords late in *Billy Budd*).[26] Understanding the continuity of wordless thematic utterance – whether in a "symphonic" or scenic context – requires that one link aural awareness of *what* is stated always to *how* it is performed. The analysis needs to move beyond the cliché that speaks only of a theme's being "given out" at a particular point in a work, as if all thematic "statements" were equally prominent, and identically scored. Music's surfaces are never so absolutely flat, but marked by the distinct unevennesses of an argument – the wrinkled patterns, in other words, of discourse.

How discourse arises as musical utterance unfolds is the main focus of my second case study, of *Lachrymae: reflections on a song of Dowland*, for viola and piano (1950). "Discourse" here denotes the form in which a narrative is articulated, rather than its basic substance (often termed "story"). In a musical sense, discourse arises when a given utterance (a theme, say) is set off from surrounding utterances by discernible articulations or shifts (in mood, topic, or stylistic register, for example). Discourse forges a link between a given event and the circumstances of its enunciation.[27] In *Lachrymae*, as Britten's title already suggests, the most aurally vivid shift is that of quotation, the appearance of a speaking utterance – John Dowland's – foreign to the immediate context. The shift to direct quotation, moreover, is audible stylistically as a traversing of historical distance: musical speech moves from the here-and-now of Britten's mid-twentieth-century idiom to the relatively archaic realm of Dowland's late Elizabethan soundworld. The quotations in *Lachrymae* are discursive shifts in a different, more problematic sense: they are all fragments of *song*, their even, flowing melodies a stylistic marker of a vocal utterance set off from more self-evidently instrumental textures. This purely instrumental vocalism – in the viola-piano medium there can be no actual singing voice – constitutes the work's central expressive mystery. An aspiration towards voice as the truest physical manifestation of human presence haunts *Lachrymae*.[28]

The discourse of quotation in *Lachrymae* is far from being a simple binary opposition of direct and indirect speech, however. The work as a whole suggests rather a sequence of moves along a continuum between Dowland's unmediated voice, directly quoted at one moment only, and the ten variations or – staying with Britten's unusual title – "Reflections" that form the main body of the piece. A complication arises, for while the main variation sequence is addressed towards the closing revelation of its source, Dowland's song "If my complaints," Reflection 6 mysteriously and poetically interrupts the scheme with its fragmentary quotation of a second song, the famous *Lachrymae* of the title. Conceived visually (as in Fig. 1.1), the argument of *Lachrymae* shifts between the direct quotation, in which Dowland's voice asserts autonomy from its context, and indirect discourse, in which it is assimilated, to varying degrees, into Britten's "reflections."

The discourse of literary quotation, the linguist Vološinov observes, is one of dynamic and reciprocal exchange of a reporting voice and a quoted speech – the two "exist, function, and take shape only in their interrelation" (119). At a first glance, the schematic right-to-left shifts visualized in Figure 1.1 for *Lachrymae* suggest a musical analogy for this interactive

Fig. 1.1: Discursive shifts within *Lachrymae*

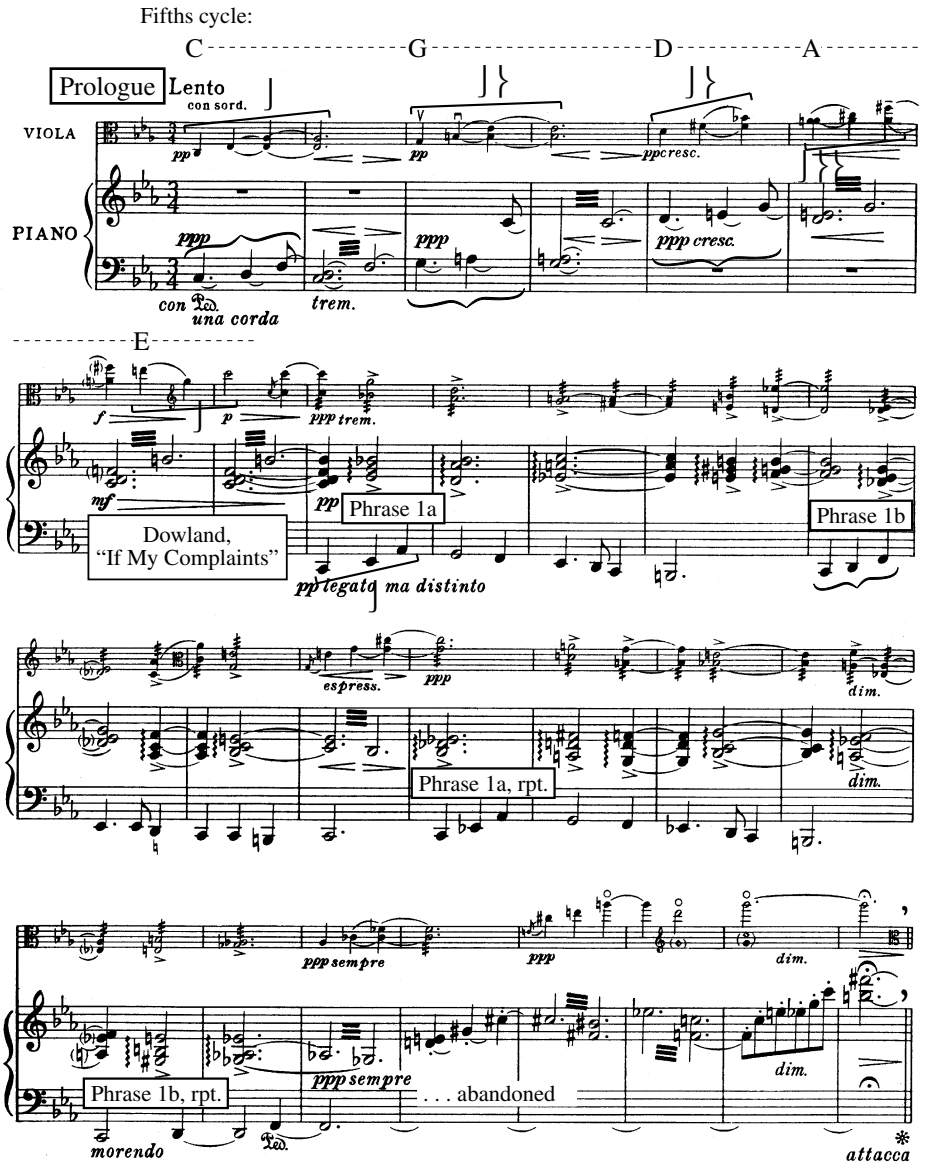
direct discourse (song quotation) indirect discourse (instrumental variation)
thematic autonomy .....thematic assimilation
Dowland Britten

Lento: Dowland, "If my complaints," Phrase 1 …
occluded by Britten's harmonies
Reflections 1-5: Alpha motive (from Phrase 1), variations
Reflection 6: Dowland "Lachrymae" melody, fragment (viola)
with Alpha accompaniment (piano)
Reflections 7-9: Alpha motive, variations
Reflection 10: piano/viola Alpha ostinato
Phrase 1 extensions, viola (m. 16–)
Phrase 1, piano joins (m. 24–)
… Dowland, "If my complaints," Phrases 2-3,
original harmonies (m. 34-end)

process. The move from utterance originating in the *hic et nunc* of the present to utterance drawn from "beyond" is evident, for instance, in the separation of Reflection 6, with its direct Dowland quotation, from neighboring movements that treat Dowland's materials more obliquely as source material for the ongoing "reflection" process. The chart encapsulates too the music's aural drama of dawning presence. Thus the work opens in a tentative and ambiguous manner, poised between exposing Dowland's voice intact, and obscuring its intonation in a setting that is recognizably Britten's. The ensuing Reflections cluster to the right of Figure 1.1, as utterances that assimilate Dowland's voice to Britten's discourse. The mounting intensity of Reflection 10, finally, is that of progressive motion to the left, "towards" utterance that is recognizably Dowland's alone. The lack, in instrumental music, of *literary* marks of indirect discourse – tense and mood shifts, deictic pronouns, reporting verbs – situates any comparison of "quotational" discourses between distinct media at the level of analogy. That said, a closer perusal of the discursive shifts summarized in Figure 1.1 suggests just how far the analogy between media can be pushed. Doing so will reveal a rhetoric of quotation in Britten's music with its own highly developed harmonic, textural, and motivic forms.[29]

In the opening Lento (Ex. 1.7), as I noted, Dowland's melodic "voice" speaks only obliquely, for the melody line of the song "If my complaints" is exposed only in a shadowy and fragmentary form. The two balancing phrases (1a, 1b) of Dowland's first strain appear in the bass at measure 9,

Ex. 1.7: *Lachrymae*, Lento: introducing Dowland's song, "If my complaints"

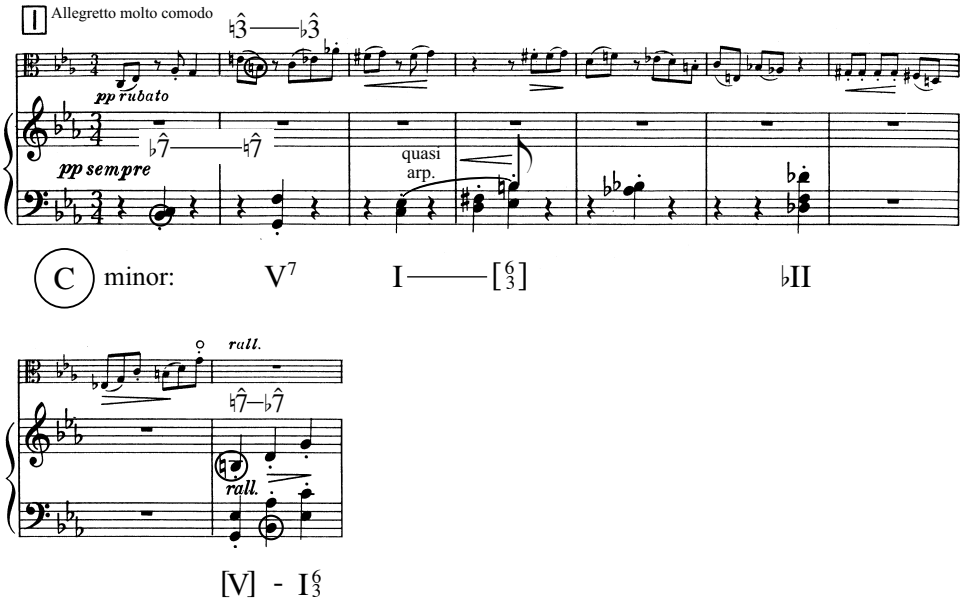


yet the song peters out without cadence halfway through a repeat. This inauspicious, faltering thematic exposition is itself prefaced by a prologue (mm. 1–8) that gestures towards the song in obsessive meditation on its rising-sixth head-motive. The viola transposes the <C–E♭–A♭> Alpha-cell via an open-string fifth cycle <C, G, D, A, E>; in the piano, a similar pattern governs statements of the <C–D–F> Beta incipit of the consequent phrase 1b. Every pitch in the first eight measures is thematic, yet by conflating the Alpha and Beta cells into dense clusters, the music hides their identity. From its opening measures, the work's thematic rhetoric is intensely motivic, yet veiled in its workings. The stability of Dowland's C-minor home tonic is equally shrouded – notably, by the prominent distortions of Alpha to an augmented triad (mm. 3–4). Here, as elsewhere in *Lachrymae*, it is tempting to trace Britten's quotation technique, in both overall atmosphere and specific detail, to the model of the Bach chorale quotation in Berg's Violin Concerto.[30]

Britten's quotation – unlike Berg's – is fragmentary, both in the sense of stating a single phrase only of its source, and in stripping the melody of its original harmonies. Textural opposition between the bass line's clear C minor and Britten's anachronistic upper-voice triads implies an "interference" of utterance, or else a discourse in which the boundary between Dowland's theme and the mediating context Britten creates is less than clear-cut.[31] Delivery of the song-theme ("legato ma distinto") is shrouded in this opening movement by the indistinctness of tremolando and *luthé* figuration, and by the persistence of instrumental muting, both *sordini* and *una corda*. The harmonic opacities of Reflection 1 – the result of pervasive modal ambiguity, with passing bitonal allusion (m. 4) to a B tonic – compromise the C-minor home tonic (Ex. 1.8), only deepening the atmosphere of speech just slightly out of earshot.[32]

Reflection 6, by vivid stylistic and textural shifts, announces a more direct mode of address (see Ex. 1.9). Abandoning the antiphonal frictions of Reflection 5 with a euphonious mutual accommodation between melody and accompaniment, the music gives internal cues to the listener of a change of speaker. The actual "Lachrymae" quotation here – from Dowland's song, "Flow my tears" – is signaled to performers by the literary quotation marks (" ") surrounding the viola melody in the score.[33] For listeners, the viola's discovery of a singing voice is audible in the emergence of a smooth diatonic line after the chromatic (and markedly instrumental) quadruple stopping of Reflection 5. This quotation, though, stops short of direct, unmediated address; it is fragmentary and infiltrated by hints of a commenting speaker. While the viola melody is apparently "utterance belonging to *someone else*" (Vološinov 116), its actual identity is hidden:

Ex. 1.8: Ambiguities of tonal presence in Reflection 1

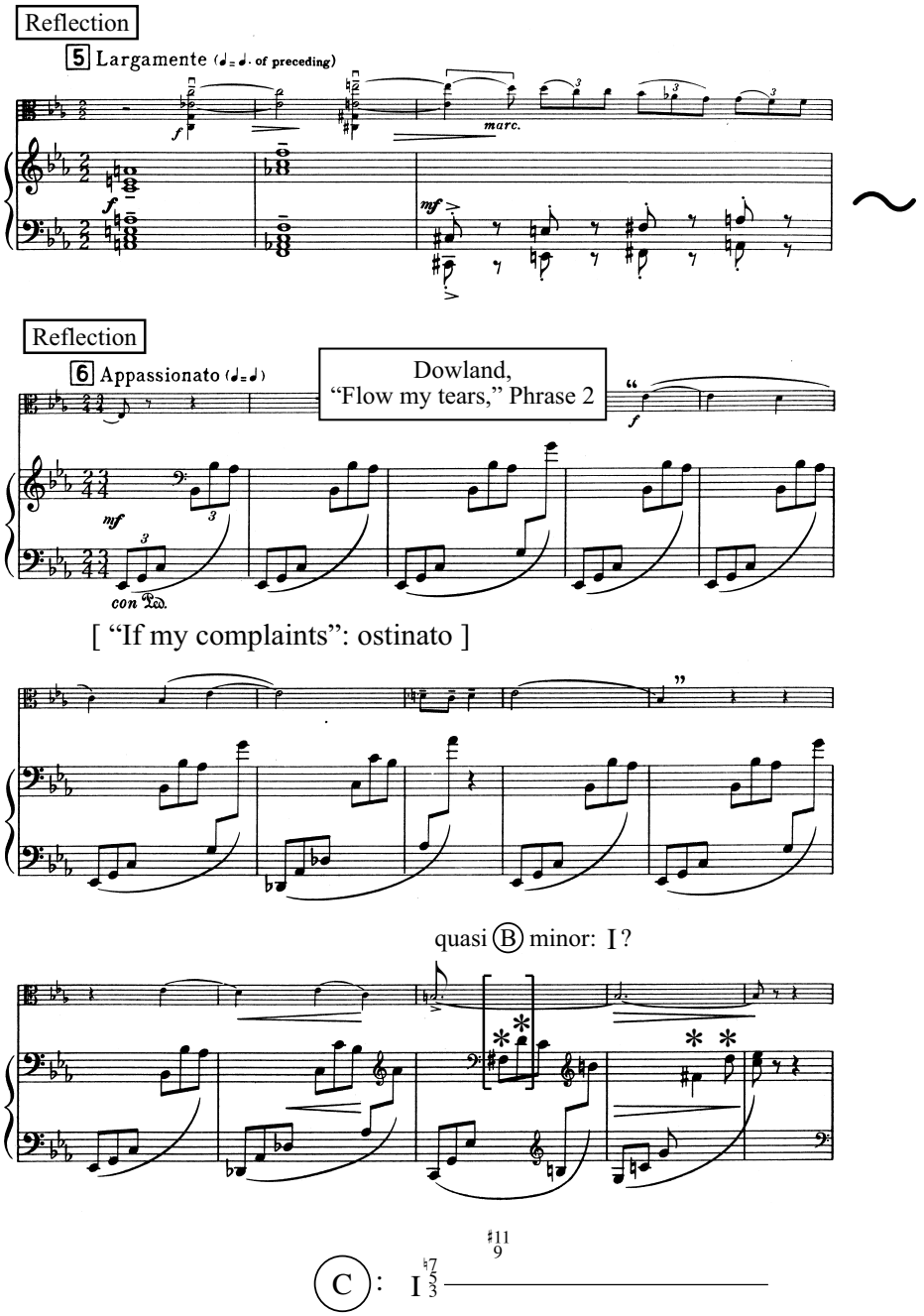


Dowland's famous "Lachrymae" tune, starting *in medias res* with its second strain, is disguised. The piano accompaniment, meanwhile, is historically "wrong" and tonally subversive (phrase endings return to the earlier C/B tonic ambiguity). As this momentary reflection of song recedes from view, subsequent musical images – the Valse and Marcia topics in Reflections 8–9 – speak a language more modern than Elizabethan.

Direct quotation, a breaking-through of a voice to direct utterance, emerges in *Lachrymae* (as in the Berg Concerto) by a concluding epiphany.[34] In this boldest of discursive shifts, Dowland's previously hidden song, "If my complaints," is discovered during Reflection 10 and finally allowed to complete itself in tonal cadences long withheld. The approach is gradual, however, starting with a searching motion in the viola (from m. 16 onwards, Ex. 1.10), joined by the piano (m. 24), finally reaching Dowland's original melody and parts, to conclude the song. By a process of unbroken metamorphosis, relatively dissonant modern chordal sonorities transform themselves into a voice-leading that is, for the first time in the work, unequivocally Dowland's.

In this final recovery of the work's source-song after so much oblique "reflection," tense motivic developments give way to broad-limbed melodic utterance. Powers of voice are unblocked. Viola and piano, I have claimed, in their movement between indirect reflection and direct quotation, speak a

Ex. 1.9: Cues for "Lachrymae" quotation, Reflections 5–6



discourse. This discourse, though, is without the crucial linguistic possibility of self-designation – instruments cannot name an "I" or a "we" – and yet, in the end, listeners are compelled to accept the viola as a quasi-vocal presence.[35] For much of the reflection process, I have suggested, Britten's *Lachrymae* conflates speaking presences in a scenario with connotations of utterance occluded or held back, if not of outright struggle among speakers. (In purely instrumental terms, the work prefigures those unsettling convergences of vocal and instrumental utterance so crucial to the interplay of human and numinous presences in Britten's staged works of the early 1950s.[36])

Articulating a purely instrumental claim to voice, *Lachrymae* returns discussion of utterance in Britten's music to Jakobsonian concepts of contact as the channel through which communication flows. The encounter, in every performance, is with an instrumental discourse mysteriously troubled by sustained meditation on the power of song, realized in a yearning for vocal expression – an almost Beethovenian celebration of "songfulness" as a property of instrumental lines.[37] Britten's *Lachrymae* defamiliarizes song, yet it is worth recalling that it does so in a strategy of quotation, arrangement, and glossing that would have been entirely familiar to Dowland himself.[38] Only the estrangement of a distant past, and the mysterious historical reversal by which the predecessor (Dowland) emerges as the *imitation* of its descendent (Britten), reveal a more modern sensibility.[39] Composed around a yearning for what is absent, *Lachrymae* dramatizes the gulf – central to Britten's art – between instrumental utterance that is complete in itself and an articulate utterance, grounded more directly in the expressive capabilities of verbal language.

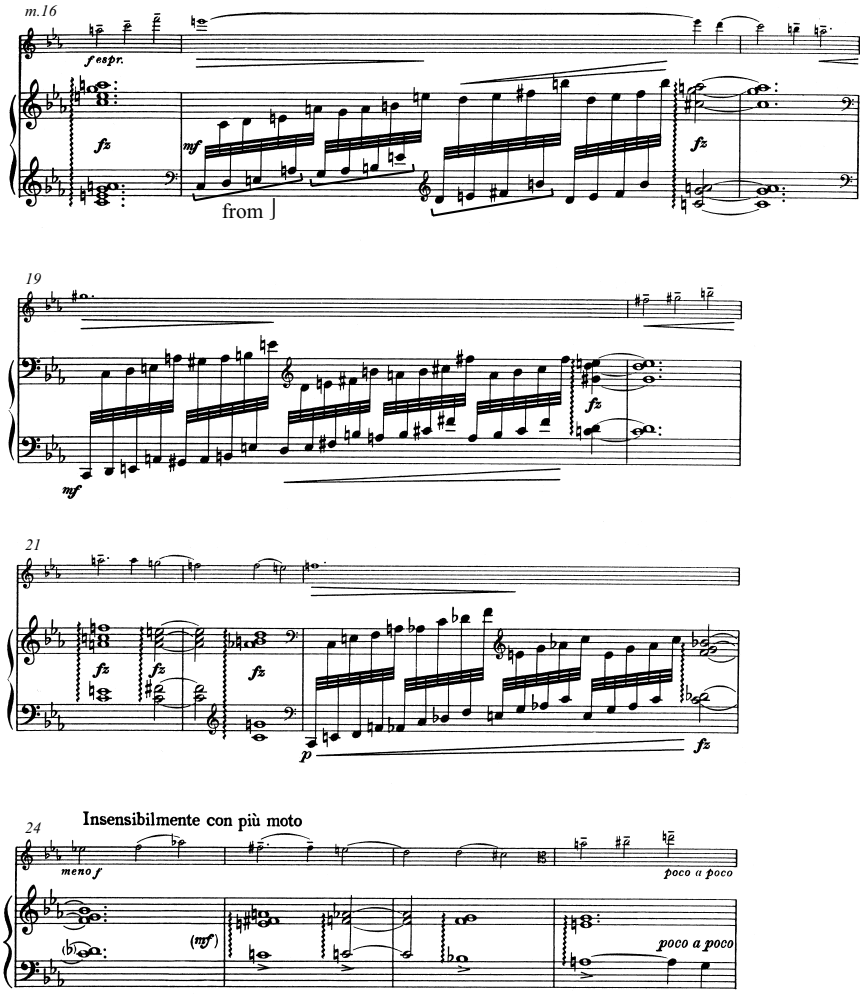
3. The social utterance: divine speech and ritual in *Noye's Fludde*

> Noye, Noye, heare I behette thee a heste,
> That man, woman, fowle, ney beste,
> With watter, while this worlde shall leste,
> I will no more spill.
>
> God's promise, *Noye's Fludde*

Looking briefly at the concluding moments of the children's opera *Noye's Fludde* (1957– 58), I want to end this preliminary sketch of the domain of the utterance in Britten's music with a turn towards the inherently social functions of all speech.[40] Musical speech, in both *Our Hunting Fathers* and in *Lachrymae*, for all the sophistication of its discursive makeup, tends towards a kind of soliloquy, texted or inarticulate, in which a single more or less clearly defined speaker addresses the listener. In *Noye*, on the other

Ex. 1.10: Dowland's "If my complaints," thematic epiphany

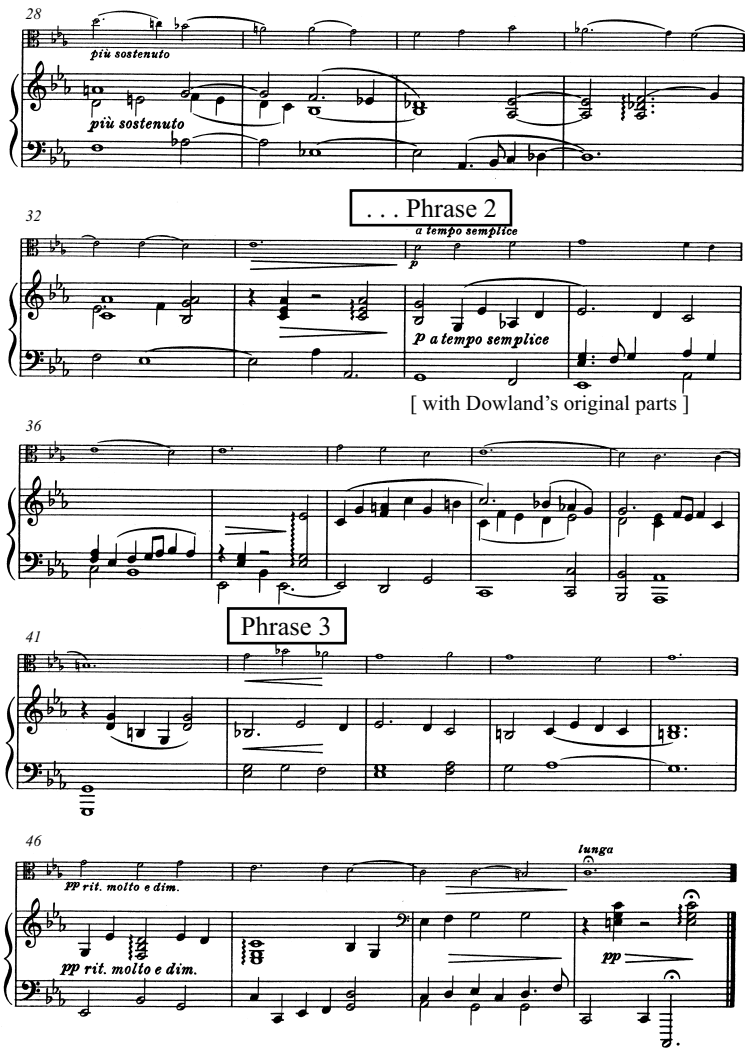
[*cf.* "If my complaints," Phrase 1]



[piano harmonies join]

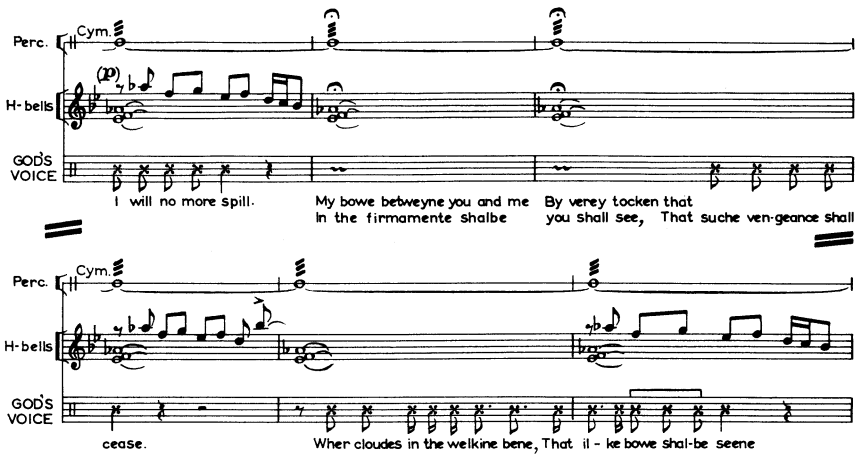
hand, the encounter with utterance is emphatically social, for speech here takes place between distinct persons in an explicitly dramatic setting. God's promise at Ararat – "Noye, heare I behette thee a heste" – never to bring another flood is one of those defining moments in Britten's musical dramas when utterance, by its inherently fused nature (word and note as "one thing, not two"), generates an event of forcefully overdetermined significance, encapsulating the whole action in one shattering musico-linguistic gesture. This promise music (Ex. 1.11) is a kind of acoustic miracle

Ex. 1.10 (*cont.*)



wrought by the appearance in Britten's score of handbells. The brilliant metallic shock of their peal here mollifies the voice of an angry, destroying God who earlier speaks only in thundering tones (and drum rolls). But the promise is more than a local sonic revelation; it is the catalyzing event for a collective musical response, one that moves the closing moments of *Noye* from dramatic representation to ritualized enactment. Ending with a familiar hymn tune, *Noye* unites the costumed performers on stage with the witnessing congregation in a shared act of song. The progression from

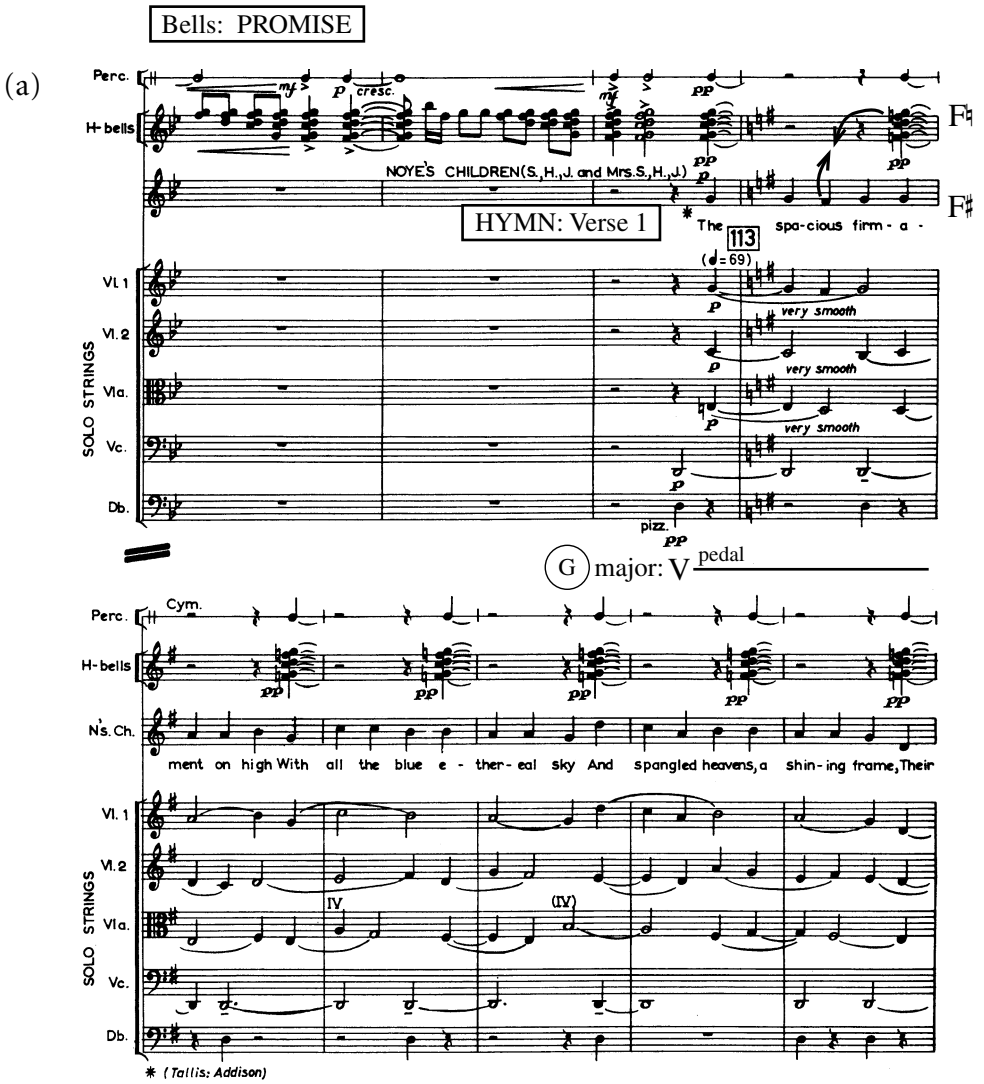
Ex. 1.11: *Noye's Fludde*, God's promise to Noye



mythic promise to general rejoicing is achieved, I will argue, in musical gestures that enact a social contract between speakers. Understanding the persuasive force of Britten's musical language, then, requires that one acknowledge fully its basis in speech as an inherently social phenomenon.

To elaborate a theory of the utterance as a social phenomenon is to recognize that all speech contributes, as Bakhtin evocatively puts it, to a "chain of speech communion."[41] The utterance, he goes on to note, cannot be understood as a discrete linguistic unit (like the sentence), for speech is at root an act of dialogue and communication. Utterance reaches beyond the internal features of individual sentences (units of merely grammatical significance) to invoke relations between speakers – question/answer, assertion/rejoinder, assertion/objection, et cetera. Speech is always "oriented toward the response of the other." An act of speech – unlike a sentence – correlates "directly or personally with the extraverbal context of reality." Such formulations find parallels in other recent theories of linguistic exchange. Thus Bakhtin's emphasis on the "situation" of speech recalls Jakobson's view of the speech event as multi-dimensional, far exceeding the merely semantic sphere of a word's potential for objective reference. Similarly, in J. L. Austin's well-known discussion of so-called performative utterance – where "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (not "just saying something") – one moves towards an analysis of speech grounded in social ceremony and culture-specific custom.[42] The promise ending *Noye* is such a speech act; a closer look at its place in the closing moments of the opera reveals ways in which the interpersonal dynamics of social speech take sounding form in Britten's music.

Ex. 1.12: Communal speech: rejoicing at the rainbow



The dramatic force of God's promise in *Noye* comes about in its musical union with the congregation's response. Promise and hymn of rejoicing achieve a miraculous fusion as the first verse steals in (see Ex.1.12a). The thrill of this moment, surely, springs from the tingling interplay of separate tonal claims (with the F♮'s of the bell clusters rubbing up against F♯'s in the hymn tune).[43] These distinctive tonal viewpoints span the overall scene. The higher brightnesses of the bell overtones correspond to the