STYLISTIC FUSION IN THE CABARET SONGS OF
BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND W.H. AUDEN:
A PERFORMER'S ANALYSIS

by

ERINN ROBERTS

B.Mus., Voice Performance, The University of Lethbridge, 2001
M.Mus., Opera Performance, The University of British Columbia, 2003

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ABSTRACT

The Cabaret Songs of W.H. Auden and Benjamin Britten merge characteristics of a multitude of styles. The purpose of this document is to investigate the fusion of styles making up the Cabaret Songs and to analyze them from a performer’s perspective with the goal of providing collaborative partnerships with an historical and musical foundation on which to build their interpretation of the Cabaret Songs and thereby serve as a basis for informed performance decisions.

Chapter 1 includes biographical information for both Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden focusing on how the two artists met and discusses their working relationship during the seven years in which they collaborated. Also included is a short section of relevant biographical information on the singer/actress Hedli Anderson for whom the Cabaret Songs were created.

Chapter 2 includes a brief overview of the history of the European cabaret-artistique and examines the creation and development of this art form. Examples of cabaret songs from other composers, namely Erik Satie, Kurt Weill, Friedrich Hollaender, and Noel Coward are given to show the musical soil of the era, from which the Britten and Auden pieces sprouted.

Chapter 3 discusses the Cabaret Songs on a song-by-song basis and provides a musical analysis from a performer’s perspective, outlining the different musical influences in each song and investigating the cross-pollination of musical styles. The songs will be examined for characteristics of traditional European art song, operatic elements, American popular song elements, European dance rhythms and elements of original European cabaret.
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For Greg & Cooper
CHAPTER 1
HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Benjamin Britten

To understand most intimately Britten’s compositional process, the various composers who influenced the young musician prior to and during the creation of the songs will be examined. These early influences will shed light on the musical choices Britten made for the *Cabaret Songs* and will lead into the further discussion on how Britten treats Auden’s text.

Words and music were married early in Britten’s mind. As a nine year old he had bound together a volume of his settings of various poets, which contained poems by Tennyson, Longfellow, Shelley, Shakespeare and pieces from the Bible.¹ This love for setting words to music continued throughout Britten’s life and although vocal music was not his total output during his college and early post-college composing, it occupied an important position in it.

Britten’s first composition instructor and musical mentor was the English composer, violist and conductor Frank Bridge (1879-1941). Bridge’s early compositional style followed 19th Century traditions and showed a particular influence of Brahms.² During WWI Bridge’s style began to acquire a new chromatic intensity, which intensified in the years following the war with further modern developments such as the use of

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² This information as well as the following information on the compositional style of Frank Bridge can be found in the article: Paul Griffiths and Jeremy Dibble, “Frank Bridge,” *The Oxford Companion to Music*, edited by Alison Latham, Oxford Music Online, [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e968](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e968) (accessed June 12, 2008).
bitonality. Bridge was at first reluctant to meet the then 14-year-old Britten but at their first meeting he soon realized that there was something quite remarkable about him. Bridge agreed to teach Britten composition at his London home and arranged with Harold Samuel (1879-1937), an English pianist primarily known for his distinguished interpretation of Bach, to teach him piano.

The fact that Frank Bridge had no other student allowed him a freedom to exert influence on the young man that went far beyond Britten’s composing. Britten often visited the home of Frank and his wife and traveled with them to the south of England and to Paris. These travels sparked conversations on the latest poems and trends in painting and sculpture and greatly influenced his early taste in music. Britten’s lessons with Bridge were long and intense, and he would often emerge exhausted and pale, yet these encounters were significant in shaping his early technique. In “Britten Looking Back,” an interview Britten gave to the *Sunday Telegraph*, the composer explains how Bridge influenced him to,

…think and feel through the instrument I was writing for, to write in a freer harmonic idiom (I learned about bitonality from Bridge), and to transmit all that was conceptualized clearly to paper.

Through concerts and the study of various scores, Bridge introduced the young composer to the music of Mahler, Holst, Ravel, Walton, and Stravinsky, but in the area of vocal

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music, sharp disagreements developed between the two:

Bridge’s approach was largely German, 18th and 19th Century at that, and by then I’d discovered Purcell and the English madrigalists...I didn’t altogether like his approach to it, and he, brought up on a Hugo Wolf tradition, never liked mine.  

In the fall of 1928, Britten won a music scholarship to attend Gresham’s School at Holt and during his studies there he discovered modernism as a movement and began to show an interest in modern art, especially Picasso and the works of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. After completing his studies at Gresham’s in July of 1930, Britten became a student at the Royal College of Music (RCM) where he studied piano with Arthur Benjamin and composition with John Ireland. In many ways Britten found himself to be out of step with the College’s expectations of him as his interests seemed to lie outside the walls of the school. Britten had a strong desire to meet Alban Berg and wished to study with him in Vienna but a representative of the college persuaded his parents that it would not be in his best interest to do so. At the time there was a moral prejudice against serialism and his parents were convinced that Berg’s influence on Britten would be a negative one and forbade him from studying with the serialist composer. As a result of this decision, Britten always felt that he had to climb over gates which otherwise would have opened for him.

7 Ibid., 5.
9 All of the information in this paragraph can be found in Michael Trend, *The Music Maker* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 232.
In the preface to *Peter Grimes* (1945), Britten reveals another influential force in his compositional technique and describes his objectives in the area of word-setting:

One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell.\textsuperscript{10}

It is clear that one of Britten’s greatest early influences was Henry Purcell. Imogen Holst claims that Britten owed more to Purcell than to any other composer and he always went on learning from his music, not only from what he described as the “clarity, brilliance, tenderness and strangeness” of the songs, but also from the vitality of the instrumental pieces.\textsuperscript{11} Britten did not imitate Purcell’s style, but sought to assimilate it into his own works through his accentuation of the text and decorative shaping of melodic lines. Percy Young suggests that Britten displayed what Purcell might have done had he been a 20\textsuperscript{th} and not a 17\textsuperscript{th} Century composer.\textsuperscript{12}

### 1.2 Wystan Hugh Auden

Throughout the numerous interviews, biographies and articles on Benjamin Britten, one can easily find references to the poet Wystan Hugh Auden or as he commonly referred to himself, W. H. Auden. Although there is some debate on the degree of intimacy that existed between them, one cannot dispute the intensity of their professional working relationship. This investigation intends to show Auden’s influence on Britten, as it applies to the *Cabaret Songs*.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 49.
Auden’s early literary influences were Wordsworth, W.H. Davies and Walter de la Mare. It was in Walter de la Mare’s *Come Hither* of 1923, where Auden learned “that poetry does not have to be great or even serious to be good.” Thomas Hardy was also a great influence on the young poet and Auden read his poetry almost exclusively from 1923-1924. Hardy’s poems were largely pessimistic and often depicted unrequited or unhappy love, something of which Auden was progressively becoming more aware at this time in his life. Other early influences on the young poet included writers such as Edward Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen, Gerard Manley Hopkins and A.E. Houseman.

During his years at Oxford University (1925-1928), Auden began to establish a reputation on campus as both a refreshing new poet and as a mentor to many fellow classmates. Students would seek him out for instruction on their writing, their psychological ailments and life in general. By his final year, Auden’s reputation had grown to the point where he considered himself the leader of a new movement, “The Colleagues,” which consisted of emerging artists, who were each assigned a position to hold in this “new regime” (rather like a shadow cabinet,) should it come to power. Members included Isherwood, Day-Lewis, Spender, Rex Warner and Robert Medley. Some parallels can be drawn between “The Colleagues” and the “Hydropathes” of the fin-de-siècle, the early pioneers of the cabarets in France, who are discussed at length in the cabaret portion of the dissertation. Auden’s small group of artists in many ways

13 Ibid., 34.
14 Ibid., 35.
mirrored the goals of the “Hydropathes,” in particular their desire to give a new voice to the literary world and their disgust of war and oppression.\(^{17}\)

After graduating from Oxford in 1928, Auden was given the opportunity to study abroad at a destination of his choice - a generous graduation gift from his father. Auden chose to study in Berlin, which was at the time the cosmopolitan centre of Germany in the height of the German Weimar Republic. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, with the relaxation of censorship, Berlin was the place to be to experience all things new and exciting in art, literature, painting, architecture, theatre and cinema. There was a new political, social and moral atmosphere in Berlin that was very enticing for the young poet who grew up in a very traditionally conservative family and attended a very strict conservative boys’ school in his middle school years. Perhaps even more attractive was Berlin’s reputation for sexual permissiveness. To be homosexual (the orientation of both Britten and Auden) at that time in England was not only frowned upon but was illegal and the diversity of the sexual underworld in Berlin was no doubt reassuring. Much of Auden’s year was spent in Berlin’s many cafés and cabarets where adolescent boys were often seen soliciting English visitors for sex in exchange for money or gifts.\(^{18}\) Auden’s experiences with these young boys led him to write the play The Reformatory that eventually evolved into The Enemies of the Bishop.\(^{19}\) Like other young English writers greatly concerned with censorship, Berlin, during the last years of the German Weimar Republic, was like a paradise where artists flourished in an environment of extraordinary


\(^{19}\) Carpenter, *Auden*, 98.
freedom.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1932, Auden was back in England when Robert Medley (choreographer) and Rupert Doone (dancer) proposed that Auden write a play for a new group of performers who called themselves “The Group Theatre.” The idea was to combine the small forms of dance, mime and speech in a kind of total-theatre experience that would be self-sufficient and free from commercial pressures.\textsuperscript{21} They also hoped the group would become a social force for left-wing ideals. This Group Theatre, much like “The Colleagues” of Auden’s Oxford years, shows direct parallels with the early cabarets of the fin de siècle, with their use of small forms, their sense of political purpose, and their embrace of a Wagner-like “Gesamtkunstwerk” where all elements of the performance, i.e. speech, sung word, dance and music are equal in importance. One may draw the conclusion that while in Berlin, Auden became inspired by the many literary cabarets-artistiques and wished to transplant in some way the philosophies and ideals of the continental cabaret artists to his homeland.

Because the texts of the four \textit{Cabaret Songs} are each based on some form of “love,” a discussion of the private love life of the poet would be applicable to a performer’s analysis of the pieces. A pivotal change in Auden’s life occurred in 1933 when he became romantically involved with a man much younger than he. Up to this point his poetry on the subject of love had been obscure and even bitter, but because of this new romance, his poetry changed in tone and began to take on a dreamlike quality. This new approach to writing, coupled with a willingness to be involved with, rather than detached from his emotions, gave his work new dimension. Richard Hoggart

\textsuperscript{20} Page, \textit{Auden & Isherwood: The Berlin Years}, 9.
\textsuperscript{21} Carpenter, \textit{Auden}, 138.
summarized Auden’s new style in the following way:

Auden wrote mostly brief lyrics and sonnets, though he had said more than once that he was interested in all forms of verse, from limericks to poems of volume and length. His comic verse was influenced by the popular forms of jazz, cabaret, music-hall, and army songs. As is evidenced by his collaboration with Stravinsky, Henze and Britten, Auden was interested in opera libretti for the inherent difficulties they presented to the poet. Most of his poetry has an indirect, but strong moral solution or purpose.\(^{22}\)

One of the most outstanding and representative literary figures of the 20\(^{th}\) Century, Auden produced poetry noted for its lyricism and technical expertise. He wrote social criticism with cutting satire and comedy with bitter irony, drawing on history, the arts and the sciences for his material.\(^{23}\) His creative expression was the result of several influences: upbringing, schooling, the political climate in England in the inter-war years, changing concepts of class, sexuality and debates about the function of the artist.

### 1.3 Britten & W.H. Auden: The Collaborative Years

Although the temperaments of Britten and Auden were very different and their period of collaboration relatively short, Auden had a deep influence on Britten and is arguably the most influential person in Britten’s early years as a professional composer. As Basil Wright, who was close to both men, wrote in a personal communication, “It may

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well be that it was Wystan who first awoke Ben’s real imaginative and emotional life.”

24 Britten began his professional collaboration with Auden on the set of the General Post Office Film Unit in July of 1935. This was a small documentary film company that worked on a tiny budget but its mildly liberal viewpoint made it appealing to young intellectuals. Britten’s first experience with the film company was to work on a production of The King’s Stamp (1935), a film which celebrated King George V’s Silver Jubilee postage stamp, and for which he had been hired to compose the incidental music. Working for the film unit was excellent training for Britten. It taught the young composer discipline and forced him to deal with immense stress as deadlines were short and the pressure to meet them was great. Britten also learned how to write scores for six or seven instruments during his time spent with the company.

26 His next projects with the documentary unit were to be Coal Face (1935) and Night Mail (1936), two films that included the young Auden, who worked on their scripts. Britten reveals his first impression of the poet: “Auden is the most amazing man, a very brilliant and attractive personality.”

27 Auden made an immediate impression on the youthful Britten. Seven years his senior, Auden had already established a reputation as a poet and spokesman for the Left and Britten often felt inferior to his great intellect. Auden, however, was immediately struck by the composer’s “extraordinary musical sensitivity in relation to the English language.” They continued to work together and their relationship grew into a mutual admiration and close friendship. Auden left the

25 Welford, My Brother Benjamin, 89.
26 Ibid., 87-88.
27 Carpenter, Benjamin Britten, 65.
28 Ibid., 178.
G.P.O Film Unit in early 1936, however his collaboration with Britten continued.

Britten summed up his assessment of Auden in a letter to Marjorie Fass, an amateur artist and musician as well as a close friend to Frank Bridge and Britten:

I know you would like W.H.A. [Britten’s abbreviation of Auden’s name] very much. He is a very startling personality – but absolutely sincere and very brilliant. He has a very wide knowledge not only of course of literature but of every branch of art, and especially of politics; this last in the direction that I can’t help feeling every serious person and artists especially must have -strong opposition in every direction to Fascism, which of course restricts all freedom of thought.29

It is apparent from this quote that Auden had begun to influence Britten’s political views and this increased further when Auden decided that Britten was to be the composer for “The Colleagues.”30 The 1930s saw a maturation of Britten’s political views: he was beginning to act out against his middle-class upbringing and found the “anti-bourgeois” stance of Auden and “The Colleagues” appealing. London in the 1930s produced a new generation of socially and politically committed poets and artists, headed by Auden. Modern art was more available and works of Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth were fuelling discussion.31 Britten was a pacifist, partly due to the influence of Auden as well as Bridge and during the 1930s, Britten wrote a number of overtly political works: Russian Funeral (1936), Pacifist March (1937), and settings of texts by socialist writers such as Randall Swingler and Montague Slater.32 The symphonic cycle Our Hunting Fathers, Op. 8 (1936), which was centered on humanity’s

30 Carpenter, Benjamin Britten, 65.
31 Oliver, Benjamin Britten, 48.
32 Ibid., 54.
treatment of animals, was his strongest political statement. Based on Auden’s text, this cycle was not received well by the conservative English audiences and did not have any further performances until it was revived in 1960.  

In the fall of 1935, under the persuasion of Auden, Britten was hired to compose the incidental music for Auden’s revival of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, produced by the Group Theatre, established by Auden, Doone and Medley in 1932. This was the beginning of several works on which Britten was to collaborate with them, another being *The Ascent of F6* (1937), a play that included the singer/actress Hedli Anderson (1907-1990). *The Ascent of F6* experienced great success and subsequently led to the creation of the *Cabaret Songs*.

### 1.4 Hedli Anderson & The *Cabaret Songs*

Hedli Anderson (later wife of the poet Louis MacNeice) began her musical training in London at the age of seventeen with the hope of becoming a successful opera singer. She soon realized that she did not possess the kind of voice necessary for a career in opera, but her personality and unique vocal style, along with a newly cultivated love for the work of Bertolt Brecht, led to a new direction in her career. Built upon the tradition of the “chanteuse et comedienne” Yvette Guilbert, Anderson began to enjoy a

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33 Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, 55-57.
34 Donald Mitchell, Foreword to the *Cabaret Songs* (London: Faber Music Limited, 1980).
career in theatre, revue and cabaret.\textsuperscript{36} Wulff Scherchen, son of the German conductor Hermann Scherchen and friend of Britten, writing in 1988, had a vivid recollection of Anderson:

\begin{quote}
I often think back to first seeing her on the stage of the old Troc [Scherchen’s abbreviation of the Trocadero Grillroom in London]. We’d walked there from the flat, Ben, Peter and I, to collect her after what must have been a Saturday matinee performance. She was the leader of the chorus line and looked absolutely stunning, indeed ravishing. What marked her out from all the others was above all the effect produced by her voice. As good luck would have it, she later at the flat sang for us not only many of Ben’s cabaret songs, including ‘Tell me the truth about love’, but Victorian music-hall ballads she knew well. I recall only one, but with great delight, called ‘Up in a balloon, boys, up in a balloon’. I thought she was marvelous, and of course she was.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

This recollection is based on an evening spent partaking in the late-night cabaret established at the Trocadero Grillroom, Piccadilly Circus, established by Charles B. Cochran in 1924. This cabaret provided a run of shows that continued until the outbreak of war including \textit{Night Lights}, in which Anderson was the leading lady. The show entitled \textit{The New York World’s Fair} included music-hall songs, dance, acrobatics and topical items, e.g. the song \textit{Everybody’s Going to the New York Fair}, words and music by Lorraine in which Anderson appeared in the role of the Statue of Liberty.\textsuperscript{38}

In the early 1930s, Anderson used her skills both as a musician and an actress in various productions by the Group Theatre where she first worked with Auden and later

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Mitchell, \textit{Letters from a Life}, 544.
\textsuperscript{38} Mitchell & Reed, \textit{The Language of Learning}, 61.
with Britten. In 1934 she accepted the role of the Cabaret Singer in Auden’s *The Dance of Death* after which she performed “old and new songs of satire” in the Group Theatre’s *Midnight Cabaret* (1934) and the role of Madame Bubbi of the Hotel Ninevaeh in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936).\(^{39}\) In 1937 Britten was asked to compose the music to the Auden/Isherwood play *The Ascent of F6*. It was in this production that Britten composed the music for *Stop all the Clocks*, the song that was later to become the *Funeral Blues* of the *Cabaret Songs*. The quality of Anderson’s performance in *The Ascent of F6* inspired Britten and Auden to create a repertory of cabaret material specifically for her.

According to the singer, it was Rupert Doone who suggested to Auden and Britten the possibility of creating a collection of “cabaret-songs” for Anderson, very much in the German and French tradition.\(^{40}\) There is some debate on the exact number of cabaret songs planned by Britten and Auden and only four complete examples have survived: *Funeral Blues* (which is based on the funeral dirge in *The Ascent of F6*), *Johnny, Tell Me the Truth about Love* and *Calypso*. The surviving songs were first published by Faber Music in 1980 and have since been broadcast and recorded by several collaborative partnerships.

The following quotation given by C. Gordon Glover in 1943 in connection with a radio production of Sackville-West’s *The Rescue*, in which Anderson played the role of Athene, appeared in the *Radio Times* and gives insight into Anderson’s relationship with the cabaret art form and her relationship to Britten and the *Cabaret Songs*:

> I am told that Benjamin Britten has made a first-rate job of the incidental music to the production; Hedli Anderson should find no difficulty in singing her

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 62.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 64.
share of it. It was for her that Britten wrote some satirical little ‘cabaret songs’ some years ago. Hedli Anderson has done most of the things that are expected of singers in their days – opera, broadcasting, cabaret, and revue, in which last she once found herself singing an aria from Traviata from the top of a ten-foot pillar.41

The ‘cabaret songs’ to which Glover referred are not exactly the four we find in the 1980 Faber & Faber publishing. The songs he speaks of, all based on texts by Auden, were composed during 1937: on the 5th of May Johnny (which is found in the 1980 edition), and between the 6th and 8th three further songs, including Jam Tart and Give Up Love, neither of which have survived to be published. According to Mitchell another ‘blues’ was written by Auden while he was living in America in 1939, though there is no evidence to suggest that Britten ever set it. Around the same time Auden sent Britten ‘a ballad’ for Anderson entitled Miss Gee and there is also an Auden manuscript item in a kind of quasi-dramatic scena created c. 1938 in three verses, each of which ends with a refrain, ‘I’ve fallen out of love with you’ however, there is no evidence that Britten ever attempted a setting of either of these poems.

It is interesting to note that in 1937, the year Funeral Blues, the first of the Britten/Auden Cabaret Songs, was written, Britten and Auden collaborated on a song cycle entitled On This Island, which became Britten’s first published group of songs with piano accompaniment. It sets five poems by Auden from the collection Look, Stranger! which had been published in 1936 and which included two poems dedicated to Britten. Compared to Britten’s previous song cycle, Our Hunting Fathers, which has a quasi-

symphonic unity, *On This Island* is more a sequence of self-contained vignettes, as is true of the *Cabaret Songs*. The songs of *On This Island* are also notably simpler in their relatively orthodox approach to word-setting and use of more traditional harmony. In the final song of the cycle, *As it is, Plenty*, one can see the influence popular or lighter music had on the young composer. This song is based on the dance music of the 1930s, as evidenced by the clipped rhythms, all dotted rhythms being executed in a “swing-style,” as triplets, rather than sixteenth notes and by the angularity of the melodic lines.

(Figure 1 – “As it is, plenty” mm. 23-24)

![Musical notation](image)

Source: *On This Island*

This song shows Britten’s appreciation for popular music and how he integrated it into his classical vocal repertoire. It is obvious that popular and cabaret-style music had a great influence upon him during the years 1937-1939 as evidenced not only through the repertoire intended for Hedli Anderson but also in the song cycle *On This Island* written for the soprano Sophie Wyss.

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1.5 Britten and Auden in America

Under the impending clouds of WWII, Britten developed an increasing desire to leave England and to go and experience America. It seems a little strange that he should go; he was enjoying great success in England and was also very close to his siblings. However, he was approached by a producer at Paramount to score an upcoming Arthurian film entitled *The Knights of the Round Table* and through his friend Aaron Copland, Britten was beginning to recognize the wealth of musical ideas found in American music. Auden and Isherwood had left for America in 1939 and Britten comments regarding his choosing to leave his home for a new world:

I was terrifically under Auden’s influence at the time. He preached that one’s roots should be in ideas and people, not places and environment. Also, I was immensely depressed about Europe.

In the same year, Britten and Pears left for the United States and after vacationing briefly in Canada, they stayed with friends in Amityville. In 1940 Britten and Pears shared a residence with Auden in New York, which proved to be much different from the solitude of Suffolk. Poets, musicians and theatre people were free to drift in and out at all hours or would sometimes live there for extended periods. Louis MacNeice in his autobiographical *The Strings Are False* enlightens us further:

I was staying now in a household in Brooklyn Heights, still being painted and without much

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furniture or carpets, but a warren of the arts, Auden writing in one room, a composer composing and a singer hitting a high note and holding it, and Gipsy Rose Lee the strip tease queen, coming round for meals like a whirlwind of laughter and sex. It was the way the populace once liked to think of artists – ever so Bohemian.  

It was not long before Pears and Britten returned to Amityville. New commissions and conducting opportunities were sustaining the composer financially and although Britten was torn between England and America, he decided to stay in his new environment until the war was over. It was here in America that *Calypso*, the fourth of the *Cabaret Songs* was written, as evidenced by its obvious ties to New York’s Grand Central Station.

After Britten’s return from America in 1942 he had no intentions of writing further cabaret songs, however in a 1946 broadcast (*The Composer and the Listener*, BBC Radio, published in the *Listener* as ‘How to Become a Composer,’ 7 November 1946), Britten told his audience:

> I maintain strongly that it is the duty of every young composer to be able to write every kind of music – except bad music. That has nothing to do with high-brow or low-brow, serious or light music. It is a good thing for a young composer to have to write the lightest kinds of music. I knew […] a good cabaret singer who asked me to write some songs for her. I obliged and wrote to the best of my ability some ‘Blues’ and a Calypso of which I am not at all ashamed.

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CHAPTER 2

CABARET AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION

INTRODUCTION

The word *cabaret* conjures different images for everyone; therefore, before delving into the main body of this chapter, a simple definition of the term would be beneficial. *Cabaret* originally meant a simple tavern or corner bistro, however, in the early 1880s, the cabaret evolved into what came to be known as the *cabaret-artistique* - part literary café, part artist’s haunt, part caveaux (originally: singing society) and part goguette (basically a singing club/society where forthright political exchanges and criticisms in song took place). This new artistic venue was the direct bi-product of social and artistic rebellion instigated by a small group of Bohemian artists in fin-de-siècle Paris. Over the next three decades, the *cabaret-artistique* evolved as it moved across Europe, from representing the epitome of the avant-garde in Zurich, to being crippling censored in Nazi Germany. Wherever it went, the *cabaret-artistique* shed an honest light on the current status quo and provided composers with the perfect environment for experimentation with music of a “lighter” quality, including jazz and blues.

What follows is a discussion on the beginnings and evolution of the cabaret-artistique and included in this discussion are examples of repertoire heard in various cabarets-artistiques of Europe. Although not exhaustive, they can be considered representative of the type of songs being written within the genre in the period leading up to Britten and Auden’s collaboration on the *Cabaret Songs*. There is no evidence that
Britten ever heard any of these pieces, but they do provide the historical context and background, musically speaking, in which the *Cabaret Songs* were conceived and were part of the cultural and musical atmosphere that Britten and Auden may have been exposed to during their travels and experiences in Europe.

### 2.1 The Birth of the Cabaret-Artistique

The fin-de-siècle was a time of turbulence, anarchy and increased mechanization and fascination with technology.\(^{47}\) The previous two decades had given the world the telephone, light bulb, phonograph, automobile, and in 1903, the airplane. These inventions contributed to an explosive expansion beyond what had previously been assumed to represent the limits of human possibility. All the arts seemed to draw new energy from this wave of innovation and musical culture in Europe underwent an enormous transformation.\(^{48}\) In the decades preceding the Belle Époque (approximately from 1890-1914) music was still being composed in an harmonic framework and in forms and styles that were widely accepted, but these elements of composition were rapidly being challenged as the 19\(^{th}\) Century was drawing to a close. Political and social struggle were central in much of European public and private life during this period and this struggle was mirrored in the music of the time. Naturally, new aesthetic and technical features were introduced into music throughout history; however this crisis in mainstream music reached an unprecedented climax around 1900 when composers pushed musical language to the outer edges of tonality. The musical environment at the turn of the


century was perhaps the most significant turn away from mainstream music, as everything surrounding European culture was buzzing with the shock of the new, and music was no exception. Grandiosity was prevalent in late 19th Century art, literature, and music.49 Three volume novels, huge paintings with hundreds of significant details, massive expositions, and Wagnerian music dramas are all elements one can associate with late Romanticism. By the end of the century, a reaction against this grandiosity began to be seen and heard in art and music. Laurence Senelick comments further:

...poets repudiated the epic in favour of limited lyric forms like the villanelle and triolet. And in the performing arts, the significantly named ‘little’ theatre movement, exemplified by the Théâtre Libre in Paris and the Intima Teatern in Stockholm, eschewed commercial compromise by staging subtly performed one-acts or chamber productions of an experimental nature.50

The “one-act” production exemplifies the reaction against gigantism and the cabaretparlé artistique was a direct by-product of this mentality. Segel characterized cabaret as an “art of miniatures” or Kleinkunst, that is, an art consisting of genres which were previously regarded as “minor” in relation to the major genres of high culture.51 The chanson, pantomime, monologue, one-act skit, poem, marionette show, and shadow play were all “miniature” elements which made up the early European cabaret-parlé artistique.52

Before the creation of the cabaret-parlé artistique, the primary source of entertainment in Paris were the café-concerts, a type of variety entertainment often presented out of

50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
doors, which showcased the most popular singers, dancers, and chansons of the day. These café-concerts made no artistic claims and catered more to a lower or middle class society rather than aristocracy. As Theodore Zeldin reveals:

What distinguished the café-concert from the theatre was that there was no formality involved; one came when one pleased, in short sleeves or overalls if one liked; one ate and drank as one watched the show; one shouted applause, abuse and comments freely; one was always incited to join in the singing.

The primary focus of the café-concerts was entertainment and although a satirical or protest song may have been part of the program, these more aggressive chansons were reserved for what was later to become the cabaret-artistique. The café-concerts, which were increasingly numerous in the latter decades of the 19th Century, were the source of much of the gaiety and sociability of Paris and made entertainment much more regularly and casually available. The fair, music-hall, circus, and merry-go-round were all part of the whimsical atmosphere which dazzled turn of the century Parisians. The diversity of the popular Parisian establishments was reflected in the program of the café-concerts and ultimately in the cabaret-artistiques as well.

During this time, the “French chanson” became the principal form of entertainment provided in the café-concerts of Paris. Typical chansons of the period included romances and chansons d'amour as well as folk songs and patriotic chansons.

56 Ibid., 19-20.
françaises. Chansons covered a variety of topics, often associated with love or simple entertaining topics, but they could also function as a reporting vehicle somewhat like a performed version of a newspaper. Chansons of the time would often spoof or ridicule authority or target hypocritical sexual mores, becoming an extremely valuable democratic tool for criticism and protest. Often, the role of the chanson was to shock its listeners with images of urban misery, crime and social injustice, representing the opposite of the Paris élite. The artists of Montmartre embraced the chanson for their own “cutting edge” work in the cabaret-artiste, developing the chansons parodies spoofing opera arias and mélodies of leading classical composers, as well as the chansons macabres dealing with death and the occult, the chansons réalistes, and chansons rouges about criminals and street characters, and chansons satiriques making fun of local politicians and social figures.

Rodolphe Salis’ Chat Noir, established in 1881 in Montmartre, was sparked by a small literary society known as the “Hydropathes,” a group of poets and artists founded by poet Émile Goudeau, who met weekly to perform their works for one another through “miniature” genres such as poetry, sung lyric, marionette shows, monologue, and short sketch. Literally the term “hydropathes” refers to those who suffer from the ingestion of water (instead of alcohol). So construed, the name implies a pun on the name of its founder: gout d’eau, a taste of water. One also suspects a reference to the name of Henry Murger’s bohemian circle of thirty years earlier, Les Buveurs d’Eau (the water drinkers).

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60 Segel, Turn of the Century Cabaret, Intro.
The Hydropathes were anti-establishment: their form of rebellion against the political and social injustices occurring in their world. By adopting the satirical and political protest song as their tool, the Hydropathes were the pioneers of what was to become a monumental movement towards the artistic avant-garde of the 20th Century. What was attractive to the early artists of this movement, was the opportunity it afforded them to add the element of play into their works. For them, the cabaret.artistique represented freedom, creativity, playfulness and the ability to express oneself without the grandiose seriousness, which, in their opinion, plagued 19th Century art. Two significant elements characterized the early cabaret.artistique and set it apart from the Parisian café-concert: first, it was a laboratory for young artists who often deliberately advertised themselves as avant-garde; and second, it acted as a critically reflective mirror of topical events, morals, politics and culture. The situation was optimal if both elements were present. This art form stood in between the “high art” of the professional concert stage and the “low art” of the café-concert, and because of its spontaneous nature and impromptu performance, the cabaret.artistique was a flexible medium which directly reflected life and popular culture. As word of this literary society spread, the group soon swelled to fifty members who met on Wednesday and Saturday evenings from 9:00 pm until midnight for drinking, smoking and much singing and recitation. The programs of the Chat Noir were extremely diverse and included humorous dramatic sketches called pochades, shadow plays in twenty or thirty tableaux, poetry readings, and, of course, the main staple of the

61 Whiting, “Music on Montmartre”, 163.
62 Ibid., 164.
63 Ibid.
64 Senelick, Cabaret Performance, 14.
program, the satirical or political protest song. Poètes-chansonniers generally performed their works during the interludes between the tableaux of a shadow play or the acts of a pochade and this ordering of events called attention to the variety of the repertoire. Salis held the position of conférencier or emcee and built his program on the element of surprise and improvisational spontaneity.

The term “Bohemian” is often used to describe artistic life in Paris, usually referring to the culture surrounding the Latin Quarter between the years 1850-1880, and often including the Montmartre artists of the fin-de-siècle. It first appeared in the 1830s, meaning “gypsy” from Bohemia, usually referring to individuals who shared a “marginal existence based on the refusal or inability to take on a stable and limited social identity” and “lived simultaneously within ordinary society and outside it.” The idea of the Bohemian was popular during this period and many of the cabaret-artistique collaborators came out of this environment of artistic freedom including Erik Satie and the members of “Les Six.”

2.2 Early Composers of Cabaret Song

To help identify what defines a “cabaret song,” one may look to two of the most popular chansonniers of the fin de siècle cabaret-artistique scene, Aristide Bruant and Yvette Guilbert. Wolfgang Ruttkowski suggested that there are two main styles of

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68 Ibid., 11.
cabaret song presentation today—each based on these two very distinct performers.70 Each chansonnier’s mode of presentation differed greatly from the other and subsequently, a “school” has been modeled after each of their respective styles which lasts until today. Where Bruant was primarily a chansonnier/chanteur, Guilbert was a diseuse, meaning a performer or actress who mainly recites with music.71 Bruant, a great presence both physically and artistically in the Montmartre district and more specifically at the Chat Noir and at his own Montmartre cabaret-artistique Le Mirliton, was primarily a “folk singer” whose presentation was exclusively singing. Guilbert, the famous diseuse who frequented the stages of several Montmartre cabaret-artistiques, had a very different approach to her cabaret song presentation which combined aural elements with visual through her movement on stage, her great use of facial expression, and her unique declamation of the text.72 Her style was concerned primarily with the delivery of the text and the performance was more along the lines of “recitation with music” achieved in part through vehicles such as Sprechstimme - the use of speech-singing where one performs the text as if speaking on pitch rather than fully resonating in a truly singing manner.73 In her published book The Art of Singing a Song, Guilbert defined her kind of cabaret performance as “un drame condensé” - a little drama condensed into a few lines. From this highly dramatic type of recitation, Guilbert also developed a rhythmical freedom which has become a common element of cabaret singing in our day, but which was totally cutting-edge in her time. She called this technique, “rythme fondue” which can be

71 Ibid.
translated as “softened rhythm” or “suspended rhythm”. Ruttkowski defines this technique further and notes the influence Guilbert had on Bertholt Brecht with whom she was to collaborate with later in her career:

This technique consists of temporarily abandoning the underlying meter of a poem or song for the sake of expression, rushing ahead or slowing down the words in favour of a 'gestic rhythm', as Brecht later liked to say.74

Guilbert's performance techniques were brilliantly innovative and during her career several performers such as Marie Dubas, Marianne Oswald, and Agnes Capri idolized her.75 Those who followed in Bruant's “folk-singer” footsteps included the singers Georges Brassens, Juliette Greco, Yves Montand, and Edith Piaf.76

Erik Satie, a prominent composer of the era, belonged to the circle of cabaret-artistique and café-concert entertainers and led the typical hand to mouth existence of a Bohemian chansonnier. He spent the period from 1887-1909 as both a composer of art music and as an insider of the most popular Parisian cabaret-artistique, the Chat Noir. Contaminé de Latour, poet and friend of the young Satie, described how the Chat Noir “revealed to [Satie] his vocation and transformed him completely.”77 The Chat Noir's atmosphere of satire, parody, wit and mockery as well as its defiance of convention appealed to him immediately and he became assistant to the principal pianist, Albert Tinchant. It was here at the Chat Noir that he accompanied singers, wrote occasional song arrangements and played the piano for shadow plays. Along with his colleagues and

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74 Ruttkowski, “Cabaret Songs”, 45
76 Ruttkowski, “Cabaret Songs”, 45.
77 Ibid.
friends, painter Henri Rivièreme, poets Jules Jouy and Maurice Donnay, and poet/humorist Alphonse Allais, Satie challenged bourgeois conventions by creating “absurdist” songs, plays and humorous satires in the *Chat Noir* journal. His cabaret and café-concert songs for the singer Paulette Darty (the “Queen of the Slow Waltz”) were among his most commercially successful works, and included the pieces *La Diva de L'Empire* (text by Numa Blés), *Tendrement* (text by Vincent Hypsa), and *Je Te Veux* (text by Henry Pacory).

Most of the popular music Erik Satie composed falls under the general designation of *café-concert* song. In Satie scholarship, popular institution labels such as *café-concert*, *cabaret-artistique*, and *cabaret* are used interchangeably. In discussions of his material no musical distinction is ever made as these songs were performed at both the cafés-concerts and cabarets of Paris. Satie was a gifted melodist and some of his best compositions fall within the category of cabaret. Two early cabaret songs are *Tendrement* (1902) and *Je Te Veux* (1897); the melody of the latter is typical of the lyricism found in all of Satie’s reflective *café-concert* songs. In *Je Te Veux*, the frequent use of ties and the division of verse and refrain into two sixteen-bar strains are characteristics commonly found in waltz music of the period. Through the romanticism of the French language and the sweeping waltz rhythm, the lusty atmosphere of *Je Te Veux* is created:

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78 Ibid.
As a lead into the A section of the piece, Satie writes a very short four measure introduction (much in the same fashion as the introduction to Britten’s *Johnny*). The overall form of *Je Te Veux* is ABABA with the A section utilized as a type of refrain, a

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form which Britten adopts in *Tell Me The Truth About Love* although Britten’s B section is much longer. Both the A section and B section of Satie’s *Je Te Veux* are made up of two eight measure phrases which are then repeated, resulting in a thirty-two measure section for both. The A section is written in the tonic (C major) while the B section modulates to the dominant key (G major). Both sections are lyrical, simple in melody and piano accompaniment, and stay within the traditional key areas of C major and it’s dominant. Neither section ventures away harmonically or chromatically and maintains the light playfulness of the Parisian waltz throughout. As will be discussed during the analysis portion of the dissertation, Britten uses the slow waltz in what can be described as the fourth section of *Johnny*, directly referencing this popular café-concert style. It is interesting to note that this could be an influence from Satie, who was using the same kinds of styles in his music for the French café-concert at the turn of the century.

2.3 Cabaret Moves Across Europe

From France, the cabaret-artiste traveled to Spain and onto Germany where it was embraced in Berlin with the emergence of Ernst von Wolzogen’s *Überbrettl* of 1901. The name of this cabaret-artiste was mimicking Nietzsche’s conception of the *Übermensch* in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “über” meaning super or over, and “mensch” meaning man. Wolzogen chose *Überbrettl*, “brettl” meaning popular stage, to express his desire to create a performance that transcended or “ennobled” the art form.\(^82\) He wished to create, as was done in the *Chat Noir*, an art form that was enlightened,

\(^82\) Ibid., 38.
intelligent and worthy of discussion and dialogue:

…it will distance itself just as much from the normal conception of a variety show or Tingeltangel and on the other hand all presentations will meet high artistic expectations in form and content…I have agreed to direct this artistic vaudeville only on the condition that its refined artistic character be maintained.83

Wolzogen’s desire to “meet high artistic expectations in form and content” is the factor that elevates his establishment to cabaret-artistique status.

The cabaret-artistique in Germany had a very different beginning from that of its predecessor in Paris. Germany in the Wilhelmine period was under strict censorship and nothing could be said onstage that had not been approved beforehand by the police. In addition, Governmental corruption was endemic.84 State and society upheld values of conformity and duty to family, business and state, and materialistic consumerism was a primary measure of success.85 Due to strict censorship laws in Berlin at this time, the artists of the Überbrettl were far more limited than the artists of Montmartre in what they could get away with on stage. The threat of jail time was always a reality and this kept the cabaret from experimenting with more political topics. Wolzogen was not one to challenge the censors as he respected the Kaiser and all other authorities, therefore songs with a political theme were not popular at the Überbrettl, however, fads, fashion, and sexual mores were all subject to satire and parody on the early Berlin cabaret stage.86

Peter Jelavich in his book Berlin Cabaret gives a colourful account of what life

84 Bronner, “Cabaret for the Classical Singer,” 454.
85 Ibid.
86 Jelavich, Berlin Cabaret, 50.
may have looked like inside another Berlin cabaret, *Zum Hungrigen Pegasus* (The Hungry Pegasus):

> [the public consists of] artists and scholars, writers and financiers, ladies of the best society and piquant bohémien
es. One of the best gynaecologists sits next to one of our best caricaturists, a high ranking civil servant has a friendly conversation with a journalist who has attacked him often enough in his newspaper.\(^{87}\)

Occasionally, members of the audience were invited to perform; most often it was professional singers and musicians who took advantage of this. This mixture of the socio-economic classes is quite interesting and presents a question as to why members of the aristocracy would associate with the lower class audience members in a setting, which blatantly ridiculed the system in which they lived. Perhaps the attraction was the gaiety of the situation and the feeling of being a part of something new, current and interesting. Perhaps it also was the enticing opportunity to act as a Bohemian, where one could observe and partake in lighter entertainment in a free and easy atmosphere away from the stresses and seriousness of everyday life. One had the chance to return to a more youthful, carefree character long discarded for a more practical and proper attitude.

Although it has never been documented that Britten ever attended any of the cabarets indicated above, it is not unreasonable to assume that he would have partaken in the cabaret-artistique scene at some point in his early adulthood. In order to create the *Cabaret Songs* for Hedli Anderson, much in the French and German tradition as requested by Rupert Doone of the Groupe Theatre, a prerequisite understanding of the

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\(^{87}\) Ibid., 86.
genre and style of the early cabaret-artistique would have been necessary. One can therefore assume that he, in some form, experienced or observed musical performances within a cabaret prior to 1937.

Two cabaret songwriters of the Wilhelmine Period who worked in the Überbrettl were Oscar Straus (1870-1954) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951).\(^88\) Straus was in part responsible for the enormous success of Wolzogen’s Überbrettl because of the song he wrote entitled \textit{Der lustige Ehemann} (The Merry Husband), a musical song and dance number that the audience loved so much that they called for several encores.\(^89\) Straus would later achieve world fame with his operettas \textit{A Waltz Dream} and \textit{The Chocolate Soldier} the scores of which are easily attainable, however his cabaret songs have not been published since his lifetime. Schoenberg served as Kappellmeister at Überbrettl from 1901 to 1903 and while he worked there wrote eight cabaret songs entitled \textit{Brettl-Lieder}.\(^90\) Only one of these eight cabaret songs was actually performed at the Überbrettl, as the rest of them were considered too musically challenging for the amateur performers, but they were rediscovered in the 1970s and have since become favourites of the recital halls. The texts came from Bierbaum's \textit{Deutsche Chansons}, of which Schoenberg obtained a copy while in Vienna, and are risqué with mild political satire. Schoenberg set seven poems by Wedekind, Bierbaum, Salus, Hochstetter, Colly, and Schikaneder from the collection.\(^91\)

\(^{88}\) Bronner, “Cabaret for the Classical Singer,” 454.
\(^{89}\) Ibid.
\(^{90}\) Ibid.
when in 1909 the Futurist movement, instigated by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, emerged. Given the term “Futurism” by its creator, this new movement burst forth crying, “Burn the Museums!” in a preliminary manifesto published in French in *Le Figaro*.\(^2\) With the onset of war Europeans from every corner flocked to the city of Zurich to escape the horrors of the day. Those who were present at the *Cabaret Voltaire* on opening night (February 5, 1916) would have heard the chansons of Bruant sung by chanteuse Emmy Hennings accompanied by her husband Hugo Ball on the piano. In a number of newspapers, Ball called upon the youth of the city to “bring along their ideas and contributions” and participate by performing their music and poetry.\(^3\) It was here in the *Cabaret Voltaire* that the new artistic aesthetic of *Dada* was born - a more radical and aggressive form of art based on shock tactics, surprise, bruitistic elements, avant-garde costumes, unconventional dance, and anti-logical poetry.\(^4\)

### 2.4 The Post-War Cabaret

Following the First World War, the people became hungry for entertainment, eager to forget their hardships and the brutality that had surrounded them. Germany, left in great desperation, welcomed virtually anyone and everyone in an effort to build up the country after its defeat and Berlin became the country’s first cosmopolitan centre. With the relaxation of censorship a new moral and political feeling took over the city. With the abdication of the Kaiser, the end of WWI, and the establishment of the Weimar Republic in Germany, censorship was lifted and new freedoms were offered to the cabaret

\(^3\) Ibid., 108-110.
performers as never before.\(^{95}\) In this environment some of the most powerful cabaret songs surfaced in Berlin, the artistic centre for the new freedom of expression. It was during this time that Auden would have travelled to Berlin and would have experienced the cabaret in its most uncensored form. The film director and actor, Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), reopened the *Schall und Rauch* (Sound and Smoke) originally opened in 1901, with Friedrich Hollaender (1896-1976) as music director and house composer and left wing political satirist Kurt Tucholsky (1890-1935) as house writer. Hollaender composed an enormous repertoire of cabaret songs (more than one hundred songs) uniting popular style with his classical composition training. His world wide fame was solidified in the songs he composed for Marlene Dietrich in the 1929 film *The Blue Angel*, including the famous song, *Falling in Love Again*. Hollaender was one of post-WWI *Kabarett*’s greatest composers (one with whom Britten no doubt would have been familiar). He wrote his own poems in addition to setting the works of Tucholsky, Mehring, and other well-known poets. In some instances, he was criticized as writing in a form that was intended to cater to “popular” taste:

Besides these more literary numbers, cabarets poured out bouncy songs based on American dance styles (ragtimes, fox-trots, one-steps)…These tunes were mass-produced and aggressively marketed in inexpensive sheet-music editions. They made no claim to lasting fame—their attractiveness lay precisely in their fleeting fashionability of hit songs of the day. This is the tradition in which the first cabarets of the Weimar Republic also worked, including Friedrich Hollaender’s songs for the new Schall und Rauch. Most of these songs use a simple strophic structure with a narrative verse set off from

\(^{95}\) Bronner, “Cabaret for the Classical Singer,” 455-456.
a rhythmic and catchy refrain. The music is clearly subservient to the words; its function is to give the text structure and to make it entertaining…

Hollaender’s *Mady-Foxtrot* is an example of the “fashionable” and “bouncy” form of cabaret song that made the *Schall und Rauch* such a popular venue. The Britten/Auden creations, more specifically *Calypso*, include simple, toe-tapping qualities of this foxtrot.

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and other playful elements that are found in the vast majority of Hollaender’s pieces, but they are not limited to this easy, carefree style. Like *Mady-Foxtrot, Tell Me The Truth About Love* and *Funeral Blues* were written in a typical strophic form, yet are very different from the vast majority of Hollaender’s cabaret songs as they are much more technically difficult for both singer and pianist and implement a variety of artistic genres including operatic elements. Hollaender’s pieces are much more accessible to the average performer in that they do not require the same sophisticated level of training as the Britten songs in order to execute them properly. And Hollaender’s *Mady-Foxtrot* is a typical example of the kind of cabaret song heard at this time in Germany, a time when Auden traveled to Berlin and might have witnessed such performances.

Berlin’s post-war attitude, however, did not only produce a stampede of revue-goers, but it also gave rise to a group of serious left-wing critics made up of intellectuals and artists who chose to use popular forms such as the newspaper and cabaret as the medium for evaluating the condition of German Society.\(^{98}\) Once again, the cabaret was utilized for its intended purposes, as a tool for radical dissent. They succeeded in bridging the gap between high art and consumer entertainment for a mass market and fulfilled what the early pioneers of cabaret had set out to do. The artists conveyed a dream of a world where individual liberty, social equality, and peace would prevail and voiced their opinion against Germany’s continued militarization and glorification of war. Tucholsky, Mehring, Ringelnatz, and Brecht were the leaders of this next generation of cabaret artists.\(^{99}\) Britten and Auden would have no doubt felt at home in the company of these men as they shared many of the same philosophies, most especially in regards to

\(^{98}\) Appignanesi, *The Cabaret*, 128.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.
war. Tucholsky's satirical writings were set to music by several composers including: Rudolf Nelson (1878-1960), Misha Spoliansky (1899-1985), and Hanns Eisler (1898-1962). The operetta star Trude Hesterberg (1892-1967) was a frequent performer at the *Schall und Rauch* and later opened her own literary cabaret in Berlin, *Die Wilde Bühne* (The Wild Stage), one of Berlin’s raciest literary cabarets. Other cabarets also began to emerge in Berlin during this time of artistic freedom, including two of the most frequented and long-lasting cabarets *Kabarett der Komiker* and the *Katakomben*.

The cabaret-artistiques of Paris in the 1920s experienced a shift in focus. Verbal satire was traded for experimentation in the cinema and a new type of music from America: jazz. Paris was now the city of jazz and was also experiencing in greater proportion the sights and sounds of “Les Six” (Poulenc, Milhaud, Durey, Tailleferre, Honneger, and Auric), Chaplin movies, and acrobatic theatrical spectacles. And of course, being the ever-current medium, cabaret shifted and melded to the popular culture of the time. At this time the cabaret-artistique in Paris reached a new peak. The sounds of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and anything from the foxtrot to ragtime could be heard. American music flooded the stages of Paris and Berlin and “primitive” black jazz was considered a “soothing, healing salve” for the war torn psyche. *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (The Ox on the Roof) named after the ballet by Milhaud, was a popular Parisian cabaret-artistique which opened its doors in 1922 to the likes of Picasso, Braque, Tzara, Mistinguett, Ravel, and Cocteau who choreographed the spectacle for which the cabaret

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100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 123.
was named. With many American jazz musicians arriving and influencing the local taste and styles of the day, a new texture was added to European music. And it is this new texture that Britten adopts in his *Cabaret Songs*, in particular in the song *Tell Me The Truth About Love* with its obvious connection to the music of Cole Porter:

The idea of a serious composer and a poet writing cabaret music had its origins in Germany, and more especially in Berlin where the pungent, sometimes abrasive cabaret song was a genre in its own right…Auden’s and Britten’s songs were personal rather than political and took as their model either the blues, roughly in the shape in which it had been imported from America, or the popular song. For instance for ‘Tell me the truth about love’, the model, for the text and the music, was clearly Cole Porter, and the song adopts the classical popular song shape. We have a well-defined ‘intro’ and a seductive refrain, seductively harmonized.

Porter’s influence will be discussed more thoroughly in the analysis portion of the document.

A work that lies outside the cabaret scene, but reflects the influence contemporary popular music was having on so-called serious or classical music in the 1920s was Ernst Krenek's opera *Jonny Spielt Auf*. This notable, revolutionary work was the first to show strong influences of jazz and American popular music. Written during the golden era of cultural freedom in the Weimar Republic, the title role in this opera, Jonny, is a black jazz musician. The work was premiered at the Stadttheater, Leipzig on 10 February 1927 and had tremendous success in Germany, being staged in forty-two different opera houses, including eventually in New York on 19 January 1929. I have not

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103 Wachsmann & O'Connor: *'Cabaret',* <http://www.grovemusic.com>
found any evidence that Britten ever heard this work, however considering its popularity at the time as well as its importance in the history and development of music, it is very probable that Britten had knowledge of it.

2.5 Cabaret in England

The excitement of cabaret as it reverberated through Europe never really found an echo in England. Aside from the Café de Paris (1924-present) and the brief life of the London cabaret-artistique, Cave of the Golden Calf (1912-1914), this institution never flourished in that country. The idea of a small intimate setting for the purpose of expressing satirical dissent never took hold.\(^{105}\) One can speculate that England was perhaps not the best environment for such establishments, the country being democratic and lacking in the political under-currents that plagued other European countries. British newspapers also tended to be used primarily as sources of information rather than tools for protest and dissent. There was also the issue of the difficulty of obtaining a late-night drinking license or “club” status at this particular time.\(^{106}\) In the inter-war years, full-scale theatre productions and music-hall slapstick humour were the two main providers of entertainment in England. Social and political criticism was not a part of their nature, and if it happened to be in part of a music-hall production, it was purely coincidental. Artists tended to be socialites as opposed to radical experimentalists and the company of spectators who went to these productions lacked the fire that drove the artistic avant-garde in the cabarets on the continent. The Café de Paris of London was the city's most

\(^{105}\) Bronner, “Cabaret for the Classical Singer,” 458.

famous location and catered only to the upper crust of British society.\textsuperscript{107} Although no major cabaret-artistique emerged in London for sole purpose of social-political critique, there were establishments that did offer cabaret-like entertainment such as the Trocadero Grillroom, Piccadilly Circus, which was opened by Charles B. Cochran in 1924. As was mentioned earlier in the dissertation, singer/actress Hedli Anderson performed at least two of Britten’s \textit{Cabaret Songs} at this establishment.

Through the 1930s, the reputation of the continental cabaret scene did arouse the interest of British composers and poets, many of whom spent time in the various cabarets of Paris and Berlin, however no major British composers are credited with creating a substantial amount of cabaret repertoire.\textsuperscript{108} Composer and performer Noel Coward (1899-1973) is the closest example of a British composer whose creations were influenced primarily by the European cabaret-artistique. As a singer he remains best known for the recordings of his own songs made in the 1950s, and associated with his cabaret performances first at the \textit{Café de Paris} in London and then the \textit{Desert Inn} in Las Vegas. Trademarks of his unique performance style include, clipped pronunciation, much use of head voice, and rhythmic licence. This style has been much copied and parodied. In early revue numbers he showed a talent for providing songs which captured the essence of current social style, presenting concise vignettes of the private reality behind public display, for example in \textit{Parisian Pierrot} (\textit{London Calling}, 1923) and \textit{Poor Little Rich Girl} (\textit{On With The Dance}, 1925). Coward was also known for incorporating syncopated rhythms of jazz into his lyrics, most notably in \textit{Dance Little Lady} (\textit{This Year of Grace},

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Bronner, “Cabaret for the Classical Singer,” 458.
There is no documentation on whether Britten liked or disliked Coward’s approach to light music, however, one can assume that he would have been aware of his compositions as they were extremely popular during the time surrounding the creation of the *Cabaret Songs*.

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Nina exhibits the simplicity of harmony, melody and form found in typical Coward

Source: Sigh No More\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{110} Noel Coward, \textit{The Essential Noel Coward Songbook} (London: Omnibus Press, 1980), 222.
compositions. His compositions tend to follow traditional patterns for form, harmonic sequence and piano/voice relationships where the piano is used primarily as a support to the vocal line. Vocal melodies in Coward’s pieces, as exemplified here in Nina, are simple and are written to follow the natural flow of the text in an attempt to deliver the story in a straight-forward way. His melodies typically do not show off the singer’s capabilities in terms of beauty of sound or flowery melodic passages but rather stay primarily within a tessitura closely resembling that of speech. This may be because Coward himself was not a highly trained vocalist and tended to perform his own compositions, therefore requiring a certain type of melody line, one which was accessible to his personal capabilities.

2.6 Cabaret Finds Refuge

The cabaret scene was about to change drastically for England in and around 1933 when German and Austrian refugees flocked to London to escape the Nazi Regime. As many members of German and Austrian cabaret were Jewish, they were forced to leave the stage permanently or flee the country. With the immense censorship placed upon art in the Nazi era, many cabarets were forced to close their doors, and with the rise of Nazi power in 1933, many of Hitler’s men would hunt down and kill key Communist and Social Democrat leaders, some of whom happened to be cabaret performers.\textsuperscript{111}

Bertholt Brecht (1898-1956) was on the Nazi's black list as early as 1923 for his aggressive political statements.\textsuperscript{112} He began his performance career in cabarets where he would perform his own poetry and songs. In 1922, Brecht briefly opened up his own

\textsuperscript{111} Jelavich, \textit{Berlin Cabaret}, 230.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
A literary cabaret called *Die Rote Zibebe* (The Red Raisin), named after a collection of his texts, although it was extremely short-lived as the police revoked its license for its critiques on war heroism. Most of his plays and librettos were based on a cabaret format where scenes, songs, and novelty acts peppered the script. Cabaret song forms including the *ballad*, the *Bänkel-sang* or Bench-song, and the *Moritat* or murder-song were used in his collaborations with Kurt Weill (1900-1950) and Hanns Eisler (1898-1962).

Kurt Weill’s cabaret-like style originated with his collaboration with Bertholt Brecht that resulted in the expressionist operas, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) and *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1930). The former work combines radical social commentary with jazz-influenced music and has a cabaret-derived structure, elements, and subject matter. His cabaret-style songs are often excerpted from these larger theatrical works and performed in varying order on concert programs. American jazz had a tremendous influence on Weill and other composers in Europe during the 1920s and on their compositions. In his article, “A Note on Jazz”, written in 1929, Weill addresses the importance of jazz as it affected the classical composer at that time:

> Today we undoubtedly stand at the end of the era in which one can speak of an influence of jazz on art music. The essential elements of jazz have already been utilized by art music…Some critics have tried to reproach modern music for being more strongly influenced by jazz than the art music of earlier times was by its corresponding dance forms. This overlooks the fact that jazz is more than just a social dance, that it contains elements which go beyond the influential possibilities of a waltz. In the midst of a time of heightened artistic abstraction, jazz appeared as a piece of nature, as the healthiest, most powerful kind of artistic expression, which because of its popular origins immediately became an international folk music of broadest consequence. Why should art music have sought to close itself off
Benjamin Britten, like Kurt Weill, was affected and inspired by the popular American musical idiom. Britten and Auden were undoubtedly influenced by the collaboration of Weill and Brecht, and by German experimental theater, which showed a strong and radical political commitment. It will become evident, for example, through a further analysis of Britten's *Johnny* in Chapter 3, Analysis of Songs, of this dissertation, that Britten's song bears certain dramatic and musical similarities to Kurt Well's *Surabaya-Johnny* of 1929.

### 2.7 Concluding Remarks

As a final point, the lines between classical and popular music are becoming more blurred. And it could reasonably be argued that cabaret has been at the vanguard of this trend. In his introduction to The Guinness Encyclopaedia of Popular Music, Colin Larkin writes:

The ultimate intention of this work is once and for all to place popular music shoulder to shoulder with classical and operatic music. It is a legitimate plea for acceptance and tolerance. Popular music is now not only worthy of serious documentation, it is worthy of the *acceptance* of serious documentation. Pop, rock, and jazz have been brilliantly written about with passion, knowledge, and relevance. As we move towards the end of the century, popular music shapes and is shaped by the decade in its very

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style and fashion: the clubs of the 20s, dance halls of the 30s, radio of the 40s, television of the 50s, festivals of the 60s, concerts of the 70s, video of the 80s, and digital and computer language of the 90s.\textsuperscript{114}

Cabaret has always straddled the classical and popular genres and has been a haven for art which does not fall decisively into either category. Such art has been adopted and generated by the “middle form,” the cabaret. The notion of what “popular” represents is constantly shifting to include new cultural influences and musical styles. Cabaret songs composed by classical composers may represent the ideal meeting of these two worlds, in that they embody both the sophistication and careful architecture of classical music merged with the accessibility and broad appeal of popular music. The prospect of writing in a less traditional and “lighter” form of artistic expression no doubt appealed to Britten, a man who devoted the bulk of his career to the production of the more entrenched and classical genres. This brief departure from his customary creative framework into the world of Cabaret provides interested parties a brief look at a different and more playful side of Benjamin Britten.

CHAPTER 3
ANALYSIS OF SONGS

INTRODUCTION

The Britten-Auden *Cabaret Songs* are a relatively new addition to the vocal repertoire. Although they were composed between 1937 and 1939, for unknown reasons they were not published until 1980. These four songs reflect the diversity of Benjamin Britten's musical experience and reveal the keen wit of both poet and composer and with their resurfacing a porthole has been provided through which one may observe the various genres and styles that inspired Britten in the early years of his compositional career and illustrate the cross-pollination of his stylistic choices.

Musical analysis will reveal operatic style traits in the *Cabaret Songs*, including recitative-aria formations and quotations from specific operatic works, that show the significance this genre played in developing Britten's musical taste. Traditional art song elements will be shown to be apparent throughout the songs in the form of thoughtful, vivid text setting as well as a complete partnership of the piano and voice. It will be seen that Britten's musical scoring greatly enhances the narration and witty innuendo in the poetry, and vice versa, the textual elements add meaning and commentary to the gestures and references in the music. Also, American popular elements will be identified indicating the influence America and American composers had on the young composer. Finally, European cabaret elements will be identified in both the music and poetry as they are combined with the afore-mentioned styles to evoke the atmosphere and creative wit
of the turn of the century artistic form. This includes satire, parody and irony – all elements of early cabaret performance - that are found in abundance throughout the text of these *Cabaret Songs*. A song written specifically with a cabaret setting in mind differs from other types of songs in that it relates much stronger and more vividly to the contemporaneous life and events of the time in which they were written. As the following analysis will show, these qualities of simplicity and immediacy of the cabaret song, its accessibility in reaching a wide audience, and its ability to create vivid imagery form an important part of the appeal of Auden’s and Britten’s *Cabaret Songs*.

### 3.1 Tell Me the Truth About Love

Popular music often tells stories of romance with expected endings, and follows traditional emotional logic. Cabaret often does exactly the opposite by surprising the listener with unexpected endings. The Britten-Auden *Cabaret Songs* seem to amplify this trait. Like the lyrics of the European cabaret songs of the past, which flaunted authority and demystified romance, Auden's lyrics are based on a subject matter that reflects contemporary life, and captures the essence of the confrontational and satirical nature of the European cabaret. The main topic of all four of Auden's texts is “love;” however each text discusses this topic in a very different way: searching for the true meaning of love, expressing anguish and despair at the death of a loved one, unrequited love which causes deep sorrow and the excitement of new found love.

Written in 1938, both poetically and musically, *Tell Me the Truth About Love* is the first piece in the collection of the *Cabaret Songs* published by Faber & Faber in 1980.
Some say that love's a little boy,
    And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go round,
    And some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
    Who looked as if he knew,
His wife was very cross indeed,
    And said it wouldn't do.
Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
    Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
    Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
    Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
    O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
    It wasn't ever there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
    And Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the Blackbird sang,
    Or what the roses said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
    Or underneath the bed.
Can it pull extraordinary faces?
    Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,
    Or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
    Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
    O tell me the truth about love.

Your feelings when you meet it
    I am told you can't forget,
I've sought it since I was a child
    But haven't found it yet.
I'm getting on for 35
    And still I do not know
What kind of creature it can be
    That bothers people so.
When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love. ¹¹⁵

This poem is told in the first person, through the voice of a character perplexed by the problem of defining and recognizing love. Auden depicts the character as searching for love almost as a tangible object, something you can find “inside the summerhouse,” “in the chicken run,” or “underneath the bed.” This clever contrast between a supposed innocence, against the innuendo that these are all places for trysts, enhances the satirical quality of the piece and adds to the light-hearted and witty feel. There are 3 stanzas, 16 lines each, and the verses come in pairs, an eight line “A Section” followed by an eight line “B section.” In the first of each pair (the A section), the narrator describes what others have said regarding love, and in the following B section asks further questions in search for answers. The text itself contributes to the overall satirical quality of this song. The idea of love looking like “a pair of pyjamas or the ham in a temperance hotel” is of course poking fun at the traditional love ballad and the ironic rhyme of “love” with “fluff” and “bluff” shows the wit of the poet. Britten sets the text strophically, musically paralleling this pairing with a two-part musical block for each verse pair (mm. 3-10, and mm. 11-38) repeated three times, the first and second with identical endings, and the third with a different one (totalling 41 mm).

There are a few small differences between the original 1938 poem found in

Auden's *Collected Poems* and what appears in the 1980 published score. The song prefaces the poem with four words that make up Britten’s short two-bar introduction: “Liebe, l'amour, amor and amoris” (the words for love in German, French, Italian and Latin). It is not known whether they were Britten’s or Auden’s idea. But these words set a tone of intelligence and cosmopolitanism, not only implying that the question of love is a worldly one that spans all countries and cultures, but also that the narrator is perhaps not so green as might be presumed by the apparent naiveté of the ensuing narration.

The further changes in the text do not take away from the original intention of the poem, but have a great impact on the musical form of the song. While lines 1-8 are set by Britten straightforwardly and consistently in a declamatory recitative style, during lines 9-16 Britten added the refrain words “O tell me the truth about love” after each of the first two sets of two lines, thus modifying drastically the second part of each stanza into 3 sections: lines 9+10+refrain; lines 11+12+refrain; and lines 13-16+ refrain. This, of course, has consequences for the musical form of the song.

The first two measures of the piece are constructed as an introduction.
For these four introductory words Britten uses an adapted *Sprechstimme* notation, apparently implying indefinite pitch rather than phonated exact pitches. The singer is evidently meant to begin each word at the indicated rhythmic position, but no additional information about the syllabic rhythm or pitch contour is given. The piano in the opening two measures presents a series of arpeggiated D major chords which are altered by a descending chromatic pattern in the lowest pitches of each chord [D-C#-C-B], as shown in the Figure 5 above. This descending chromatic motive is used throughout the piece and will be discussed later in greater detail. The series of four arpeggiated chords ends with a final flourishing chord in m. 2 that is a clever parody of the Tristan chord from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. On the last bass note of the descending chromatic motive, B, Britten sets up the Tristan chord by adding a C# above the ascending Dominant seventh [B-D#-F#-A], and then by omitting the B in the descending arpeggiation, thus ending with the eponymous half-diminished seventh chord D#-F#-A-C#.

116 Britten *Cabaret Songs*, 2.
interesting chord is approached through the descending step-wise motion of the bass line, the ear clearly hears the colouring of the Tristan chord with the added C#. If the narrator is searching for the true definition of “Love,” by quoting one of the best known romantic operatic love stories, Britten cleverly connects the cabaret and operatic genres and styles. The Tristan chord also reappears on the downbeat of m. 3 and again at the most climactic chord of the A section, on the third beat of m. 9, as displayed below.

(Figure 6 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” m. 9)

This chord is unmistakable to anyone familiar with Wagner's epic work. The prominent use of this particular chord, and the connotations surrounding it, leave little doubt that Britten quoted this operatic calling card for witty effect and innuendo. Like the use of foreign words at the opening of the song, it implies that Britten had an urbane, cultivated audience in mind.

Source: Cabaret Songs

117 Britten Cabaret Songs, 3.
In the introductory measures, the narrator’s approach seems almost scholarly, as though she is reading definitions out of a dictionary. Britten creates this feeling by notating the four words “Liebe, l'amour, amor” and “amoris” on C5 which tends to sit in the mid to high range of a person's speaking voice, suggesting a questioning or searching inflection (see Figure 5). Britten also spaces the words evenly, on the first and third beats of a quadruple time signature, as if depicting someone systematically reading and contemplating the answer to the question “What is Love?” To date it is unclear who added these introductory words. But their role is clearly a playful commentary on the possibilities of romantic affection.\textsuperscript{118}

Britten evokes the gender of the narrating diseuse through the use of arpeggiated chords in the upper register of the piano, suggesting a feminine character leafing through a book about love. The composer ends each arpeggiated chord on F#, which comes to be heard as the third scale degree, and which evokes a searching or questioning feel since the chords are left “open-ended,” or in other words, not ending on the tonic. Ending on the tonic would suggest finality, whereas these chords depict a question with the gesture beginning low and ending high, much in the same way a person would ask a question in regular speech. Although D major will be explicitly indicated by key signature starting in m. 11, it is important to note that no key signature is given for mm. 1-10. Despite the notated C5s for the initial spoken intonation, there is nothing further to suggest C major in these measures. Indeed, the emphasis on F#, later heard as scale degree 3 in D major,

\textsuperscript{118} This suggestion has been documented by several Britten scholars (Graham Johnson alludes to this in his book \textit{Britten, Voice & Piano: Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten}. (Hampshire, England. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 173-175) and has been suggested in letters from Auden as well as in certain poems which Britten scored, namely, \textit{When you're feeling like expressing your affection}, and \textit{Underneath the abject willow}.
here seems pointedly at odds with the Cs of “Liebe, l’amour, amor, amoris.” Perhaps the lack of key signature for mm. 1-10 should be understood to signify an initial state of tonal ambiguity that corresponds to the narrator’s uncertainty about love.

Britten employs a variety of operatic elements throughout the *Cabaret Songs*, as exemplified in this piece in particular. *Tell Me The Truth About Love* is written in a recitative-aria format. The “recitative” section comprises mm. 3-10 and can be considered the “A section” of the piece.

(Figure 7 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” mm. 3-4)

In this section, Britten scores the speech-like vocal line, repeating F#4, over mildly dissonant half-note piano chords that delineate descending chromatic progressions organized in patterns of two measures, each pattern figures in the piano chords of similar durations of a half-note, and each features a chromatically descending bass line (similar

119 Britten *Cabaret Songs*, 2.
to the introduction), with corresponding parallel chords on top. Characteristic of mm.3-4 and 5-6 are parallel descending chords outlining tritones plus a minor seventh, with the singer’s F#4 sitting in the mid to low register of the voice, a register close to natural speech. Measures 7-11 use the same descending chromatic bass pattern, but with mostly dominant seventh sounding chords, and although the pitches used for the declamation in these measures are different, the range is limited to within an octave of F#4 and maintains a natural speaking manner. Britten indicates *tempo rubato* at the onset of the A section, indicating a freedom in the rhythm, much as operatic recitative requires, and he adds *fermate* on certain words (i.e. boy, round, door, knew, deed, and do), to heighten the effect of narration.
As Figure 8 shows, Britten incorporates traditional art song elements into the piece by clearly enhancing the text. He accomplishes this by adjusting the chromatically descending pattern in m. 7 when the narrator speaks about asking the “man next door, who looked as if he knew.”

While the lower voices again descend chromatically, the upper voice uses an ascending step-wise motion, also heard in the vocal line, to mimic the way spoken questions generally end at a higher pitch level, and perhaps also to quote the “Desire”

Source: Cabaret Songs

120 Britten Cabaret Songs, 3.
motive from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*.

Britten then uses the highest pitch in the A section, F#5 on the word “cross,” in order to emphasize the anger of the wife of the “man next door.”

(Figure 9 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” mm. 9-10)

This climactic chord brings back the “Tristan chord” used earlier, and it ironically expresses the mood of the man's wife (who is evidently no more an Isolde than he is a Tristan) through the higher range of the vocal line and coloring of the unsettled and somewhat dark sonority heard in the half-diminished 7th chord. The chord is held for a full two beats and is also notated with a fermata, signifying its importance in connection with the text. In the following verses this Tristan chord corresponds to the “chicken run,” the physical location of a possible tryst, perhaps gone wrong, and in the third verse refers to love as a “creature,” which “bothers people so.”

Britten uses interesting chords in the final measure of the A section, m. 10, under

121 Britten *Cabaret Songs*, 3.
the words “and said it wouldn't do” (see example above). The chordal progression is a V7 of the key of G, leading into a cadential chord in G minor, perhaps commenting on the character (more specifically, the wife) presented in the text. The F# is utilised as a non-harmonic tone to the G minor chord, creating an expressive and unresolved major dissonance, again enhancing the character's unresolved situation. This harmonic choice leads the listener to believe that there is still much confusion and pondering left to do on the subject of love, which allows for the narrator to pontificate in the B section in the hopes of finding truthful answers.

The “B section” of the song spans mm. 11-38 for verses 1 and 2 then mm. 11-45 in the final verse and is written in a way that resembles the qualities of an aria. Although the narration is still somewhat declamatory, in this section the vocalist is offered more freedom to sing with all the capabilities of her instrument, much as an aria allows the opera singer the freedom to show all the colors of her vocal palette. Figure 10 shows a typical excerpt from this section.
Compared to the recitative-like “A section”, the vocal line is much more lyrical and melodic and covers a much wider range (two octaves, from A4 to A6). The rhythm is no longer in a free speech-like manner, but is now governed by a strict duple meter with curvaceous triplets, and the accompanying piano material is also much more dramatic, encompassing a wider range and thicker texture.

The organization of this second section which comprises lines 8-16 of each poetic stanza creates meaningful textual and musical divisions that show how Britten perceived the structure of the poem. He creates a three-fold musical/poetic structure (mm. 11-19, 20-28, and 29-38) by setting lines 8-9 and 10-11 of each stanza of them poem, respectively, to similar music, and adding after each pair a refrain on “O tell me the truth about love,” which did not exist in the poem. The third fold consists of a setting of lines 12-16 of the poem to a varied musical version of the first two, ending again with the

122 Britten Cabaret Songs, 6.
refrain, which originally did appear at the very end of the poem. While the first two
sections are set very simply harmonically, to a harmonic sequence that repeats every two
measures (D: I, German augmented sixth chord, Neapolitan chord and Dominant seventh
chord), the last section receives a different, more involved treatment, almost
developmentally moving up by sequences temporarily suggesting tonicizations, which
end up with an abrupt move by half-step from mm. 34 to 35, from a dominant seventh
chord on A-sharp (reinterpreted as B flat, the flat six degree of D major), to an A major
dominant seventh chord of the home key, D major, for the same refrain as before which
ends the piece. Constructing these three waves growing in intensity and culminating with
the third underlines the structure of the second stanza of the poem, with its three
agonizing questions about what love could be.

In virtually every measure of this piece one can find chromatic movement in
either the piano or vocal line, often in both. The constant chromatic motion in the A
section illustrates the elusiveness of love, leaving the listener with no firm tonal centre.
Perhaps Britten was trying to illustrate love as lacking a firm foundation with the ever-
changing and ambiguous key relationships, or to indicate the naiveté or ambivalence of
the narrator towards love. This particular chromatic idiom not only suggests Cole
Porter’s American popular style, but also helps to symbolize the unstable and shifting
nature of love. Porter, an American composer, was the creator of many theatrically
elegant, sophisticated and complex songs of American 20th Century popular music and
was known for many musical elements found in the Cabaret Songs, including:
chromatically descending lines - usually slow in tempi, melodies spun from repetition
through sequences or variations of single motives, an ability to move easily between
major and minor modes, use of triplet figures in duple meters, his fondness for Latin rhythms, and his creative experimentations with harmonies.\footnote{123}{Deane L. Root & Gerald Bordman, “Cole Porter,” Grove’s Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed [01/02/07], <http://www.grovemusic.com>)} It is easy to see Porter's influence on Britten in this piece in particular when one looks at Porter's popular song composition *Night and Day* written in 1932 for the musical play *The Gay Divorcee*. The structure to *Night and Day* is strikingly similar to *Tell Me The Truth About Love* as it begins with a short, 4 measure introduction, followed by an A section written in a declamatory nature revolving in a chromatic fashion in the piano accompaniment around the pitch G4 heard in repetition in the vocal line, then moves on to a much more lyrical B section. Porter was known for repeating single pitches to give the feeling of speech, and perhaps also an air of urbane worldliness, bordering on boredom or monotony.
This example of Porter's A section in *Night and Day* shows strong similarities to Britten's A section of *Tell Me The Truth About Love*. It is clear that the A section is written in a declamatory manner, much like operatic recitative, designed to further the storyline quickly and clearly rather than showing off the singer's vocal capabilities, with a repetitive G4 in the singer's middle register. Underneath the vocal line, the piano accompaniment shows chromatic movement, like the Britten composition.

In *Tell Me The Truth About Love*, a recurring melodic figuration is first heard in m. 16 and then numerous times throughout the piece, to set the refrain “O tell me the

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truth about love”.

(Figure 12 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” mm. 17-19)

(source: Cabaret Songs)

Its chromaticism and swooning triplet rhythm show strong influences of American popular music, especially Cole Porter as seen in the B section of Porter’s *Night & Day*.

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125 Britten, *Cabaret Songs*, 4.
From this example of *Night and Day* it is clear that similarities occur between the two

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compositions. The B section (shown in part above), written in cut time, is much more lyrically written for the vocalist overtop a vamping, chromatic piano accompaniment. Again, central to the vocal line is the pitch of G4 heard in great repetition, perhaps symbolizing the singer's obsession with her object of love, which winds chromatically down an octave into the lowest register of the vocalist's range. The tune begins with a pedal dominant built on the flattened 6th of the key which then resolves to the dominant seventh in the next bar [Ab7-G]. This section repeats and is then followed by a descending harmonic sequence starting with a half-diminished 7th (the same chord Wagner used as the Tristan Chord heard in Britten's *Tell Me The Truth About Love*) built on the Augmented 4th of the key, and descending by semitones to the supertonic minor 7th which forms the beginning of a more standard II-V-I progression. This example illustrates Porter's use of the triplet figure in a duple meter, also found in great length in Britten's composition, and the feeling of monotony created by the use of a single pitch heard in repetition.

Since the refrain “O tell me the truth about love” is heard so many times, the performer must take much care to not repeat it in the same way. The singer may wish to portray light-hearted questioning on one repetition, frustration on the next and complete desperation on another, possibly choosing different stances in different performances.

A closely related chromatic figure used several times in the vocal line appears first in m.14.
This chromatic figure returns several times throughout the B section, and its slow triplets and smooth legato line create a jazzy feel over the vamping piano accompaniment. We now hear a much more legato and singable melody, which is spun from repetition and the constant weaving of chromatic ascending and descending figures. Indeed, this figure uses the same two components as the refrain in Figure 12: an upper neighbour figure and a descending chromatic figure; in this case, the order is reversed relative to the refrain, with the neighbour figure (here a whole step) occurring second rather than first.

The B section is underscored with the repetitious four-chord “vamp” in D major mentioned above.

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127 Britten, *Cabaret Songs*, 4.
This section is entirely made up of triplet figures in both the vocal and piano line. The vocal line generally presents 6/4 rhythms, and sometimes 3/2 rhythms, while the piano consistently presents 12/8 rhythms, resulting in the vocal triplet pulse moving slower than the piano triplet pulse, and in polyrhythm with it. The use of triplet figures in a duple time signature was common with Porter's compositions (as shown in Figure 15 above), giving the feel of a square syncopation, and fitting in with the Jazz trends heard throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Because the narrator is searching and pondering, the piano vamp effectively projects a monotonous cyclical feeling that corresponds nicely to the narrator wandering around in circles in the hopes of nailing down a definite answer to her question.

In the vamp progression, [I–Ger6–bII–V7], it is easy to hear the tritone root-

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128 Britten, Cabaret Songs, 3.
relation between the Eb major chord and the A dominant seventh chord as a comment on the love-conundrum. In fact, the tritone interval already appeared in the vocal part at the outset, between the C5 of “Liebe, etc.” and the F#4’s of the ensuing vocal patter. The tritone root-relation also arises as the climax of a short expanding-interval process: the Eb major bII chord is one semitone above the D major chord one measure earlier, while the A dominant seventh V7 chord is one semitone below the corresponding bVI7 chord one measure earlier. One thus experiences the vamp as cycling quickly through a process of expanding harmonic distance and tension, in a way that helps characterize the narrator’s confusion over the nature of love.

Measures 29-34 illustrate the increasing excitement and intensity of the narrator's search for answers.
(Figure 16 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” mm. 29-34)

It is here that Britten changes the melody line and the harmony to ascend sequentially by whole step with each measure. This ties in completely with the asking of the questions,

Source: Cabaret Songs

129 Britten, Cabaret Songs, 5-6.
layer upon layer: “Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is? Or soft as eiderdown fluff? Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?” By ascending in whole steps, Britten mimics not only the way in which human speech asks a question, but also shows the growing intensity of the questioning.

By the third verse this intensity boils over and is illustrated well in the third ending.

(Figure 17 – “Tell Me The Truth About Love” mm. 36-41)

Rather than immediately returning to the original refrain “O tell me the truth about love” as seen throughout the piece, mm. 39-41 are written an octave higher in both the voice and piano, utilising the upper range of the singer to show dramatic intensity and ultimate frustration of the character.

Figure 18 shows the final gesture in the piano is an arpeggiated D major chord which sweeps upwards and ends on the dominant of the chord, suggesting that the narrator's question is left unresolved and the searching will, possibly forever, continue

Source: Cabaret Songs

130 Britten, Cabaret Songs, 6.
As we can see, the wit of Auden's text is underscored in Britten's musical writing, which seems to satirize and parody the musical forms themselves. Like the parodies popular in cabaret halls throughout Europe, *Tell Me The Truth About Love*, is also a parody of a torch song that satirizes the seductive nature of that genre. A torch song is a sentimental love song, typically one in which the singer laments an unrequited or lost love, where one party is either oblivious to the existence of the other, or where one party has moved on. Crime. Female singers of the popular vocal tradition are referred to as "torch singers" when their repertoire consists predominantly of such material. We can visualize the sultry chanteuse

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131 Ibid.
leaning against the piano and it is this image that Britten and Auden have fun with. Good
diction is essential to the delivery of these songs, as the lyrics are narrative, and the
audience's comprehension of the theatrical scene is contingent upon the proper
declamation of the text.

3.2 Funeral Blues

The second piece in the 1980 collection is *Funeral Blues*, originally written in
1937 for the Auden/Isherwood play *The Ascent of F6*. Written in strophic form, four
verses in length, *Funeral Blues* takes the listener on an emotional journey as the narrator
describes immense loss and sorrow with the death of a loved one. Although these
*Cabaret Songs* were written for the singer/actress Hedli Anderson there is nothing to
indicate that the narrator in each of the songs is female. Given the sexual orientation
of both composer and poet, and the topic of love connecting each poem, it may be safe to
assume that the narrator could in fact be male. Therefore, the readers have the freedom to
decide for themselves how to read and interpret each of the poems.

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone.
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He is Dead.
Tie crepe bands round the white necks of the public doves
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West

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My working week and my Sunday rest.
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out everyone
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the woods,
For nothing now can ever come to any good.  

In *Funeral Blues* the narrator’s grief is so great that he/she makes no attempt to comprehend death or to meditate upon it, but simply accepts it as the end of not one man’s life but as the end of all life. The poem engages in hyperbole, or dramatic overstatement, closing with the astonishing proclamation that “The stars are not wanted now; put out every one, / Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun, / Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood; / For nothing now can ever come to any good.” In the face of this death, the narrator claims, there is no need to go on living, so there is no need to preserve the sun or moon or anything else that sustains human existence. The speaker’s distress is so vast because the deceased person was, in life, his/her lover: “He was my North, my South, my East and West, / My working week, and my Sunday rest, / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song.” It might seem that the poet likens his/her lover to a compass and a calendar, as if to suggest how his lover helped him to define who he was and where he existed. The poet states categorically that there is no such thing as everlasting love: “I thought that love could last forever: I was wrong.” His/Her gesture to do away with the universe in response to love’s passing indicates that in fact he/she equates the breadth of love with that of the universe. In other words, the infinitude of the universe makes no sense if love, too, is not infinite and eternal; thus if one is destroyed,

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they both are.

Britten scores Auden’s text with a certain simplicity, building a repetitive chromatic vocal melody overtop a highly syncopated rhythmic ostinato in the piano. The simplicity of this song is also evidenced by the relatively few motivic ideas in the vocal line, the minimal harmonic variation and the hypnotically repetitive rhythm. The overall form of the song consists of strophic settings of the four stanzas; however the final verse takes on a heightened emotional climax, as Britten scores the vocal line one octave higher overtop a much more harmonically dramatic piano accompaniment (as will be discussed later).

The partnership of text and music (as first exemplified in traditional art song) is evident from the onset of the piece. The introduction, in F minor, written in the piano's higher register with a dynamic marking of pp and steady syncopated rhythmic pulse, depicts the ticking of the clocks supported by a dominant pedal, and at the same time presents, embedded within the C octaves, an octave descending chromatic line that will constitute the essence of the motivic materials of the song.
The same melodic pattern is used in each of the four stanzas: lines one and two are set similarly, each lasting two measures, on a monotonous, repetitive pedal octave on F in the bass, with the tessitura of the vocal line quite low, hovering chromatically from middle C up to F and back, starting and ending on this same dominant pitch C and never cadencing on the tonic, creating an unresolved, melancholy, solemn mood. Lines three and four of each stanza cover a broader trajectory: they start melodically from A flat above middle C and descend chromatically over four measures back down to middle C. The syncopated rhythm of the vocal line in partnership with the flow of the text follows the inflection of natural speech, yet creates an impression of staggering, as if the person has trouble singing because of the unbearable pain. This is also supported by the piano accompaniment both harmonically and rhythmically, without dominating the vocal line.

One of the most noticeable elements to *Funeral Blues* is the use of a death march

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135 Britten, *Cabaret Songs*, 7.
created through the hypnotic rhythmic ostinato in the piano accompaniment. Heard almost continuously throughout the piece in a variety of ways, the death march provides a constant rhythmic drive, which begins softly, almost as if in the distance, then increases in significance to a final climactic moment at the end of the fourth verse, as will be discussed. Funeral marches have been heard in various operas and other classical works throughout music history and Britten undoubtedly took inspiration from these classical genres in the creation of this piece. Funeral marches were also heard in the Jazz/Blues repertoire of the southern states, namely Louisiana. It was tradition in Louisiana during the 20th Century (this tradition has somewhat dissipated since the 1970s) that when a “jazz man” dies, there is first a viewing and service at the church followed by a march to the final resting place. En route to the resting place, slow solemn dirges accompany the congregation and comfort the family. There is no evidence to suggest that Britten had traveled to Louisiana during the writing of *Funeral Blues* however it is interesting to note this uniquely American tradition in analysing this particular piece.\(^{136}\) It is also possible that Britten could have heard a recording of a similar song based on the Louisiana death march technique although no evidence of this has been documented. Britten created *Funeral Blues* with three staves for the piano, the top two indicating the primary accompaniment and the bottom indicating the “drum” for the march. Throughout the first verse, this figure is consistently heard with three grace notes indicating the sound of two sticks hitting a drum.

As in the first piece of the collection, *Funeral Blues* utilises colourful chromaticism throughout. Chromatic scales and motivic figures are prominent and can be likened, as was the first piece *Tell Me The Truth About Love*, to the music of Cole Porter, or more generally, to the use of descending chromaticism to represent sombre topics and funereal associations. Much of the melody is based on a small chromatic motive [C-D-Eb-F-Eb-D-Db-C] first heard in the opening two measures of the first verse: “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone” (see Figure 20 above). This melodic fragment is used numerous times throughout the piece and altered slightly to fit the rhythmic differences needed for proper articulation of the text. A certain amount of jazz ability is needed in this piece to give it the blues-like feeling that is called for in the title. During the first decades of the 20th Century blues music was not clearly defined in terms of a

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137 Britten, *Cabaret Songs*, 7.
chord progression. Melodically, blues is marked by the use of the flatted third, fifth and seventh (the so-called blue notes) of the associated major scale. These scale tones can replace the natural scale tones or be added to the scale. Blues shuffles create a trance-like rhythm and form a repetitive effect called a “groove.” Shuffle rhythm is often vocalized as “dow, da dow, da dow, da” as it consists of uneven, or “swung,” eighth notes. The “blues” figure (as seen in the syncopation of beats two and three of the right hand of the piano line in m. 4), created through chromaticism and syncopation or “swung” rhythm, exemplifies the American jazz element that Britten adopted throughout the piece (see example above). He uses this figure numerous times, and in a variety of different ways by manipulating it rhythmically, inverting it, or placing it in different registers of the piano as shown in the piano accompaniment of the following example.

(Figure 21– “Funeral Blues” mm. 5-6)

Source: Cabaret Songs

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139 Britten, Cabaret Songs, 7.
The accompaniment to verse two (beginning on m. 11) changes to depict the aeroplanes in the sky as the piano begins to utilise the upper octaves. Arpeggiated chords and ascending eighth note couplets give the feeling of an aircraft being taken up in flight. The “moaning” of the aircraft is evident in m. 12 where the piano uses a chromatic contrary motion figure that slowly increases then decreases in dynamic level, giving the impression of a drone-like moaning noise.

(Figure 22 – “Funeral Blues” mm. 11-12)

In mm. 13-14, Britten cleverly depicts the message that the aeroplanes scribble in the sky through the use of ascending scale passages:

Source: Cabaret Songs¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Britten, Cabaret Songs, 8.
The right hand plays a short ascending triplet-sixteenth note figure (the scribble) that crescendos into two accented and syncopated chords, to set up the singer's next phrase: “He Is Dead”. Immediately following these “death” chords, the piano once again rushes into a higher register in triplet-sixteenth notes groups, perhaps suggesting the fluttering doves that are described next by the narrator. It is worthwhile to note that in this second verse, much of the narrator's text describes objects in the sky: aeroplanes, messages written in the sky, and doves. Britten's use of the higher register of the piano follows the sightline of the narrator as she describes these objects, then upon her description of the policemen, her focus is once again brought down to earth and the piano accompaniment reflects this in the final pattern shown in m. 18.

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141 Ibid., 9.
Typical of all blues pieces, the title *Funeral Blues* can be taken as a bit of a play on words, as the blues element is heard both technically, in the way in which it is written as depicted through the use of the syncopated rhythmic swing, but also in the sense of what the character is feeling emotionally as he/she is lamenting the loss of love and therefore feeling depressed or in this case “blue”. When the character first speaks of “stopping all the clocks,” the music ironically uses prominent syncopations that project an off-kilter or lop-sided rhythm, suggesting that the singer is living out of step with the perfectness of time and struggling against the common flow of life. Britten also ironically displays the spelling of certain chords in a very interesting way. Certain chords are spelled enharmonically between the voice and piano lines, mixing sharps in the vocal line.

142 Ibid.
with flats in the piano and vice versa as seen on the word “rest” in m.22. This interesting element is seen at various points throughout the piece and illustrates the fact that the world in which the narrator is living in does not make sense any longer.

(Figure 25 – “Funeral Blues” mm. 21-22)

This enharmonic spelling would go unnoticed by the audience, but it is there for the singer and pianist to see as part of the composer’s way of expressing the text.

The character development is clearly indicated in verses three and four through further striking harmonic choices. At the onset of verse three, m. 19, the vocal melody is introduced in the same melodic/harmonic manner as the first two verses, beginning on middle C and chromatically ascending to F4 in a syncopated blues-like fashion then returning to middle C after a chromatic descent, but now the piano is much more solemn and subdued, using a rhythmic accompaniment based on even eighth-note chords rather than the “swung” syncopation of the first two verses.

Source: Cabaret Songs

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Source: Cabaret Songs
As the narrator slowly becomes more angry and grief stricken, these chords begin to ascend in pitch by whole steps and semitones, and increase in dynamic intensity. During the beginning of verse three, Britten uses octaves in the left hand, a doubling which enhances the depth of despair the narrator is feeling. Verse three indicates a growing intensity of the march as the right hand now joins in rhythmically with the left hand pulsing in eighth-note chords on the four main beats of each measure. It is at the word “rest” (m.22) where Britten then omits the bass note and uses a single pitch in the left hand, a motion that adds to the overall feeling of harmonic ascent and helps to enhance the feeling of increased dramatic intensity.

This verse shows intense harmonic disorientation as the intensity of the drama unfolds and helps to capture through the music the despair and anguish that the character feels. The ascending harmonic disorientation foreshadows the upcoming emotional outburst at the climax of verse four.

Source: Cabaret Songs\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
Although Britten keeps the same vocal melody throughout verse three, the piano accompaniment changes dramatically. Britten uses a series of ascending dominant-seventh chords, often written with scale degree 7 in the bass. These chords are each repeated once, rise by either a whole tone or a half tone, and possess an interval of a tritone. Britten begins this sequential dominant pattern in measure 23 with a dominant D.

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145 Ibid.
major chord in third inversion then ascends primarily by whole tones [D4/2, E4/2, F4/2, enharmonic Gb4/2, Ab4/2, Bb4/2, B4/2]. Interesting to note is that Britten leaves out scale degree 5 in all of the dominant seven chords found in mm. 23-26 perhaps to eliminate the use of parallel fifths. The ascending pattern creates the feeling of building intensity while the tritone enhances the uneasiness, anguish and ultimate “scream-like” frustration which emotionally leads the narrator into the words “I was wrong” of measure 26. Also adding to the build up of tension and emotional instability is the fact that these dominant seventh chords never resolve. Instead, they continue on until reaching the C# major chord found on beats 3 and 4 of m.26 as the performer sings the word “wrong” (see Figure 27 above). It is interesting to note that this chord immediately precedes the return of F minor at the onset of verse 4. Britten chooses to utilise the C# seventh chord as a dominant to the return of F minor, the “wrong” chord to use in conventional harmonic cadential patterns.

The portamento heard in both the vocal line and the right hand of the piano leads the voice to sing the final verse (beginning at m. 27) one octave higher than the previous three and depicts the rage and torment that the protagonist is feeling at the loss of the loved one. It is here that the march takes on the ferocity of the character as it encompasses a broader range, dynamic level, colourful accents and grace notes. Indicated both forte and brillante, the pianist plays flourishing, ascending embellishments in the upper registers over full-bodied chords in the bass. The dynamic level of this final verse begins forte and increases to a raging ff as the narrator proclaims on the highest pitch of the piece (Ab6) “Pour away the ocean,” on the same descending inversion of the original ascending chromatic motive that characterized the previous stanzas, except that now
more strained because of its placement an octave higher.

(Figure 28 – “Funeral Blues” mm. 31-32)

The piano imitates the narrator's torment through the increased syncopations, accentuations, and dynamics. The extremely wide registral span of the piano accompaniment, along with accents, grace notes, chromatic glissandos and dissonance all add to the anguish the character portrays. The non conventional series of chords in the last three measures [Fminor-AbCE-CEbB-CEbBb-ACE-Fminor] have imbedded within the inner voices a final repetition of the chromatic motive heard numerosely within the vocal melody (beginning in measure 33 beat 3 – [Ab –Bb-A-Ab]). This final chromatic motive is underscored by a dominant pedal of C in the bass notes of the piano and a parallel accompaniment of the vocal line in the upper notes of the accompaniment.

146 Ibid., 11.
A final approach to the tonic F in octaves in the last measure via inverted upper and lower half-steps four octaves apart seem to mimically represent the emotional tearing apart of the protagonist’s soul. The final fermata over the rests in the last measure of the piece indicates the silence and finality that come with death.

(Figure 29 – “Funeral Blues” mm. 33-35)

3.3 Johnny

The five verses of Auden's *Johnny* outline the narrator’s fascination for a young man who does not return his/her affection. Hypothetically, if one were to view the narrator as female, this lack of affection may be either out of ambivalence towards her in particular, or possibly (given the personal lives of the poet and composer) towards women in general. She is obsessed with spending time with Johnny and smothers him at

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\(^{147}\) Ibid.
every opportunity, only to have him frown at her and walk away. Finally after several
attempts, the poor woman resigns herself to the fact that Johnny will never return her
love. This poem is structured in a strophe + refrain pattern of five stanzas, each of 6
lines, out of which the first five lines recount some kind of an encounter with the lover,
which, at least in the girl’s mind seemed happy, yet in the sixth line of each stanza a
refrain-like text comes back reiterating Johnny’s rejection.

O the valley in the summer when I and my John
Beside the deep river walk on and on.
While the grass at our feet and the birds up above
Whispered so soft in reciprocal love.
And I leaned on his shoulder, 'O Johnny let's play':
But he frowned like thunder and he went away.

O the evening near Christmas as I well recall
When we went to the charity matinee ball,
The floor was so smooth and the band was so loud
And Johnny so handsome I felt so proud;
'Squeeze me tighter, dear Johnny, let's dance till day':
But he frowned like thunder and he went away.

Shall I ever forget at the Grand Opera
When music poured out of each wonderful star?
Diamonds and pearls hung like ivy down
Over each gold and silver gown;
'O Johnny I’m in heaven', I whispered to say:
But he frowned like thunder and went away.

O, but he was as fair as a garden in flower,
As slender and tall as the great Eiffel Tower,
When the waltz throbbed out down the long promenade
O his eyes and his smile went straight to my heart;
'O marry me, Johnny, I'll love and obey':
But he frowned like thunder and he went away.

O last night I dreamed of you, Johnny, my lover;
You'd the sun on one arm and the moon on the other,
The sea it was blue and the grass it was green
Every star rattled a round tambourine.
Britten uses a parody or imitation of a different style or genre, related to the subject matter of each stanza. The five verses of the poem are set to five distinct sections in the song, each with its own character and style. The first stanza is interpreted by Britten as a folk song, the second as a lively polka being played at a Christmas ball, the third as a recitative from an Opera, the fourth as a waltz, and the fifth as the minor equivalent to the folk song heard in the first stanza. Upon first hearing, one could suggest that these five sections may really be considered as separate songs in themselves, as the melodic lines, accompaniment figures, keys and styles do not seem to resemble each other. However, deeper analysis will show that these sections are in fact related to each other.

The piece opens with a two measure introduction in F major, the same music that is heard as a refrain at the end of each stanza/section. The first stanza of the piece, written in F major, is set in a folk song style, illustrating the summer stroll that the narrator and Johnny are taking through the valley by the river. The simplicity of both the vocal line and piano accompaniment, combined with the symmetrical four bar antecedent-consequent phrasing, the use of the vocalist's middle register and simple tonal progression [I-V-I] of the phrases, indicate a simplistic folk song approach. As in the first two songs, Britten depicts the text through musical word-painting. This song is rife with such examples, the first being in the opening measures of the vocalist's first phrase “O the valley in the summer,” where Britten outlines the shape of hills and valleys in the melodic line. The phrase is written on the lowest pitches when the text speaks of

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“valleys” and “grass at our feet,” then ascends to the upper octave when the text speaks of “birds up above.”

(Figure 30 – “Johnny” mm. 1-6)

Source: Cabaret Songs\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 12.
A noticeable connection to the text occurs in mm. 9-10 as the narrator describes the birds whispering “so soft in reciprocal love.”

(Figure 31 – “Johnny” mm. 7-10)

Here Britten’s ascending intervals of a third on “whispered so soft” are inverted at “reciprocal love” thus showing, quite literally, the reciprocation in the music.

The music for the Christmas party of the next stanza lasts between mm.15-41. Britten sets it with a lively trill and polka-like dance in the piano, evoking immediately, the energy and excitement of a room filled with jolly people. The new melody, texture,

150 Ibid., 12-13.
key (now D major) and 2/4 time signature indicate a brand new setting and time. The band is depicted through the polka accompaniment of the piano (m. 15-18) and a quite humorous coloration of the text is found at “the band was so loud” where the “band” plays two accented \textit{ff} chords. The narrator's smothering of Johnny, and Johnny's apparent distaste for the speaker is portrayed in the polka accompaniment during mm. 35-39 when the brightly dancing polka music turns quite sour and ugly.

(Figure 32 – “Johnny” mm. 31-39)

By dropping the dynamic level as well as the register during these phrases and by using

\cite{Ibid., 14.}
the dissonant diads [A-Bb] and [G#-A] in the piano, Britten clearly depicts the uncomfortable scene. It is apparent that Johnny does not like the attention that the narrator is giving him, and therefore immediately following, he “frowns like thunder and he went away.” Importantly, each stanza ends with a textual and musical refrain, that one may perhaps call “Johnny’s theme,” heard at the end of every verse at “But he frowned like thunder and went away.” This is also the same music heard at the introduction of the piece. This motive represents Johnny as he frowns and leaves the narrator, dashing all hopes of reciprocal love. This recurring motive undergoes change and variation as the gravity of the drama changes, yet no matter in what new key Britten scores each new section, he always returns to the same refrain in the same key of F major.

In stanza three of the poem the girl reminisces an operatic performance that she and Johnny attended. This gives Britten the opportunity to use the most obvious operatic parody, in mm.42-54. This section of the piece is a direct reference to Italian operatic recitative and is marked Lento: quasi recit. The piano accompaniment sets the secco recitative style with tonic chords, which are sustained in support of the singer who shows off, in bravura style, her range and agility. This is made even more funny as the music also imitates a technical exercise of vocalizing, by outlining arpeggios sung every other measure one semitone higher, going from arpeggios in G major (m. 42), to Ab major (m. 44), A major (m. 46), D, Eb, E, etc. She is now required to navigate larger intervals of an octave and sustain pitches in the upper extension of her range. Hints of Italian coloratura can be seen in m.45 as the narrator’s vocalizing humorously parodies the showing off of famous operatic stars of the past. The particular use of coloratura found in measure 43 in the piano accompaniment and measures 44-45 in the arpeggiated vocal line (shown
below) strongly suggest a traditional Rossini embellishment used commonly by opera singers today in the performance of various Rossini arias, namely *Una Voce Poco Fa* from Rossini’s opera *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

(Figure 33 – “Johnny” mm. 43-46)

For stanza four, whose music begins at m. 55, Britten uses another dance element, this time a waltz to create the romantic feelings associated with a Parisian promenade by

\[\text{Source: Cabaret Songs}^{152}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 15.}\]
utilizing a traditional waltz accompaniment in the piano. Here again, we have a new key of Db major, triple time signature of 3/4, new style and register in both the vocal and piano lines. Britten’s waltz is more complex and colourful both rhythmically and harmonically in that the piano accompaniment, through the use of broken chords and running eighth notes, creates a greater sense of movement rather than the traditional “oom pa pa” waltz. Britten also introduces chromaticism (a strong element tying the four Britten *Cabaret Songs* together) into his version of the traditional dance form that updates his waltz to a more 20th Century experience. The simplicity of the melodic line as well as the integrity of the typical waltz rhythm is maintained, which creates the illusion of two people waltzing down the Parisian promenade.
The peak of the section occurs fittingly at the most emotionally intense portion of the text

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153 Ibid., 17.
where the narrator sings, “O marry me Johnny, I'll love and obey.” Britten scores this phrase higher in the vocalist's register, leading up to an Ab6 where it is held with a fermata. The piano's waltz accompaniment is also much more engaging here as it flourishes over four octaves, ending with a fermata on the dominant-seventh chord of Db major in anticipation of Johnny's negative refrain in answer to the hopeful and love-struck young woman.

The refrain heard at mm.79-80 has been drastically altered from the others.

(Figure 35 – “Johnny” mm. 79-80)

Instead of the original V-I progression, Britten now incorporates two German-sixth chords, the first occurring on beat four of m.79 and the second on the downbeat of m.80. These chords are immediately apparent due to the change in color they present. They have a much darker quality than the original chords and what is more notable is that they

\[154\] Ibid., 18.
lead into the third and most important chord change in the section, the Tristan chord on beat three of m. 80. This chord was first introduced to us in *Tell Me The Truth About Love* and is now used in operatic quotation to show the significance of the loss of love that has occurred in this situation. We finally get the sense that the narrator has accepted the fact that Johnny will never return her love. This dark, menacing chord is a perfect transition into the final section of the piece, the funeral march.

The final section of the piece is of course the most tragic and melancholy for the narrator as she has had a dream of Johnny leaving her “ten thousand miles deep in a pit.” This section is reminiscent of the *Funeral Blues* in many ways, as it has for its foundation a death march, it is in the key of F minor, and it is placed in the lowest registers of both voice and piano. More importantly, it is the melody of the first stanza, varied, and set in the tonic minor, which makes the dark turn of fate even more obvious. These elements all combine to depict the death of love or the idea of love and the symbolic death of the character in her dream. The extremely low register in the vocal line of this last section can be very difficult since the singer had just been required to use her upper register for an extended section of high-lying operatic coloratura parody. This enormous vocal range is required and used by Britten to express the broad range of emotion the character goes through in *Johnny*, from extreme elation and joy to sadness and depression, indicating that the technical proficiency and the range of expression required of the singer are such that only vocalists with a solid technical foundation will be able to do justice to these songs.

The rattling of the stars as “tambourines” is depicted through trills in the piano's upper register and the deep pit or grave that the character lies in is clearly shown by the
solemn chords which stretch deep into the pianos depths (mm. 90-91).

(Figure 36 – “Johnny” mm. 90-91)

Britten’s *Johnny* bears certain dramatic and musical similarities to Kurt Weill’s *Surabaya-Johnny* of 1929. The character of Johnny in Weill’s rendition is somewhat darker than Britten’s, as the narrator (Johnny’s jilted lover) describes him as a “dog” and asks him repeatedly “why are you so mean”. But the essence of the two Johnny’s remains similar – that is, both men have abandoned their love and left them alone, depressed and in the utmost despair. Is Britten’s Johnny based on the same character? Scholarship does not say, but it is not unthinkable to assume that Britten and Auden knew about the Brecht/Weill song and perhaps decided to integrate the same idea into their *Cabaret Songs*. Musical similarities can also be drawn between the two pieces. A pedal of F is heard at length at the onset of Weill’s piece bearing resemblance to Britten’s

\[155\] Ibid., 19.
funeral march in the final section of *Johnny*. The use of a refrain is also heard, although Britten’s is much shorter. Certain elements found in Weill’s *Surabaya-Johnny* can also be found in Britten’s *Funeral Blues*. Firstly, Weill indicates *Sehr ruhig* (blues) at the onset of the piece, which hints at the need for a blues-like quality, a quality also required in Britten’s *Funeral Blues*. Also, the sparseness of the piano accompaniment in Weill’s composition, mostly chordal and drone-like in feel, is similar to that of the death march of the *Funeral Blues*. The two pieces are also written strophically and are each based on a very simple melody, a melody that builds in intensity and demonstrates much emotional anguish.
As mentioned earlier, the Britten song seems to possess five distinct sections, each one contrasting from the other in terms of the style it parodies. However, further analysis shows underlying relationships between the A section (mm.1-14) and the final

Source: A Centennial Anthology\textsuperscript{156}

(E) section (mm.81-93) as well as the B section (mm.15-41) and the D section (mm.55-80). Britten's format creates a pyramid structure; the following diagram helps to explain further:

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C
  B   D
 A   E
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The melodies of both the A section and E section of the piece use ascending major and minor 3rds extensively throughout. These ascending intervals are the foundation for the entire melodic line in both verses and are accompanied by simple chords in the piano.

Auden's narrator truly develops through the course of the song. The opening section is bright and happy, while the concluding section, though it retains many similarities with the first, is now more of its opposite mirror. The opening measures of the final section (mm.81-83) are an octave lower, depicting the character's grief. The onset of the final melody is also descending rather than ascending which displays the sorrow and depth of the “pit” in which the narrator is lying.
(Figure 38 – “Johnny” mm. 1-3 A section)

Source: Cabaret Songs

(Figure 39 – “Johnny” mm. 81-83 E section)

Source: Cabaret Songs

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157 Britten, Cabaret Songs, 12.
158 Ibid., 18.
The B and D sections also show several commonalities. They both begin with the piano introducing a new dance rhythm, the B section polka and the D section waltz. The B section is written in D major while the D section is written in D flat, and melodic similarities are most evident between mm.28-35 of the B section and mm.67-77 of the D section.

(Figure 40—“Johnny” mm. 28-31 B section)

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159 Ibid., 14.
These two sections also share a common relationship with the A section and E section in that they use the major and minor 3rd interval relationship regularly throughout.

The C section of the piece, or “operatic” section, is the most contrasting of all sections in terms of its musical content, however it also utilises the ascending 3rd relationship as seen in mm.47 and 49.

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160 Ibid., 17.
These intervallic and melodic relationships help to unify the sections and create a coherent piece from beginning to end.

In *Johnny*, every traditional stylistic element within the piece has become a satire of itself. Britten uses the folk song, polka, opera recitative, waltz and funeral march in such exaggerated forms, that they become parodies of themselves. This song is to be light and playful, even the ending suggests that the character still has fond memories of Johnny, although he has left her for dead. This is evident in that Britten scores the final measure in the major mode rather than minor. We are not to approach this piece too seriously but rather with humour and playful nature or else we risk presenting the piece in a way that would take away from the light, satirical nature of this cabaret song.

Source: Cabaret Songs

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161 Ibid., 16.
3.4 Calypso

*Calypso* was the last poem to be written out of the four in the collection and consequently, the last poem to be set to music. Written in 1939, this piece reflects the new environment that both the composer and poet were living in. At this point, Britten and Auden had settled for a time in America and therefore, *Calypso* possesses the feel of an American steam-train and makes reference to Grand Central Station.

Driver, drive faster and make a good run  
Down the Springfield Line under the shining sun.

Fly like an aeroplane, don't pull up short  
Till you brake for Grand Central Station, New York.

For there in the middle of that waiting-hall  
Should be standing the one that I love best of all.

If he's not there to meet me when I get to town,  
I'll stand on the pavement with tears rolling down.

For he is the one that I love to look on,  
The acme of kindness and perfection.

He presses my hand and he says he loves me,  
Which I find an admirable peculiarity.

The woods are bright green on both sides of the line;  
The trees have their loves though they're different from mine.

But the poor fat old banker in the sun-parlour car  
Has no one to love him except his cigar.

If I were the Head of the Church or the State,  
I'd powder my nose and just tell them to wait.

For love's more important and powerful than  
Even a priest or a politician.\(^\text{162}\)

\(^{162}\) Britten, *Cabaret Songs*, 20-26.
In Auden's *Collected Poems*, this poem is marked with stress symbols throughout in order to show the emphasis needed for the West Indian “calypso” effect. “Driver, drive faster and *make* a good *run* / down the *Springfield* line *under* the *shining sun*.” The sentence structure and rhyming scheme are typical of a West-Indian type of dialect, with the emphasis falling on the last syllable of the sentence “For love's more important and powerful *than*, even a priest or a *politician*.” The calypso style was a new and exciting form of music that had become a major part of the international popular music scene in the early 20th Century; therefore popular American elements permeate this light-hearted piece. Traditionally, calypso music was written in a duple meter with a rhythmic notation of short-long / short-short-long note values, the emphasis on the weaker beats of the bar creating a syncopated feel, and the consequent emphasis of the typically unstressed syllables found in traditional English speaking.

Auden’s text is written in ten relatively short two line stanzas which Britten enhances and ties together with snippets of the opening phrase “Driver, drive faster” in various alternate forms treating the opening stanza as somewhat of a refrain and enhancing the overall depiction of someone anxiously anticipating meeting their lover at Grand Central Station. One gets a sense of the overall “movement” of the text as Britten depicts the poetry speeding up through these snippets of refrain as will be discussed in further detail.

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165 Ibid.
Calypso is written in six short sections. The first six measures serve as an introduction, built upon the chromatic cluster [C#-D-Eb] which becomes central to the piano accompaniment heard throughout the piece, both in its primary form and in various transpositions, with the dominant (D) repeating first by quarter notes, then by eighth and sixteenth notes. The first main section is 10 measures in length written in G major and encompasses the first four stanzas of the poem. The melodic line is very minimal yet very rhythmic as it is meant to imitate the chugging of the train down the track, beginning on D4 and moving only within the interval of a minor third which chromatically descends from F4 back down to D4. This opening melodic line is treated much like a dominant pedal and will be used in varying forms as a type of small refrain in between the main sections of poetic verse. The second section (beginning at measure 17) is 16 measures in length in the tonic key of G with a much more lyrical vocal melodic line which covers a range from F5 to D4. There is a 4 measure snippet of the refrain “Driver drive faster...” before the next section between mm. 40-49 in Bb major. After another 4 bar refrain, this time ascending from F4 to Ab4 and in shorter note values with every repetition, the fourth section is introduced (mm.55-62) in Db major with a melodic line reaching an Ab5. Another 4 bar refrain is heard again from mm.63-66 which leads into the fifth section (mm.67-74) in E major. Measures 75-80 include the final snippet of refrain before the sixth and final section of the piece at mm. 81-92 in the home key of G major, with a postlude fadeout of the refrain “Drive faster, faster, faster............” (mm. 93-95).

It is obvious that Britten's scoring is to serve the purpose of enhancing the image of a train chugging down the track on its way to Grand Central Station. From the onset of the piece, the image of a train slowly starting down a track and gradually picking up
speed is clearly outlined, by reducing the durations of the repeated D pitch (dominant pedal of G major) in the left hand, from quarter notes, to eighths notes to sixteenth notes within four measures.

(Figure 43 – “Calypso” mm. 1-5)

The character in this piece is showing much excitement at the prospect of seeing their love at the end of the train ride and urges the driver to drive as fast as he can to get there, but more so than that, the narrator is perhaps a little frantic and possessed with the idea that if she/he does not get to her lover fast enough, they will be miss them. Depending on how one chooses to play this particular scene, one may wish to make this anecdote frantically emotional or playfully youthful. The narrator's melodic lines change to depict the person she is speaking to or speaking of. When he/she is speaking directly to the driver, the vocal line--a repeated pitch-- mimics the movement of the train and the words “Driver drive faster” in a rhythmically driving declamation.

\[166\] Ibid., 20.
As the train picks up speed later in the song, these “Driver, drive faster” sections ascend in pitch and take on quicker rhythmic notation as shown in mm.49-51.

This piece is built upon small motivic figures, which are sometimes transposed or fragmented in order to serve the text. As we learned earlier, much of Cole Porter's song compositions were based on melodic fragments, which were wound together to form a larger whole. Once again, chromaticism is central to the musical structure of the piece and serves to tie together this final song to the first three in the collection. Britten’s setting of this poem through the use of fragments and repetitious melodies within a continuous, through-composed musical form is meant to reflect both the excitement of a newly found love and the practical frenzy and sense of urgency of the speedy taxi ride with the goal of reaching the narrator's destination. Short ascending and descending scale passages are repeatedly used throughout the piece both in chromatic and whole tone form, as exemplified in mm.11-14.

Source: Cabaret Songs\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
There is a great contrast melodically as the narrator describes his/her lover with the text “For there in the middle of that waiting hall should be standing the one that I love best of all.” It is here that the West Indian dialect and “calypso” rhythm is clearly shown with the short-long-short-short-long rhythmic notation.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.

This section shows the melody now in a higher range and although it is still very rhythmic and “calypso” in style it is marked \textit{p dolce} indicating a much gentler approach. Measures 27-30 also show this same approach as the narrator sings “For he is the one that I love to look \textit{on}, the acme of kindness and perfection” (Italics added to indicate syllabic stress markings). Following this line of text, Auden writes “He \textit{presses my hand} and he \textit{says} he loves \textit{me} which I \textit{find} an \textit{admirable peculiarity}”. The emphasis here is quite an “admirable peculiarity” as it is much different from traditional speech patterns, but nevertheless adds to the “calypso” feel by the rhythmic notation of the short-long-short-short-long note value, the emphasis on the weaker beats of the bar creating a syncopated feel, and the consequent emphasis of the typically unstressed syllables found in traditional English speaking. This little recurring motive, first heard in mm. 21-24, plays

\cite{Peters52} 170}
on the interval of a major third, similar to that in *Johnny* and helps to depict the train chugging down the track at a steady rhythmic pace.

(Figure 47 – “Calypso” mm. 30-32)

A new section begins in measure 38 with the text “The woods are bright green on both sides of the line”, introducing a new theme in the vocal line, a much more lyrical melody created in a less driving rhythm which enhances the textual reference to nature in a more peaceful and serene approach but nevertheless maintaining a certain degree of calypso syncopation.

Source: *Cabaret Songs*\(^{171}\)

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 22.
This new character changes quite suddenly when the narrator introduces the “poor fat old banker in the sun-parlour car,” whose corresponding melody is treated much differently through accents in the vocal line and $sf$ markings in the piano.

\[\text{Source: Cabaret Songs}^{172}\]

\[p\text{ dolce}\]

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\[172\text{ Ibid., 23.}\]
Britten’s use of the lower register allows for the singer to experiment with their chest voice to add color and a new quality of tone while portraying this particular character. Finally, in measure 55, Britten introduces one last character to the piece, “the head of the Church or the State.”

Source: Cabaret Songs

173 Ibid.
This new character is written musically with pompous importance and is given one of the highest pitches in the song, (Ab6). Accented quarter note chords in the left hand of the piano are coupled with flourishing fanfare in the right hand and a strict dotted rhythm in the vocal melody with accentuated pulses help to create an atmosphere of stature and

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\[174\] Ibid., 24.
importance. Most noticeable here is the absence of the calypso syncopation which permeated the piece earlier. Britten chooses to write the “Head of the Church or the State” theme in a more traditional way, illustrating perhaps the straight-laced and diplomatic character.

As the train proceeds down the track, the tempo gradually speeds up until reaching the *prestissimo* section (beginning at measure 79), the finale of the song. After the train whistle (mm. 79-83), as the narrator's excitement builds to a high, the motive heard first in mm.21-24 is now seen in variation an octave higher, at the height of the vocalist's range for this piece, and on the nonsensical words “Ah, la la la la”. 
The scoring for both the voice and piano characterize the train as it moves further and further out of sight, as depicted by the *morendo* (*sempre pochissimo*) in the final three measures.

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175 Ibid., 26.
3.5 Concluding Remarks

In sum, it has clearly been established that the four *Cabaret Songs* contain elements of Traditional Art Song, operatic elements, popular American song elements as well as European cabaret elements. In his inimitable style, Britten very effectively fused all these elements or styles into cabaret songs that are unique and undistinguishable, yet belong to the best of this genre. Although these songs are not a group in the sense of being a cycle, there are elements within the music and poetry that hold them together and give them a certain unity of style. These include the vivid musical setting of the text, the following of the natural flow of the words, the enhancement of the drama by the piano accompaniment, the use of a pedal tone and rhythmic and motivic ostinati, the

\[\text{Source: Cabaret Songs}^{176}\]

\[\text{Figure 52 – “Calypso” mm. 92-94)}\]
abundant use of chromaticism and the requirement of a wide vocal range. In addition, all of the *Cabaret Songs* with the exception of *Funeral Blues* use refrains throughout as a means of tying together the verses of each piece. In the poetry the love theme predominates. Although these four pieces are fairly unknown and relatively new to the world of classical vocal repertoire, they offer classically trained collaborative partnerships the opportunity to experiment in a new and exciting genre, one which blends traditional elements with popular.

The performer has to study the songs in depth, then it is through the analysis of text and music, knowledge of the creation and evolution of the cabaret-artistique, as well as the understanding of the biographies and professional relationship of Britten and Auden that collaborative partnerships can interpret and perform the *Cabaret Songs* with depth, feeling and intelligence. Perhaps over time these pieces will be performed more regularly on the recital stage as they have much to offer to the classical vocal repertoire.
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