

THE BRITTEN-PURCELL REALISATIONS:  
CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT  
THROUGH THE VOICE OF PETER PEARS

by

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## Abstract

This thesis will examine Benjamin Britten's realisations of several of Henry Purcell's songs taken from *Orpheus Britannicus* and *Harmonia Sacra* and explore how these realisations were created by practical performance considerations at the time of composition (realisation) and the role that tenor Peter Pears played in this process. The thesis will consider how these songs combine the thinking of both Purcell and Britten. It will also take into consideration how the tenor solo vocal technique changed between the time of Purcell and Britten and how Peter Pears' unique vocal ability synthesized these two approaches to technique.

Although Purcell also wrote songs to be accompanied by larger instrumental forces, only the realisations and performance requirements of the continuo songs can be discussed in this document. The majority of songs Britten and Pears selected fall into this category. These songs will be analyzed using the following criteria: harmonic changes introduced by Britten, the manner in which the accompaniments are adapted or realised to meet the demands of the text, the specific editorial indications added by both Britten and Pears, the technical approach required for a tenor to perform these songs, and how these songs showcased the unique vocal, histrionic, and musical abilities of Peter Pears.

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## 1 The Source

### 1.1 Henry Purcell: The Orpheus Britannicus

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) is often regarded as the last great English composer until Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). During his life, Purcell was regarded as the Orpheus Britannicus, or British Orpheus. He wrote for the voice in a variety of different musical genres, such as incidental music for plays, sacred works, opera, music-drama entertainments, and solo song. He was particularly successful in setting the English language to music. Indeed this strength was even acknowledged during the composer's lifetime by Henry Playford in his preface to *Orpheus Britannicus I* (1698):

The Author's extraordinary Talent in all sorts of Musick is sufficiently known, but he was especially admir'd for the Vocal, having a peculiar Genius to express the energy of English Words, whereby he mov'd the Passions of all his Auditors.<sup>1</sup>

Comparisons are often drawn between the style of text settings by Purcell and Britten. The sweeping comment is often made that both composers set English text with a feeling for the natural inflection and communication of the language unrivalled by any other composers before or since. Britten readily acknowledged his admiration and respect for the way Purcell set text and how it influenced his own compositional technique. In program notes for the first performances of *Peter Grimes* he wrote, "One of my chief aims is to try to restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell."<sup>2</sup> He was

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Purcell, *Orpheus Britannicus: The First Book, A Facsimile of the 1698 London Edition* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1965), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Program notes, *Peter Grimes* (London: Sadlers Wells, 1945).

later quoted, "I had never realised, before I first met Purcell's music, that words could be set with such ingenuity, with such colour."<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Continuo songs

With the restoration of England's monarchy in 1660, the musical arts once again flourished. Purcell's solo songs were consequently written in the many different forms inherited and developed during England's Restoration period. The solo song forms Purcell developed and expanded are loosely grouped under the name of *continuo songs* and fall into two large categories, dance songs and declamatory songs, the latter of which Purcell developed into the extended song. According to Holman, the dance songs, typically in strophic form, are settings of less weighty verse, in lines of short and regular length, with easily anticipated musical accents, rhyme schemes and matching cadences. Holman reports that the declamatory song, by contrast, was used for more serious poetic ideas, cast in duple time, and often requiring a slow tempo.<sup>4</sup>

But the vocal line mirrored the inflections of speech and illustrated the words with appropriate images, so they are rarely tuneful, though they tend to have more melodic coherence than true recitative, Italian or English. Declamatory songs were in theory through composed . . . .<sup>5</sup>

Both dance and declamatory song forms functioned for varied occasions, both sacred and secular, and were further subdivided under the genres of drinking songs, glees, catches, mad songs, dialogue songs, and extended declamatory songs.

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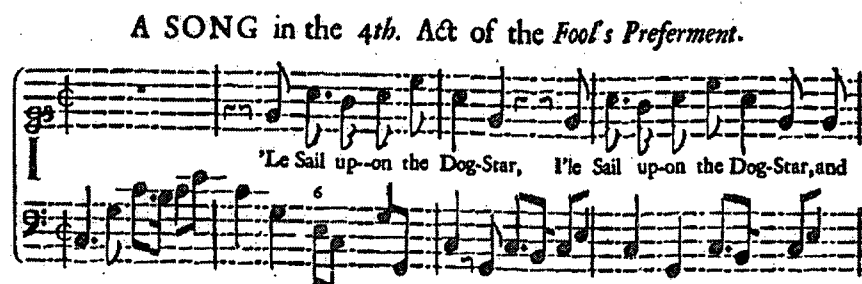
<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Britten, "Talking about Music," interview by John Amis, BBC sound machines, Britten-Pears Library, The Red House, Aldeburgh, undated tape.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Holman, - *Henry Purcell - Oxford Studies of Composers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

As was the practice of that time, Purcell's continuo songs are notated with just the melody, text and the figured bass line.

**Figure 1. Facsimile of 1698 London Edition of "I'll Sail Upon the Dog Star"**



Source: Orpheus Britannicus<sup>6</sup>

It was expected that the performers were well-versed in realising figured bass accompaniments in a suitable, captivating, and supportive manner. In the early part of the 1600's, the accompaniment would have been performed on a lute, possibly by the singer. This began to change later in the century when the more robust theorbo replaced the lute, giving way in the last quarter of the 1600's to the harpsichord. A bass viol joined the ensemble when available, but it was certainly not required.

### 1.3 Benjamin Britten: *The new Orpheus Britannicus*

When Benjamin Britten was still studying composition at Royal College he was not particularly drawn to his immediate predecessors who were using folk song as their inspiration, but rather he was attracted to the music of Henry Purcell. Decades later he told Murray Schafer,

<sup>6</sup> Purcell, *Orpheus Britannicus: The First Book, A Facsimile of the 1698 London Edition*, 122.



Purcell is a great master at handling the English language in a song, and I learned much from him. I recall a critic once asking me from whom I had learned to set English poetry to music. I told him Purcell: he was amazed. I suppose he expected me to say folk music and Vaughan Williams . . . [my] *First Canticle* was . . . certainly modeled on the Purcell *Divine Hymns*; but few people know their Purcell well enough to realise that.<sup>7</sup>

Similarities have frequently been drawn between the music of Britten and Purcell. In an article from *Music Survey* entitled "Britten 'The Eclectic'," Charles Stuart writes about the influence of Purcell on Britten.

The most fruitful and readily definable of all Britten's "adopted" manners is Purcellian. Listening not only to Britten's outright realisations of Purcell's vocal music but also to the chacony of the second string quartet, . . . I sense an affinity so deep as to be almost filial. Britten uses the Purcellian idiom, applying it to new purposes, with as much assurance, flexibility and affection as if it were a peculiarly personal inheritance . . . . I think of the grandeur of the Violin Concerto's closing pages. Purcell could not have written this music. Nor could Britten himself have written it had his mind not been moved and fired by the Purcell tradition.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Headington, *Britten: the composer as contemporary* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1981), 75.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Stuart, "Britten 'The Eclectic'," *Music Survey*, n.s. (1949-1952): 249-250.

## 2 The Britten-Purcell Realisations

### 2.1 Britten and Pears as collaborative performers

Although today people think of and remember Benjamin Britten as a great 20<sup>th</sup>-century composer, he was also a prominent pianist for most of his life, which enabled him to bring himself as a composer into his role as performer. Remarking on this duality, Eric Roseberry writes,

Benjamin Britten's secondary, but none the less significant and complementary, role as performer of other men's music is well known today and justly admired . . . . His performances are supremely creative: the composer nourishes the performer in him, and vice versa, which provokes the reaction, as one admires an interpretive idea in the performance of a . . . Schubert song partnered by Britten at the piano... 'how Schubertian' and yet 'how Brittenish'.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to his compositional activities, Britten maintained an extremely busy performing career, appearing frequently in recital with his partner, the tenor, Peter Pears (1910-1986).

Much has been written about the lives and careers of Britten and Pears, their personal correspondence, documents, articles and reviews of their performances. This material will therefore not be reviewed yet again in this study, except when directly related to the composition and performance of the Britten-Purcell realisations.

The duo, concerned with mounting pre-war tensions in Europe and in search of increased career opportunities, departed for North America in April of 1939. When war broke out

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Roseberry, "Britten's Purcell Realizations and Folksong Arrangements," *Tempo* 57 (Spring 1961): 7.

later that year, as longtime pacifists, they remained in America until 1942. It was during this self-imposed exile that they began to work on the first of the realisations, and where they premiered several of them in joint recitals.

Upon their return to England in 1942, they were eager to make public amends for abandoning England during the first years of WWII and re-establish their careers at home. After both had been granted exemption from active duty as pacifists by the British war tribunal, they were able to resume their musical endeavors. Although both men had careers independent of the other, Pears with his operatic and oratorio engagements and Britten as a composer, they also continued to build their collaborative projects, accepting recital engagements throughout Great Britain during the war years.

They were engaged by the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA), a forerunner to the Arts Council of Great Britain, to perform recitals throughout England. These recitals proved to be a perfect platform for presenting the freshly-inked Britten-Purcell realisations. The Purcell repertoire was an ideal choice. Although many of Purcell's works had fallen into public neglect, his name was still a treasured cornerstone of British music. It is entirely possible that the relative neglect of Purcell made him that much more appealing to Britten and Pears, who now brought his music before the public in a new and "contemporary" light. Britten's ongoing fascination with Purcell's daring harmonic structures and the suitability of the songs to Pears' vocal skills only strengthened the choice. Yet another boon was that the Purcell texts were in the vernacular and thus readily enjoyable to the often less-than-musically erudite audiences

for whom they performed.<sup>10</sup> Although these songs were programmed for their musical value, they also encompassed a wide range of emotions and moods and included dramatic scenarios which beautifully displayed Pears' celebrated dramatic flair and interpretive artistry.

Britten's letters include several casual references to their concert programs and repertoire. From their earliest recitals together in the 1930s they regularly programmed the songs of Purcell, and clearly enjoyed performing this repertoire and the public reception it received. In 1945, in a letter to Ralph Hawkes, a friend in the New York office of his publisher, Boosey and Hawkes, Britten stated, "it is most wonderful music and gets extraordinary receptions everywhere. Peter and I have done it all over this country, and we're going to do some of the big pieces in Amsterdam and Brussels next month."<sup>11</sup>

As Britten's and Pears' careers took on an international scope, their arrangements of Purcell's songs remained a standard component in their programs. Britten writes,

In practically every one of our concerts, given the length of three continents over the last twenty years, Peter Pears and I have included a group of Purcell's songs. Although they were not included for chauvinistic reasons, it has been nice to find that foreign audiences accept these English songs alongside those of their own great classic song writers.<sup>12</sup>

Britten again comments,

It is pleasant to get cheers at the end of Purcell's 'Alleluia' in the home of Schubert and Wolf, requests for a repeat of 'Man is for the woman made' in the birthplace of Mozart, appreciative giggles at the end of 'There's not

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<sup>10</sup> Headington, *Britten: the composer as contemporary*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten: 1913-1976, Volume Two, 1939-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1285-6.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Britten, "On realizing the continuo in Purcell's songs," in *Henry Purcell, 1659-1695, Essays on His Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7.

a swain on the Plain' in Fauré's home town, and an impressive silence as the last bars of 'Job's Curse' die away in Düsseldorf, where Schumann spent many years. And not only in foreign places too – where, to our shame, the music of Purcell is still shockingly unknown.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 Britten's performance considerations

Britten, a very fine pianist with a somewhat non-traditional technique, wanted to display his own virtuosity in these recitals and place his own compositional ideas before the public. Purcell's songs and Britten's realisations of them provided a dual outlet for both his compositional and pianistic abilities. This duality was commented upon in a review from 1961.

The happy fusion of Britten's exceptional talents as performer and composer attains complete fulfillment, perhaps, in his activity as an interpreter of the music of Henry Purcell – a highly sympathetic figure with whom Britten has strong creative affinities, and possibly the greatest single influence on the development of his own vocal and operatic style.<sup>14</sup>

The realisations were written for piano for two principal reasons. Britten was a pianist, and not versed in harpsichord technique, and as these first recitals were being held during the infancy of the early music revival, there were no harpsichords in the concert venues in which they performed. Many of the songs they wanted to perform were unavailable in modern published versions, and Britten considered the realisations of the continuo parts which already existed to be pedantic, harmonic filler. He claims in his essay in the volume of his writings collected by lifelong friend Imogen Holst on the bicentenary of Purcell's death, "It [*i.e.*, Purcell song repertoire] is unknown because so much of it is

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<sup>13</sup> Britten, "On realizing the continuo in Purcell's songs," 7.

<sup>14</sup> Roseberry, "Britten's Purcell Realizations and Folksong Arrangements," 7.

unobtainable in print, and so much of what is available is in realisations which are frankly dull and out of date.”<sup>15</sup> Regarding the realisation of the figured bass Britten continues,

If the tradition of improvisation from a figured bass were not lost, this would not be so serious, but to most people until a worked-out edition is available, these cold unfilled-in lines mean nothing, and the incredible beauty and vitality, and infinite variety of these hundreds of songs go undiscovered.<sup>16</sup>

Although Britten never claimed to be a specialist in Baroque music, his gifts as both composer and pianist were tailor-made for creating modern realisations of the figured bass lines of Purcell’s continuo songs and they provided him with a stimulating and creative challenge.<sup>17</sup> He coupled his talents as a composer and pianist to create dazzling, evocative and captivating realisations for these songs, often requiring an extremely fluid technical prowess. Sometimes the realisations remain quite close to the Purcell figured bass, but are made more pianistic and brought to the public in clear and playable versions. In addressing the performance realities of the recital format, Britten did not shy away from adding an introduction if he felt it would prepare both singer and audience for the ensuing material.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Britten, “On realizing the continuo in Purcell’s songs,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. .

<sup>17</sup> Roseberry, “Britten’s Purcell Realizations and Folksong Arrangements,” 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. .

**Figure 2. Britten's introduction for the realisation of "I attempt from Love's sickness to fly"**

With gentle movement

VOICE

PIANO

*p freely*

*p*

I at -

These four bars ad libitum

Source: *Five Songs from Orpheus Britannicus*<sup>19</sup>

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In the more serious sacred songs, extended mad songs and declamatory pieces, the realisations take on a pronounced 20<sup>th</sup>-century flavour, infused with his own personal interpretation. He uses the full spectrum of the piano's timbres and inserts some characteristic Britten dissonances. He later defended this practice in an article about his realisations.

But just a filling in by these harmonies above the correct notes is not enough; one dimension is still lacking, the dimension of one's own personal reaction to the song, which in former days would have been supplied by the improvisation. This dimension comes from the *texture* of the accompaniment and the *way* the harmonies are filled in.<sup>20</sup>

By using the full capabilities of the piano and adding his own personal harmonic flashes, the songs become a hybrid creation by both Purcell and Britten. Humphrey Carpenter claimed that "Britten's Purcell realisations are idiosyncratic rather than historically

<sup>19</sup> Henry Purcell, *Five Songs from Orpheus Britannicus*, ed. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1960), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Britten, "On realizing the continuo in Purcell's songs," 7.

accurate, and make the music seem like the work of one man, Britten - Purcell.”<sup>21</sup> Since Britten was fully cognizant that there would be opposition from early music purists regarding his approach to realization, he explained his practical approach.

If one is realising for a piano, it is important to be aware of the difference in sound from harpsichord and string bass, for which most of the songs would have been written. There must be compensation for the lack of sustaining power of the actual bass notes (repeated notes, octaves, trills, tremolandi for crescendi, etc.), as well as an awareness of the difference between the plucked and the hammered strings. Actually the sound that Purcell expected can give one ideas – dry clear arpeggios, grace-notes, octave doublings, sudden contrasts in dynamics or range, and that wonderful short staccato.<sup>22</sup>

He claimed that the Purcell pieces had by and large been neglected because of creative dullness and a sense of austere reverence towards Purcell by earlier composers, performers, and editors.<sup>23</sup> He acknowledged the inherent possibilities in realising these songs, recognizing the recent musical contributions and similarities in approach between Michael Tippett, Walter Bergmann and himself, and called for other contemporaries to explore new realisations.

### 2.3 Critical response

Critical reaction to these realisations was rather mixed at the time of their publication. A cross section of reviews from the time will illuminate the diverse response. Commenting favourably, Eric Roseberry praised Britten's attention to editorial detail.

These directions, together with an almost Mahlerian scrupulousness of phrasing and dynamic detail, reveal the editor's passionate concern to make his intentions clear. Others may feel these songs differently, but

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<sup>21</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 229.

<sup>22</sup> Britten, "On realizing the continuo in Purcell's songs," 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. .



there can be no doubt about the immediacy and sharp precision of Britten's sympathetic reaction to the original conception.<sup>24</sup>

In a rather critical review from 1948 in *Music-Survey*, Harold Truscott takes umbrage at both the creator's talent (Purcell) as well as their re-creator's success (Britten), although grudgingly acknowledges that Britten did select the "best of the lot" and did some sound scholarship when bringing them before the public. Not content just to review Britten, he took the opportunity to comment on Purcell as well, taking exception to the long-held claim that Purcell was a master of English text setting.<sup>25</sup> Turning to Britten's realisations of Purcell he then ponders the hybrid nature of the material,

Is it that Britten has put a lot of himself into them, or is it, as I am incline to think, that Britten's own style, where there is one, has been so influenced by Purcell (when Mahler will make room) that when he realises perfectly these Purcellian accompaniments we are immediately confronted by bits of Britten? However it is, there are moments when Purcell hovers dangerously near Britten or Britten near Purcell, and these moments fall doubtfully on the ear.<sup>26</sup>

These realisations have often come under critical attack for their seemingly heavy-handed dramatic approach, the use of piano and the "Brittenish" quality of the accompanying sonorities. Peter Evans dealt with Britten's use of Purcell's music, particularly *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (also known as *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell*) commenting, "... those who find uncomfortable the stylistic dichotomy of Britten's piano-accompanied Purcell song realisations will be no less discomfited by the portly orchestral guise in which Purcell's theme is presented."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roseberry, "Britten's Purcell Realizations and Folksong Arrangements," 7.

<sup>25</sup> Harold Truscott, "Hearing Britten's Style in the Purcellian Accompaniments," *Music Survey*, Volume 1, Number 4 (1948): 120.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. .

<sup>27</sup> Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1989), 301.

The matter of early music authenticity in these realisations is again remarked on by Paul Kildea in his book, *Selling Britten*.

The concept of authenticity in early music, already emerging in England during the 1930's, became a stronger, if slow-fused, force after 1945: Britten's approach to this complicated and contentious issue – established in his . . . realisations of Purcell's songs – was directly opposed to the teachings of scholars such as Dent or Thurston Dart . . . To Britten 'effect' was more important than so-called authenticity, yet his slightly dismissive tone in the introduction . . . suggests that he was well aware of the growing arguments for the latter.<sup>28</sup>

It is vital to the understanding and appreciation of these realisations that they be viewed in the light of the time and purpose for which they were created. In 1996, Michael Oliver weighed in on this aspect of the Britten-Purcell realisations.

They are . . . a fascinating indication of Britten's attitude to a composer who influenced him greatly. They [Britten's realisations] . . . have tended to fall out of use as the attractions of 'authentic' Purcell have become more manifest. But Britten's editions made this music accessible at a time when it would otherwise have remained unperformed, and they played an important part in the revaluation of a great composer much of whose music was then little known.<sup>29</sup>

Britten often remarked that he was not composing for future generations and posterity, but rather for pleasing the people at that moment and to enhance their lives. The way he was able to link the past with contemporary compositional trends and still communicate to a large and relatively popular audience was remarkable.<sup>30</sup> In his Aspen Award

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Kildea, *Selling Britten; Music and the Market Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 143.

<sup>30</sup> Headington, *Britten: the composer as contemporary*, 75.

acceptance speech he said, "That is what we should aim at – pleasing people today as seriously as we can, and letting the future look after itself."<sup>31</sup>

Financial and commercial considerations were also not left out of the debate, and radio programmers commented on the relative merits of these realisations, as seen in BBC's interdepartmental correspondence in Britten's "composer file."

Purcell's realisations in Britten's hands have become matters of argument and contention in the musical world and are in some quarters actively disliked. If the enjoyment of Purcell's music, in say, the *Golden Sonata* or the *Queen's Epicedium* is the reason for broadcasting it, the older realisations are better. If an examination of the principles governing thorough-bass and its realisation are intended, Britten's editions will provoke discussion. Therefore, generally, I think we would suggest the more normal realisations on *Home* and *Light*, and Britten's realisations on *Third* (i.e., so-called elitist programs of the BBC).<sup>32</sup>

Despite these contradicting criticisms and arguments regarding the Britten-Purcell realisations, the fact remains that these idiosyncratic creations have withstood the test of time. They remain a fixture in recital programs by the novelty of the juxtaposition of such seemingly divergent musical periods. Today, they serve as reminders of the dynamic musical experimentation of Britten's time, and a musical record of this particular mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century approach to early music revival.

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<sup>31</sup> Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, 213.

<sup>32</sup> Kildea, *Selling Britten; Music and the Market Place*, 93.

### 3 Vocal Performance of the Britten-Purcell Realisations

#### 3.1 Overview

Having looked at the roles of both Purcell and Britten in the creation of these pieces, it is time to address the final factor in these “modern” realisations, the singer for whom they were realised, tenor Peter Pears. Pears’ vocal technique encompassed both contemporary and earlier traditions, and his technical versatility is a defining element of the realisations. In a 1946 review of a Britten-Pears performance of Purcell’s “*Lord, What is Man?*” critic William McNaught wrote that it communicated “an intricate and unified whole, compounded of Purcell’s mind, his fellow-composer’s, and the mind and gifts of the singer.”<sup>33</sup>

#### 3.2 The 17<sup>th</sup>-century voice

The voice of the contemporary tenor, or perhaps more appropriately stated, the way in which the contemporary professionally trained operatic tenor approaches and uses his voice, is considerably different than that of singers in Purcell’s time. It would seem that the voices for which Purcell wrote were generally much lighter and more naturally produced than those of today’s professional solo singers. These voices were neither untrained nor amateur, but simply were not called upon to create vast volumes of sound. Solo song, as previously noted, was accompanied by the lute, theorbo, or harpsichord. Relative to the full texture and robust sonority and volume of today’s concert grand piano or the volume of sound produced by an orchestra, these instruments are quite subdued

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<sup>33</sup> William McNaught, “London Concerts: Purcell-Britten,” *Musical Times*, Vol. 87, No. 1236 (1946): 60.

and more intimate. Likewise, the solo singers of Purcell's time were not called upon to fill large public concert halls seating audiences of 3,000 people as are today's professional singers. For example, one need only compare the orchestral forces accompanying a soloist in Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* with those in an opera by Richard Strauss to understand the different demands placed on singers' techniques in these two historical eras. This raises the question whether one singer can perform both styles of repertoire with equal success.

The type of voices for which Purcell composed his solo song were sweet, relatively small and pure, with clear diction; abundant volume was not desirable attribute.<sup>34</sup> In 1636 Charles Butler wrote that vocalists should "sing as plainly as they would speak: pronouncing every syllable and letter (especially the vowels) distinctly and treatably."<sup>35</sup>

Another observation attributed to Andreas Ornithoparchus (1609) and translated by John Dowland cautions the singer to "take heed, lest he began too loud braying like an Asse...For God is not pleased with loud cryes, but with lovely sounds."<sup>36</sup> It is not that innately loud voices did not exist; of course they did, but they just were not highly cultivated and were not the ideal aesthetic most commonly desired or appreciated by those audiences. This was confirmed in 1667 by Samuel Pepys when reporting on an amateur who sang in the Chapel Royal "very handsomely, but so loud that people did

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<sup>34</sup> Holman, *Henry Purcell*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> E. H. Jones, *The Performance of English Song, 1610-1670* (New York and London, Garland Publishing Inc., 1989), 19.

<sup>36</sup> R. Spencer, "The Performance Style of the English Lute Ayre c. 1600," *The Lute Society Journal*, Volume XXIV, (1984): 58.

laugh at him – as a thing done for ostentation”.<sup>37</sup> Another quotation from 1685 noted that a female singer’s voice was “so loud, as tooke away much of the sweetnesse . . . certainly never woman had a stronger, or better [voice] could she possibly have govern’d it; She would do rarely in a large Church among the Nunns.”<sup>38</sup>

In addition to sheer bulk of sound, vibrato is also a technical vocal feature that differs between the contemporary and earlier eras. Vibrato was not taboo, but was used as a vocal and musical enhancement as opposed to a vocal constant, as now is the case. On the subject of the acceptable use and type of vibrato preferred in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, Roger North claims it to be likened to

a gentle and slow wavering, not into a trill, upon the swelling the note; such as trumpets use, as if the instrument were a little shaken with the wind of its owne sound, but not so far as to vary the tone [i.e., pitch], which must be religiously held to its place, like a pillar on its base, without the least loss of accord.<sup>39</sup>

Greater emphasis was also placed on the proper and clean execution of coloratura and the graces (i.e., ornaments) and above all on the clean articulation and intelligibility of text.

Since the Britten realisations were, for the most part, written for the tenor voice, specifically that of Peter Pears, only this vocal type and range will be examined. Purcell, in all likelihood wrote for what would, if heard today, be labeled a *natural* tenor voice. This male voice naturally sits higher in pitch than does the male norm, the baritone, both in speech as well as song, and has an ease and natural facility particularly in the upper

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel Pepys, *Letters and the Second Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. G. Howarth (London, J. M. Dent, 1932), 425.

<sup>38</sup> Holman, *Henry Purcell*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. .

part of the vocal range.<sup>40</sup> To modern ears, the most likely equivalent is a very fine tenor chorister. The natural range of the tenor voice, without mixing or blending into falsetto, and without advanced training and technical manipulation to take the full voice (*voce piena*) unnaturally higher, stops at approximately A<sup>4</sup>. When looking at Purcell's songs and assuming that Baroque pitch was nearly a semitone lower than today's A<sup>4</sup> (A = 440), the usual range of most of the songs for tenor lies comfortably within this natural tenor range. There are certainly songs for male voice which go somewhat higher (Bb<sup>4</sup>, B<sup>4</sup>), but in all likelihood, a clever blending of full voice, to head voice, and then into falsetto was employed to create a seamless range, possibly more like that of a countertenor.

Most countertenor parts, however, are similar to French *haute-contre* parts . . . they do not go higher than A<sup>4</sup>-Bb<sup>4</sup>, and can easily be sung by light, high tenors, particularly since evidence from woodwind instruments suggests that the secular pitch in England around 1700 was around A<sup>4</sup>=406. Some countertenors probably blended high tenor and falsetto voices; indeed, it is hard to imagine how else the parts in Blow's *Ode on the Death of Mr. Henry Purcell*, with the range D<sup>3</sup>-D<sup>5</sup>, could have been sung.<sup>41</sup>

Jeremy Noble further supports this use of lighter tenor voices:

As for the counter-tenors it looks as though they – or at any rate the majority of those in the Chapel Royal – were more like high light tenors than purely falsetto voices, for Purcell rarely makes them go higher than Bb or B, while his tenors have an equal range about a major third lower.<sup>42</sup>

The solo tenor voice of Purcell's time was responsible for creating a distinctly different sound than today's professional non-specialist (i.e., not specifically early music) tenor

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Miller, *Training Tenor Voices* (Belmont, CA: Schirmer Books, 1993), ix.

<sup>41</sup> Holman, *Henry Purcell*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Noble, "Purcell and the Royal Chapel in, *Henry Purcell 1659-1695 Essays on His Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 63.

must create. To continue this discourse, we will now consider a few of the physiological changes in vocal technique which occurred in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

### 3.3 Change in vocal technique

Almost all instruments started to increase in size, volume, and strength early in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century in order to cope with the increasing demands being placed on them. The human voice was no exception, and needed to keep pace. Entire treatises, such as Richard Miller's *Training Tenor Voices*, have been devoted to the study of vocal technique, but the scope of this document allows us only a brief overview. When the natural male voice ascends in pitch, the larynx rises. Ultimately the vocal apparatus reaches a point of unbearable tension and the man's voice cracks and switches into falsetto. In the hands of skilled performers at a soft dynamic with very little pressure on the apparatus, the shift can be almost undetectable, and was apparently practiced by 17<sup>th</sup> century countertenors, but when increased amplitude is required and used, the change in register (*passaggio*) or break is clearly heard. Over time, a physical maneuver was perfected in order to maintain this full, robust sound, capable of filling an opera house, and to take the voice to extremes of pitch, well out of the natural tenor range. When approaching the *passaggio*, the larynx is gently and consciously shifted downward, which creates the need for other subtle modifications to the apparatus, and pressure is increased on the instrument and the air column becomes more compressed. This is currently the accepted vocal technique for the tenor voice. One excellent and somewhat simplified description of this process is found in Potter's *Vocal Authority*:

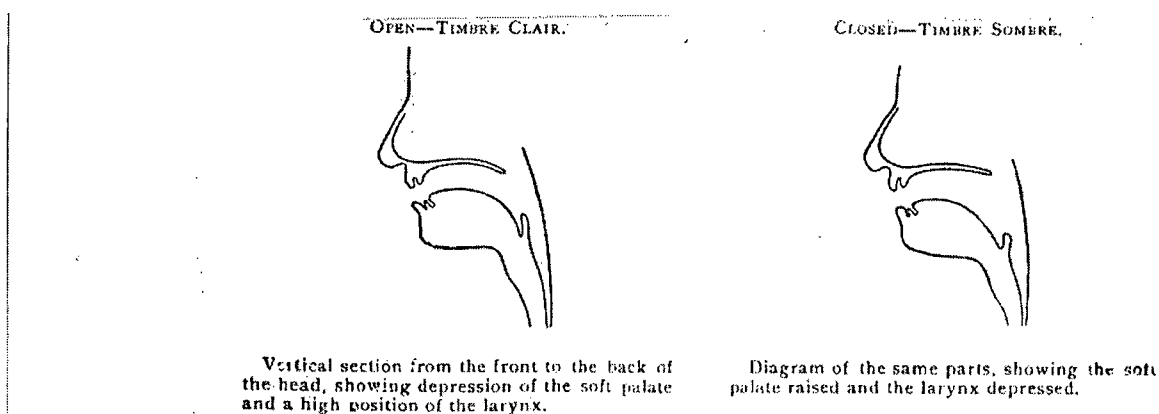
We know from Garcia's treatise in 1841 that the lowered larynx position (the *voix sombrée*) was a novelty in the 1830's and was not known earlier,



and this enables us to make certain assumptions about a pre-Garcia voice. It is reasonable to assume that earlier singers sang with the larynx closer to the higher position used in speaking. This enabled them to distinguish clearly between the vowels and made their voices light and agile: exactly the kind of voice one would need for the intimate performance of chamber music or the more florid ornamentation of the late Renaissance, baroque and classical periods.<sup>43</sup>

The following illustration from Manuel Garcia's treatise shows the rudimentary physical modifications which occur inside the throat and mouth between the so-called natural production, *voix blanche* (*timbre clair*), and the more enhanced production *voix sombrée* (*timbre sombre*).

**Figure 3. Diagram of laryngeal positions during singing**



Source: Manuel Garcia, *Hints on Singing*<sup>44</sup>

With this increased volume, clarity of diction is lost, because of a conscious lowering of the jaw, and for many men their facility with agility is also compromised. Although the glottal articulation of running rapid passages is now considered somewhat taboo by vocal

<sup>43</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: singing style and ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53.

<sup>44</sup> Manuel Garcia, *Hints on Singing* (London: E. Ascherberg and Company, 1894), 11.

pedagogues, in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, glottal articulation of runs was fully expected. As

Julianne Baird comments,

. . . singers negotiated fast passages with a lightening quick kind of glottal articulation, which was performed on the soft palate. The air percussed against the soft palate the way it does in a giggle . . . , it gave the voice the ability to move quickly or with agility.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.4 The voice of Peter Pears

Peter Pears had the ideal type of voice and vocal technique to perform these hybrid realisations which encompass two very different vocal performance styles. His versatile and unique technique can be attributed to two major influences. In his early career he worked as a professional chorister (i.e., the natural tenor voice) in London with the BBC Singers and sang in a vocal sextet called the New English Singers, specializing in Elizabethan madrigals and other early music in addition to some small solo oratorio engagements. Committed to forging a successful solo career, he undertook rigorous technical study during his years in America (1939-1942). By the time he returned to England, the technical progress was remarkable. Music that had previously been beyond his technical control was now within his ability to perform publicly. One of Britten's first compositions for Pears' voice, the taxing *Michelangelo Sonnets*, was favourably reviewed in the *New Statesman and Nation* by Edward Sackville-West who said of Pears, "it is long since we heard an English tenor with a voice at once so strong, so pure and so sweet".<sup>46</sup> As this quotation illustrates, Pears did indeed develop a sturdy technique, secured his upper range and added weight to his sound. His voice gradually developed into a full-blown operatic tenor voice capable of handling the rigorous vocal demands.

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<sup>45</sup> Bernard Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 231.

<sup>46</sup> Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, 84.

His subsequent solo engagements bear testament to this and he was regularly engaged to sing a diverse array of repertoire encompassing the leggiero as well as the full lyric roles including Tamino (*Die Zauberflöte*), Almaviva (*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*), Hoffmann (*Les Contes d'Hoffmann*), Alfredo (*La Traviata*), Duke (*Rigoletto*), Ferrando (*Così fan tutte*), Vašek (*The Bartered Bride*), Rodolfo (*La Bohème*) and subsequently the title role in *Peter Grimes*.

This versatility allowed him to combine both pre- and post- c. 1830 vocal techniques, whether consciously or not; he made use of the full sound as well as the less-produced, more natural sound. The duality of technical approaches is characteristic of his vocal style clearly heard in all of his many recordings throughout a very long and successful career. He was willing to bend and modify his voice technically as the musical and emotional demands of the repertoire required. His attention to clear delineation of text is exemplary, both in studio and live recordings. Pears' fluency and virtuosity in rapid passage work, showcased in much of the early music Britten wrote for him, is astonishing for a voice of this size. These vocal traits made the music of Purcell as realised by Britten, demanding a fuller yet malleable sound, an ideal vehicle to showcase Pears' prowess as a singing artist.

When listening to live recordings of Britten and Pears performing these Purcell realisations, one is struck with the remarkable ease with which Pears negotiates his voice. At times, he swells to full operatic intensity so as not to be overpowered by the weighty realisation accompaniments supporting him, while at other moments, he sweetly and

effortlessly floats a high tessitura. He can execute coloratura passages in full voice with all notes cleanly delineated, and at the same time, communicate the text with impeccable diction. In addition to the qualities mentioned, detailed knowledge of the vast collection of works Britten tailored for the Pears voice suggests other unique vocal traits. His ability to maintain a high tessitura for extended periods ( $D^4$  -  $G^4$ ), an exploitation of the pitch  $E^4$  (intoned and sung repeatedly), his characteristic *mezza voce* and ability to sing at *ppp* levels, as well as a robust baritonal quality in his lower range ( $C^3$  -  $G^3$ ) were all well suited to the vocal lines of Purcell in the songs they selected to perform. Judging from audience response as well as reviews of his performances, he also brought incredible emotional commitment, charisma, and dramatic flair to his performances.

The strength of the Britten-Pears artistic partnership was great, and Pears recognized and appreciated Britten's sensitivity to his vocal abilities. Pears said, "Ben was extraordinarily sensitive as a pianist, both to what I wanted to do with a song and in what he wanted to achieve. He could make lighter sounds than anyone else I can recall . . . ." <sup>47</sup>

It is unlikely that these realisations would have been created had it not been for the adaptability and appropriateness of the voice of Peter Pears to this particular repertoire. His influence on Britten and these realisations cannot be marginalized. In an essay, Pears acknowledges this symbiotic relationship. "He made my career by all the wonderful works he wrote for me. On the other hand, he said he would not have achieved anything without me." <sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 18.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 18.

## 4. Song Analyses

### 4.1 Overview

The first book of these songs was published in 1947 by Boosey and Hawkes, and several volumes of solos as well as duets and chamber pieces continued to appear until 1971, containing material from both *Orpheus Britannicus* and *Harmonia Sacra*. Many of these works are subsequently being re-released in new folios, also by Boosey and Hawkes.

Britten and Pears remained lifelong devotees and proponents of the music of Purcell. Their combined private library maintained at their home in Aldeburgh contains many volumes of Purcell's music, several with their personal annotations. It is unclear at this point which specific editions and volumes they consulted and used as their primary source for the continuo songs they later realised for performance, so this remains a fascinating and useful topic for further research.<sup>49</sup>

### 4.2 Parameters for analysis

A study of Britten's arrangements of six of Purcell's songs will help us understand Britten's modernizations of these 17<sup>th</sup>-century compositions for audiences of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Information about the first performances of the Britten-Purcell realisations, the original interpreters and first publication dates will be provided for each song. The

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<sup>49</sup> Research Officer – Thematic Catalogue project to the author, email, June 23, 2006. Lucy Walker believed that there was no definitive source edition upon which Britten and Pears based their realisations and suggests that tracing the authentic "sources would comprise a considerable Phd. -sized project".

piano part will be examined to determine whether Britten changed Purcell's harmonic structure, or altered the bass line in an attempt to enhance Purcell's setting of the text. We will also examine the ways Britten interpreted Purcell's figures and reconfigured them for use at a modern concert piano. Countermelody constructions and editorial additions in the piano part will also be noted.

The pitch and rhythm of Purcell's vocal lines in all of these vocal compositions are essentially unaltered, although in a few instances the key of the song has been transposed. Pears is credited as the editor of the vocal line and his additions and their effect will be noted. Finally, the unique qualities of Pears' voice and dramatic capabilities which are showcased and exploited by this material will also be examined, and a number of suggestions will be provided for 21<sup>st</sup>-century professional tenors interested in attempting to amalgamate pre- and post- 1830s vocal techniques in this music.

### **4.3 Realisations from *Orpheus Britannicus***

#### **4.3.1 "Hark the Ech'ing Air"**

This song was the first of the Britten-Purcell realisations to be performed publicly. During their time in America, Britten and Pears began work on several of the Purcell songs. This song was first performed by the duo on November 9, 1939 at Hotel Henry Perkins, Rivershead, NY. That same evening another Purcell realisation, "The Knotting Song," was also premiered. Purcell's version was published in Book II of *Orpheus Britannicus* by Playford, under the title "A Single Song" (pp. 18-19) in C major, but

Britten and Pears lowered the key to B $\flat$  major, presumably in order to accommodate the tenor's negotiation of the passaggio.

Although Purcell's original bass line is relatively unchanged, Britten has occasionally added lower octave doublings to increase the sonority and richness (e.g., mm. 1-2 and the added B $\flat$ <sup>1</sup> in m. 6). In mm. 6-9 Britten changed the bass line from the sustained three measure low B $\flat$  to alternating rolled tonic chords and single lower octave tonic pitches every two beats to give motion and added buoyancy to support the broken arpeggiated figure in the vocal line. Sonority is further increased in this passage by the additional use of the editorial *Ped.* symbol. Britten also specified that the dynamic levels should be increased (e.g., mm. 13-14) by adding editorial *cresc.* and hairpin markings, and he later added upper octave bass line doublings to thicken the texture leading into the first and second endings. Britten altered Purcell's bass line on the fourth beat of the penultimate measure of the song, replacing Purcell's F<sup>2</sup>-F<sup>3</sup> with the octaves below (F<sup>1</sup>-F<sup>2</sup>) in order to enhance the thrust into the final cadence. This lower sonority is also the lowest note in the piece, adding increased cadential interest and strength, and supporting the singer's intensification of the cadence. The use of the added lower octave by Britten is continued into the first ending (m. 31) and added to the rolled chord for the final measure of the song.

Possibly because of the added octave, Britten chooses to leave out the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the chord in the left hand of the final bar for a cleaner texture. This same open chord texture (root-fifth-octave) is used by Britten earlier in the song with the ornament found in mm. 16-19

and 23-25 as well as m. 31. Each time this figure/ornament appears it is accompanied by Britten's editorial *Ped.* indication and followed by editorial staccato markings. Despite the open chord ornament, the removal of the piano dampers gives a richer sonority at these points, creating a mixture of textures. These staccato indications contrast particularly well with the vocal line which is marked legato. Perhaps the intention was more in keeping with Pears' editorial markings (m. 17), giving buoyancy and helping the singer glide through these figures gracefully. Other editorial indications added by Britten for the bass line are the tenuto accents in m.20, indicating that the singer's natural inclination to accelerate to the cadence should be resisted.

The true genius of invention in Britten's Purcell realisations is found prominently in the construction of the right hand of the piano part, bearing in mind that the songs in Playford's *Orpheus Britannicus* consist of only the bass with occasional figures, and the vocal melody line and text.

The triumphant tone of the song is established in the first measure with the pseudo trumpet fanfare which then disperses into a preview of the opening roulade which the singer subsequently mimics (m. 2). This flourish paints both the "air" and subsequently the "ech'ing air" in the text. Whenever basic chordal accompaniment is used to support the voice, Britten maintains the two-part trumpet duo type of writing, as in mm. 3-4, 5, 10-11 and 12-13. Britten is careful to limit his rapid 16<sup>th</sup> note passage work for the right hand to moments when the voice is not moving in 16<sup>th</sup> note patterns, thereby both



maintaining clarity and creating constant motion and dialogue between the voice and piano.

Britten creates increased excitement and contrast for the vocal line by providing complimentary, yet contrasting figures in the right hand of the piano. For example, in the sequence (mm. 6-9) Britten uses full octave descending 16<sup>th</sup> note runs which alternate with the upwardly rising and exciting arpeggiation figures in the voice on the word “triumph”. Underlying excitement is kept alive by repeating the 16<sup>th</sup> note F<sup>4</sup> (mm. 12-13) while there is a stasis in the vocal line. The ascending octave-and-a-half run in the first ending of the first section (m. 15) also increases the energy and leads to a renewed and energetic repetition of the opening material. Although the first half of the song is nearly void of any of Britten’s adventurous 20<sup>th</sup> century harmonic colourings, he does include one of his characteristic semitone clashes, the E<sup>♯</sup>, leading tone of the dominant, which slightly anticipates and thrusts toward the dominant before Purcell perhaps would have done, had he been realising this song. The E<sup>♯</sup> was also briefly introduced on the first beat of m. 11, where there is a noisy clash between E, F, G, A and B<sup>♭</sup>.

In the right hand, Britten also doubles the broken chordal ornament which was examined earlier in the bass line in mm. 16-19, 24-25, and then after establishing this ornament, lets it speak on its own in the right hand in mm. 28-29 before returning to the right and left hand coupling for the first ending (mm. 31). Britten also adds another grace ornament, the acciaccatura, to give fresh colour to the word “clap” (mm. 21, 27-28). To bring this word out even more, Britten also adds editorial accent indications ( ' ) on the

chords which the acciaccatura decorates, perhaps to give the illusion of the cupids flapping their wings.

The vocal melody is mimicked with a right hand melodic echo of the dotted eighth rhythm (mm. 18-19) but not before cleverly giving the illusion of presenting it first for the singer's use (mm. 16-17). This lilting melodic figure is used throughout this second section of the song as a unifying graceful motivic device (mm. 21-26 and 28-30).

Britten is specific in his choice and indication of legato slurs, staccato markings, and other accents or non-accented notes. All of these minute markings support, echo or foreshadow the text. When these markings are observed, much of the singer's interpretive work is done for him, or at least supported by the pianist's efforts.

Pears' editorial indications give one a wonderful idea of how he would have approached this song in performance. He starts by marking the opening *forte*, which to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century singer indicates that an increased amount of vocal muscle mass should be employed; however, he marks the coloratura passage in the second measure (*clear*). Therefore a balance must be achieved by the singer between the more robust forte sound, and rapid articulation of the melismas which are a dominant feature of this song. In addition, the tempo indication placed by Pears at the beginning of the song is *Quick and brilliant*, again reinforcing the singer's need to temper quantity of sound with rapid execution of coloratura. The alternating 16<sup>th</sup> note pitch patterns in the first melisma (mm. 2-3) require the singer to add a slight glottal articulation to maintain the brilliance, rapidity and

clearness of the passage, especially at the forte dynamic level. The repetition of the opening half of the song is marked *repeat p*, indicating that Pears was equally adept at the execution of coloratura passages in a range of dynamics.

The choice of key, B♭ major, lowered from Purcell's original of C major, reduces the amount of laryngeal modification (or cover) that the tenor is forced to employ, as the majority of the scale passages only ascend to F<sup>4</sup>, a pitch which is not necessary to cover, and thus further enables the singer to maintain the suggested tempo. Another passage requiring this Baroque approach to articulation is found in m. 12, where he writes *marked* above the oscillating 16<sup>th</sup> figures.

Pears shows his sensitivity to future singers using these realisations by including some of his breath markings, such as the one indicated in m. 11, which would have given him a brief moment of laryngeal relaxation after the ascending and descending passage (mm. 7-11). Note also the dynamic indication *softer*, placed above m. 7, suggesting that the singer not over-pressurize the lower part of his range, despite the desire to mimic a trumpet in this section. Pears indicates a return to full volume only as the singer finishes this flourish (m. 9) and is required to cover on the turn between F<sup>4</sup> and G<sup>4</sup>. Many singers will discover that this delay in adding weight helps them make a smoother technical transition.

The editorial indication for the second half of the song, *p gracefully*, asks the singer to adjust the mood and vocal colour at this juncture in order to portray the cupids' little

wings clapping. He also places legato slurs over the dotted eighth followed by two eighths pattern previously noted in the piano part. The legato marking would also lead the singer to avoid detaching, re-attacking or aspirating the 16<sup>th</sup> note in the pattern. The dynamic marking of *p* and the tessitura in which this section of the song sits require the singer to use much more head voice than is perhaps required in the opening of the song. This abundant head voice mix in the E<sup>4</sup>-F<sup>4</sup> range was one of the characteristic features of Pears' voice, and this section of the song surely effectively displayed this quality. Note the slur indications over the melismas in mm. 21-22, 25-26 and 29-30. This contrast from the opening half of the song would suggest that these melismas are to be sung without the use of glottal strokes, showing instead the use of a hybrid and flexible vocal technique within the same composition. The second half of the song should therefore be in marked contrast to the declamatory and brilliant trumpet calls in the first half.

The final measures of the song have an increase in dynamic marking to *f* for the final sustained Bb<sup>3</sup>. No decay is indicated for the singer, so as the piano's volume decays, the voice will remain firm and strong for a decisive final punctuation of sound, and with the reduced piano presence the final consonants of "wings" will also be clearly audible when the singer concludes in triumph.

#### 4.3.2. "Sweeter than Roses"

This song, found in Book I of Playford's *Orpheus Britannicus* (pp. 60-61) was premiered by Britten and Pears at London's National Gallery on November 23, 1945, grouped with the new realisation of Purcell's "If Music be the Food of Love" (1<sup>st</sup> version). "Sweeter

than Roses” was premiered by broadcast two years later on BBC’s Light Programme, again performed by Britten and Pears. Britten retained Purcell’s original key of Bb major but changed the time signature from common time to cut time.

Britten fully exploited the lower range of the modern 20<sup>th</sup>-century piano, which of course Purcell did not have at his disposal, and the effect is one of underlying sonorous warmth which enhances the passionate text of this song. Britten drops Purcell’s bass line an octave, beginning in m. 2 (B $\natural$ ), and extends this rich sonority for the next textual phrase (“or cool evening breeze”, mm. 4-5), and again in mm. 9-12. Consistent with his other Purcell realisations, in the bass line Britten only alters register, and occasionally duration and rhythm (mm. 14-16), yet rarely the functional bass pitches. Purcell’s original version sustained the G<sup>2</sup> (mm. 14-16). Britten changes the formerly sustained note to an eighth-note followed by rests (first half of m. 14) which is then re-articulated every two beats until m. 16 when two quarter-note low G’s are sounded. This rhythmic device, while not altering the melodic structure of the bass line, adds increased interest to the text’s main idea, the “dear kiss.” He further underscores the text by doubling Purcell’s bass line at mm. 16-17, which by virtue of the richer sonority of the lower notes of the piano has the effect of intensifying the text. He then keeps the lower octave voicing for Purcell’s “trembling” effect (m. 18). An effective device is created to enhance the word “freeze” (mm. 20-22) by adding acciaccatura ornaments before the widely spaced (registrally) *fp* chords, and Britten again doubles the bass line.

Leading into the second section of the song, Britten prepares the listener for the approaching pseudo-fanfare with a reinforced bass line *sf* low C<sup>1</sup> (m. 27), and then proceeds to continue the doubling through mm. 32, which is then repeated with the next appearance of the ritornello (mm. 39-44). A rare instance of an actual pitch alteration, and thus harmonic alteration, is seen in m. 46 where Britten changes the bass line's rhythm from Purcell's quarter followed by half, to a half followed by quarter note, which momentarily alters the harmonic structure from the second beat being based on D major to an A minor (1<sup>st</sup> inversion) structure. Britten brings the song to a resounding conclusion with the doubling of octaves (mm. 64-69) and an acciaccatura doubled C<sup>1</sup> and C<sup>2</sup>, plunging to the lowest reaches of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century concert grand, reinforcing the primary textual emphasis on the subject, the final word "me."

Britten's editorial markings, as in "Hark the Ech'ing Air", support his innovative chordal realisation and counter-melody construction. Gently undulating arpeggiated triplet 16<sup>th</sup> note chords create a feeling of compound time in the piano part and characterize the opening 15 measures of the song, generally mirroring the dynamic indications in the vocal line. While these compound meter chords support the voice harmonically, they also increase the underlying intensity of the text by their juxtaposition with the duple time 16<sup>th</sup> notes in the vocal line, and this element creates a feeling of free recitative or *Recitativo andante*. The rhythmic tension between the voice and piano is a predominant feature in several of Britten's original piano-voice compositions as well.

The interplay between voice and piano is intricate, with neither being the primary focus in the song. For example, in m. 12 the voice introduces a descending melodic figure on the words “on a warm,” which the piano then imitates in canon. The piano propels the voice forward in m.14 with a counter-melody, a descending scale passage. The scale increases in dynamic intensity (*cresc.*) and supports the singer into the first important emotional and vocal climax of the piece (mm. 15-16). This moment culminates in a new piano figure, the rolled and accented chords (m. 16) which stress the importance of the word “kiss.” Then Britten again introduces a new figure in the right hand of the piano, a parallel open 6<sup>th</sup> or faux-bourdon figure (mm. 16-17), which the voice echoes in canon. The contrast between the vocal line’s moving figure and the piano’s stasis of motion creates a riveting aural effect on the word “freeze” (mm. 20-21). Also note how wide a spacing Britten uses on these chords, creating a frozen void between inner and outer voices. These musical devices are very much in keeping with the Baroque fascination with text painting, and Britten shows himself to be a master of this craft throughout this song.

As the voice first comes to rest (“freezes” m. 22), the piano once again creates the impetus to move into the next section of text, “then shot like fire,” with the sharply accented (*marcato*) bass line and driving chordal 16<sup>th</sup> note right hand attacks, creating the requisite “shot” effect, soon articulated in the voice part (m. 23). This section, marked *sempre forte* in the voice part, drives directly onward to the second part of the song.

Britten adds the tempo indication of *Allegro brillante* (m. 28) to the second part of the song. In the opening and second ritornello (mm. 28-32 and 39-44), Britten recalls a trumpet fanfare with the martial dotted eighth followed by 16<sup>th</sup> rhythmic figure, evoking the triumph of love, and highlights it with a rather strident pedal point G<sup>5</sup> in the upper voice of the right hand chords. Britten includes the pitch G in nearly every measure of the opening 22 bars of this section, creating tension between the tonic and dominant key centres. Further adding to the brilliant opening of the second half is the dynamic indication *f marcatisimo*, yet his sensitivity to the accompanying aspect of the piano part is shown in his editorial markings, such as the drop in dynamics from *f* to *p* when the voice enters (mm. 32 and 44) and his marking *molto sostenuto senza Pedale* (m. 32) while the voice is doing coloratura work above it (mm. 33-38). In m. 51 a contrasting motive is introduced, and Britten highlights this with a drop in dynamics (*mf*), a six bar legato slur line (mm. 51-57), adds the pedal (*con Ped.*), and marks the entire section *legatissimo*. This contrast in editorial markings reflects the text as the singer shifts from a rather martial phrase (“victorious”) to a more gentle text (“dear kiss”).

There is a brief return to the opening section’s emphasis on the word “kiss,” which Britten colours with a counter-melody having the same rhythm as the voice (mm. 57-58) before heading into a nine measure coda stressing the word “all.” Britten adds a right hand counter-melody to create a total of three intertwining melodic lines: voice, right hand, and left hand (mm. 60-end). Each of the lines continues to grow through the use of dynamics and accents (vocal line), lower octave doublings in the left hand, and upper octave doublings, more fully voiced chords and a string of parallel fifths (starting in mm.



65) in the right hand, until the climax of the song is reached on the final word (“me”), a masterstroke by the poet, subsequently expounded upon by Purcell and grandly treated by Britten and interpreted by Pears.

“Sweeter than Roses” is an excellent song to highlight and illustrate the previously discussed two-fold vocal approach best suited to contemporary tenor performances of this Baroque-based repertoire in mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century conditions and performance expectations, at which Pears was so adept. The opening bar, starting on E $\flat$ <sup>4</sup> (*pp*) and turning over the passaggio note of F<sup>4</sup> while making a crescendo and decrescendo, requires considerable control of the laryngeal function. The first three beats (vocal line) can be performed by a light tenor without any modification of laryngeal position, but vocal depth, warmth and colour will be sacrificed. To achieve maximum colour and richness for this musical and emotional textual effect, the E $\flat$  should be started in a lighter mechanism (head voice), and then in order to achieve the crescendo, increased breath energy and compression must be added to the tone, while gently lowering the laryngeal carriage. As soon as this is accomplished, the process needs to be reversed in order to make the diminuendo and descend the scale into a full chest mix on the G<sup>3</sup>. Since this type of melodic passage was a specialty of Pears, Britten exploited his particular ability in this register to great effect in several of the original compositions he created for Pears.

Pears was also a master of vocal colour and shading, both of which lend themselves wonderfully to this repertoire. On the word “cool” (m. 3, beats one and two), a Baroque-inspired straight tone effect could be effectively employed, and then after the indicated

breath (m. 3), during which time the larynx is released from the momentary laryngeal constriction caused by such a straight tone effect, the ensuing phrase can be sung with a fully released sound by contemporary standards, thereby juxtaposing both sounds and styles in an appropriate and artistic manner.

The indicated breath in m. 10, as marked by Pears, gives the tenor a momentary release to prepare for the next ascent into *voce piena in testa* (full voice in head), on the F<sup>4</sup> (m. 11) on the [i] vowel of “ev’ning.” The *crescendo* (m. 10) also indicates a need for increased support and intensity at this point of the phrase.

A slight *coup de glotte* (stroke of the glottis), or detached (aspirated) articulation is needed to clarify the rapid 32<sup>nd</sup> notes on “dear” (mm. 14-16). This was an accepted feature in baroque singing and although often eliminated in contemporary professional singing, its technical application is perfectly suitable and justified at this point in the song. The first forte ascent into the upper voice is seen in m. 15 (“dear”). To give voice to this phrase in a larger hall when accompanied by a concert grand, the tenor must use full-voice above the staff to achieve the desired effect. Thus, the jaw must be slightly slackened, the laryngeal space increased and the vowel modified, to create the breadth of sound contemporary audiences expect of a professional tenor voice.

Full-voiced singing must also be employed starting at m. 23 to avoid being covered by the thrusting accented chords of the piano. Full voice must subsequently be taken all the way up to the top Ab<sup>4</sup> (adjusted for the standard octave transposition for tenor range) and

continuing through the crescendo on G<sup>4</sup> (m. 26). These bursts of wonderful full-voiced singing were also a key feature of Pears' vocalism. Although he did not sustain this aggressive vocalism for extended periods, he was capable of producing considerable quantities of sound for short periods of time. Britten understood his collaborator's voice so well that, in his own original vocal compositions, he invariably gave Pears moments of dynamic repose after these large vocal outbursts. Such a moment of repose is offered by Purcell to the singer in mm. 28-31, and further highlights the innate suitability of this repertoire to the technical capabilities of Pears' instrument.

The coloratura passage extending from mm. 33-38 was also tailor-made to exploit Pears' abilities. He was capable of remarkably clean coloratura and could negotiate difficult passages with seeming ease throughout his range. This particular run is potentially difficult for modern tenors because they must repeatedly traverse the upper passaggio, while maintaining clarity and accuracy. Note the swells (*cresc.*, *deces.*) indicated over the pinnacle of each of the first ascending three measures of this run. Pears was obviously aware of the need for increased support and intensity as the voice ascended, and yet realized it would not be wise to push too hard after each crest was attained. The accents on the descending part of the run (mm. 36-38) show how Pears would have given strength of voice to the principal note, and then lightly eased off the pressure on the more rapid 16<sup>th</sup> notes to keep the voice from getting over-weighted while maintaining buoyancy throughout this passage. Additionally, a glottal stroke or aspirate must be employed to make the repeated pitches sound (F<sup>4</sup>, E<sup>4</sup>, D<sup>4</sup>, in mm. 36-37). The entire phrase requires breath control as well, for it is stretched over eight measures, without a

breath indicated by Pears. This again points to the masterly control of his unique and colourful instrument.

There is a momentary respite from full-voiced singing (mm. 51-60) before the slow build-up to the forte ending, with loud piano accompaniment. The vocal line has contrasting broad sweeping legato markings and accents (mm. 64, 66, 67) as well as markings of *cresc.* (m. 61) and then a reminder of *sempre cresc.* (m. 66). This ending obviously calls for great strength of voice and full-voiced singing in order not to be overwhelmed by the accompanying piano, and to achieve the effect desired by Britten and Pears.

#### 4.3.3 “Mad Bess”

“Mad Bess,” dedicated to soprano Joan Cross, was given its world premiere by Britten and Pears on November 17, 1945 at the Philharmonic Hall in Liverpool, England, and was grouped with “Music for a While,” also dedicated to Cross. This was another of the songs Playford collected in *Orpheus Britannicus*, Book I (p. 101), which he entitled “Bess of Bedlam.” The Purcell key of C major remains intact in the Britten realisation.

This song follows the paradigm of traits consistent throughout Britten’s catalogue of Purcell realisations. Britten maintains the integrity of the bass line (*e.g.*, mm. 16-22, 40-46, 64-66 and 72-79), enhancing it only to utilize the dramatic sonority of the contemporary piano with lower octave doublings (*e.g.*, mm. 1-13, 14, 34-37, 47-56, 79-86 and 99-103). Occasionally Britten supplants Purcell’s bass line with a lower octave,

leaving the piano's middle register open for additional harmonic figures (*e.g.*, mm. 14-17, 22-33, 61-63 and 93-99). In two instances Britten alters the register of Purcell's bass line, dropping it by an octave and additionally doubling this change a further octave below to create a broader canvas of musical colours to support the text (*e.g.*, mm. 57 and 104).

This song was a fantastic vehicle for Pears' strengths as an actor, and the dramatic construction of the song as a "mad scene" was one which Britten subsequently adopted and constructed for Pears in his operas *Peter Grimes* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This song gives scope for multiple histrionic shadings such as rage, jealousy, torment, melancholy, despair, joy, and rapture, and two distinct characters, the Narrator and Bess. Interpretively, the door is also left open for the singer to impersonate spirits of the dead, and different ages and moments in Bess's life and stages of her relationship with her ex-lover, who presumably cheated on her, causing her subsequent mental collapse.

Although Purcell has clearly delineated many of these dramatic episodes in his original version, in the hands of Britten the piece takes on a larger more operatic scope, lending itself to a broad and intense interpretive approach, as witnessed by the riveting performances of dramatic artists such as Jon Vickers.<sup>50</sup> Britten enriches, enhances and expands Purcell's original framework using several techniques, some of which have been observed in previous analyses, but which are given much broader and varied treatment in this song: counter-melody construction, detailed editorial markings, and inner voice textural realisation of the harmonic structure. Unlike the other three songs analysed from

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<sup>50</sup> *My Song Resounds*, Jon Vickers, CBC, PSCD 2024.

*Orpheus Britannicus*, Britten takes a few liberties with the harmonic structure of the underlying chords which could be construed as somewhat ambiguous because of Purcell's lack of basso continuo figures. As these four elements are closely intertwined, they will be viewed simultaneously. Britten's choices can always be linked to the text, and correlations between these elements and the underlying text will be noted.

The song begins with the marking of *Recitativo fantastico*, indicating to both pianist and singer the inherent creative freedom they are granted in their interpretations. Although a sectionalised song with a recurring dance-like ritornello, a unifying motive that runs throughout the song is created by Britten in the two upbeats to the song embellishing the tonic chord with unison left and right hands. This "*fantastico*" motive returns in mm. 3 and 5, in modified form in m. 13, and again in mm. 38 and 87 and as a so-called book-end postlude in the final bar of the song (m. 105). Two other similar broken chordal figures demark other sections of the song, one in m. 47 and again at m. 60.

The quiet opening mood ("silent shades") of the song is maintained with the use of a series of sustained four-voiced homophonic chords (mm. 1-6) which Britten connects with a series of common tone pitches tied between chords and often across bar lines, and the entire section is marked *sost.* (*sostenuto*). The voice mimics this restrained feeling with a dynamic indication of *p*, and does not swell until m. 5 (*cresc.*). Britten gives initial momentum and aural interest to the first two phrases (mm. 1 and 3) by the editorial hairpin crescendi climaxing in *fp*. Britten introduces a passing note dissonance (F<sup>4</sup>) in the right hand (m. 6) which Purcell does not indicate in his figured bass. This dissonance

propels the melodic phrase forward, even though the singer takes the indicated breath, and the subsequent resolution (E<sup>4</sup>) creates a plateau for the Purcellian vocal flourish leading to the mention of the god of rain (“Jove”) in m. 7, editorially marked by Pears with an accent for further emphasis. Britten adds a 7-6 suspension in the right hand of m. 7 to help maintain the intensity for the singer on the top F (“Jove”) and to continue the momentum of the phrase through to its textual conclusion on “year” (m. 9). To delineate the next phrase of text (“Poor senseless Bess. . . lovesick melancholy”), Britten introduces a broken chord grace note embellishment figure (mm. 9, 10 and m. 11) which tonally anticipates the chord it decorates, thereby further moving the action of the song forward. This important phrase, which imparts the information that Bess is “senseless” because of a lost love, returns to a hushed dynamic (*p*) which creates a vivid contrast to the next section of the song.

Bess’ voice is first displayed in m. 14, in the section marked *Animato e ritmico*, as she recalls the first joys of love and passion. Britten has marked almost every bar in this section (mm. 14-21) with *fp* accents, using rolled chords to realise the harmonic structure, doubling the melody and the exuberant dotted rhythms of the voice part, and using marcato accents on the phrase (mm. 17-18) to colour the power the god, Oberon. As Bess moves into the next section of the song, which Purcell helps make unique with a switch to 3-4 time. Britten further highlights this section with a very different realisation of the supporting harmonic structure in the piano part.

Immediately before this section beginning in m. 23, Britten modifies Purcell's harmony (m. 21), with an implied C major chord (m. 22, beat three), being replaced by an A minor chord (first inversion), momentarily foreshadowing the next melancholic section. This new melancholic section (starting in m. 22) is marked *Piu lento e tranquillo*, and the dynamic indication for the piano drops to pianissimo level for the first time in the song, helping to highlight this part further. The figure Britten uses to support the text is an elegiac broken and embellished chordal pattern (mm. 21-34), leaving the first eighth note of every bar in the right hand of piano empty so the voice and text are clearly audible and more free to colour the text. Additionally, the left hand chords are open-spaced rolled chords in an undulating (half plus quarter note) rhythmic ebb and flow. Sensitivity to the support of the voice is shown again in mm. 25-27 and m. 30 and 34-37 where Britten indicates hairpin crescendi when the voice goes into the upper range. The brief two bars marked *Recitativo* (mm. 38-39), create a bridge to yet another bright 3-4 (*Allegretto*) section starting in m. 40. Britten leaves the piano part rather stark (m. 38) so that the voice can shape the rhythm and intensity of the key words in the text ("For since my love is dead, and all my joys are gone").

The section marked *Andante tranquillo* (mm. 46-56) begins with Bess' "groan" being echoed in the extreme lower range of the piano with a small dynamic hairpin (m. 47), again pointing to Britten's sensitivity to supporting and enriching the text. The lush four-voiced right hand chords with *tenuto* accents dominate this section and give it a unique quality which differs from everything that has come before. Britten keeps the dynamic markings at *pp* and *ppp* levels throughout the section as Bess lies "down to die." The



descending fauxbourdon (first inversion) chords in the left hand (mm. 50-51) result in a slightly altered state-of-being for the character, as do the planing passing-chords (m. 54, right hand), illustrating her further descent into madness. These, however, are chords which Purcell did not specify. Britten also alters the harmonic realisation (m. 55, beat three), and whereas Purcell calls for a C major (first inversion) sonority, Britten changes this chord to E minor, thereby giving a more somber close to this section.

The next several sections musically evoke an emotionally unstable, perhaps even schizophrenic person, through the use of rapid and frequent tempo changes and alterations between recitative and measured tempi: *Recitativo Presto* (m. 57), *Allegretto (come sopra)* (m. 60), *Recitativo Animato* (m. 66), and *Allegretto (come sopra)* (m. 72). The first of these recitative sections has tremolandi throughout all three bars, gradually increasing in dynamic intensity as the text become more desperate, and the vocal line continually ascends to a fortissimo (*ff*) E<sup>♯</sup> with a fermata (m. 60), supported with a three-octave rolled chord. The singer is given a moment to change emotions (or characters or personalities) before launching into the vigorous dance ritornello again at m. 61 at a soft dynamic, underscored by taut, lightly voiced chordal support (mm. 61-65). The ensuing recitative section again returns to the lower octave menacing sounding tremolandi (G and C, mm. 66-71) and swells to a climax at m. 71. Britten, always sensitive that the voice should not be covered by heavy piano texture, only makes the dramatic colour effects after the voice has completed its text. Each vocal phrase seems to be ignited by a distinctive rhythmic figure in the piano part of two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note capped with marcato accents. This figure propels the singing-actor forward to the

climax of this section, ending on a long (*lunga*) fermata (m. 71) for both piano and voice. The immediate return to the sprightly dance ritornello marked *staccato* gives a moment of repose, before the deceptive false ending of the song (mm. 83-87), which is prepared with a gradual slowing of tempo and a crescendo in both the voice and piano (*piu cresc. ed. allarg.*).

One final pairing of *Recitativo lento* (m. 87) and 3-4 dance-like ritornello (m. 93) bring the song to its conclusion, and after the tonic preparation in m. 87, this section acts as a coda. Bess' death, or ultimate descent into madness, is musically portrayed with the unresolved A minor (first inversion) chord (m. 92) which then ushers in the return to the narrator's voice (m. 93) to conclude the drama. Britten altered this A minor chord from Purcell's original C major sonority, possibly to add more poignancy to the death of Bess. Britten provides for this dramatic ending and death with an immediate decrease of dynamics from *forte* to *piano* (m. 87), and subsequently drops down to *pianissimo* (mm. 88-92). The departure of Bess' mortal being is indicated by Britten with the harmonic realisation in the right hand chords (mm. 89-92) in open sixths in the upper range of the piano, all marked with long *legato* slurs (both right and left hands) and with the lower reaches of the piano being avoided. The song ends with a gradual crescendo as the chordal accompaniment becomes thicker and more widely spaced (mm. 99-104). After the voice has finished, Britten recalls the *recitativo fantastico* figure with a diminuendo leading into silence, as a post-script to the song.

This song would have provided Pears a framework showcasing several of his vocal strengths. His full-voiced (operatic) upper voice strength, available to him for short durations, was exploited in the climaxes of the song (*e.g.*, mm. 60, 70-71, and 99-104), as was the strength of his lower register, which is uncommon in the tenor voice (mm. 60, 70-71). Additionally his *voix-mixte* and *voce finta* could be used for great dramatic effect when the character of Bess is limpidly singing (*e.g.*, mm. 21-26, 38-40, 47-56 and 87-91). His ability to crescendo and decrescendo (*messa di voce*) phrases throughout his *passaggio* was also exploited in his song (*e.g.*, mm. 26-28, 34-37, 39, 53 and 55-56). Another of Pears' strengths was the clarity of his diction and his ability to communicate stories through song, abilities which made his performances of the English song repertoire one of his areas of specialisation. "Mad Bess," as realised by Britten, allowed Pears ample opportunity to display his many strengths: vocal, textual and dramatic.

#### 4.3.4 "Man is for the Woman Made"

Most of Purcell's secular songs realized by Britten were taken from the two books of songs assembled by Playford (*Orpheus Britannicus*, Books I and II). The source for this strophic song, however, is unclear. Correspondence with the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh suggests that Britten and Pears collected several anthologies and collections of Purcell songs by various publishers and editors. In the Preface to his *Orpheus Britannicus* series, Britten references the multi-volume complete works of Purcell published by Novello, which he owned, so it is likely that "Man is for the Woman made" was drawn from this collection as the source for this realisation. It is found in Volume XX, *Dramatic Music Part II*, of the Novello collections, published in 1916. The

“incidental” song was written for insertion into the play *The Mock Marriage* (1695) by Thomas Scott, and was originally sung by the actress Miss Cross (soprano) in Act IV. The text is thought to be by Motteux, and was entitled “Rondelau.” The world premiere of the Britten-Purcell realisation occurred on November 21, 1945 at Wigmore Hall in London, and was the final song in a group of seven other new realisations being premiered that same evening. The radio broadcast premiere of this song occurred over two years later on April 15, 1948 on the BBC Light Programme.

Consistent with the majority of these realisations, the functional harmony and bass line again remain intact. Britten adds upper octaves to the left hand (mm. 13-17) and repeats this in the second verse (mm. 28-32). In verse three Britten adds lower octave bass line doublings (mm. 35- 43, 45, and 47-48) and omits Purcell’s original bass line, opting for the octave above in the moving eighth notes in m. 33. Traditional block chords on off-beats, with tenuto accents, create rhythmic propulsion in the opening and subsequent ritornelli (mm. 1-4, 15-18, 28-31). Unlike many of the other realisations which contain numerous editorial markings, this song contains comparatively few. The bass line is marked *pesante* (m. 1), and Britten employs slurs to ensure that vocal phrase endings move smoothly into the ensuing textual phrase (mm. 4-5, 8-9, 10-11, and 12-13). Britten’s dynamic indications stress the need for soft playing so as not to cover the witty and humorous text of the singer (mm. 6, 11, 20, 23, and 34), frequently calling for a diminuendo after a piano flourish (mm. 22, 24, 26, 32, 36, 38, and 40). Britten’s other editorial accents include *martello* (mm. 43-4), occasional *staccatti* (e.g., mm. 5-7, 9, 10,

and 33-35) and the standard *marcato* (mm. 43-45 and 47-48). Unique to this realisation are several right hand fingerings (*e.g.*, mm. 36, 38, 40, and 42).

Pears' editorial markings for the vocal line are also comparatively few, and tend to mirror the piano shadings throughout the song. He adds a portamento at the end of each ritornello (mm. 4, 18, 33 and 46) and adds a slur at m. 34, requiring the singer to carry over the phrase without a breath, leading seamlessly into the final strophe. He marks the tempo as *con spirito*, which certainly honours the poet's intentions for this rowdy and humorous text.

This song shows the practicality of the Britten-Pears performance team, for the song has obvious audience appeal. In several of their recitals it was included as the finale to a long group of more intensely musical, and in terms of text and structure, potentially challenging songs for the audience. The song is joyous, and slightly risqué with its mention of "liquor" (m. 13), "wanton" maids (m. 37) and even a "slut" (m. 41). In the published edition, the original (Purcell) words "Queane, slut" were changed to "Princess" (mm. 41-42), yet in live recordings Pears can clearly be heard delivering the word "slut," to amused response.<sup>51</sup> The audience response to this rousing song, available on live performance recordings, was invariably resounding. It showed the lighter side of these often somewhat esoteric performers. The song was a vocal tour de force for Pears because of its rapid text, which he acknowledged challenged his memory, as well as the full-voiced (*ff*) ending, climaxing on one of his most powerful notes, G<sup>4</sup>. Equally, if not

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<sup>51</sup> *Britten the Performer*, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, BBC Worldwide Music, Ltd., BBCB 8006-2.

more dazzling, is the virtuosic piano writing, which grows more elaborate with each successive strophe, demanding rapid right hand scale work (mm. 36, 38, 40 and 42) and stride-chords for the final ritornello (mm. 43- 45) and concludes with the left hand thrusting down to the extreme low C<sup>1</sup> of the piano (m. 48) undoubtedly executed with a soloist's élan.

#### **4.4 Realisations from *Harmonia Sacra***

##### **4.4.1 "A Morning Hymn"**

Britten was drawn to sacred and spiritually inspired texts throughout his career. Several of the Purcell vocal pieces Britten realised are drawn from the *Harmonia Sacra* collections (Books I and II) compiled by Playford. The first of these sacred songs to be analysed is drawn from *Harmonia Sacra* Book I (pp. 7-8), entitled "A Morning Hymn," with text by Dr. William Fuller, former Lord Bishop of London. Britten and Pears gave this realisation its world premiere on Nov. 23, 1945 at the National Gallery in London, the day after another spiritually inspired work of Britten's, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, was premiered by the duo. The song made its broadcast premiere over twenty years later, on May 29, 1967 on the BBC, with Viola Tunnard instead of Britten accompanying Pears.

Throughout Purcell's *Harmonia Sacra* compositions, there are striking similarities in compositional style and form between works such as "The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation," "Job's Curse," "Saul and the Witch of Endor," and Britten's *Canticles*, five extended narrative songs based on sacred text. Britten was often able to illuminate

difficult poetic text with his sensitive piano accompaniments and realizations, and “A Morning Hymn” is no exception. It is through composed without ritornelli and melodically segmented and disjunct. The melody, although shaped to paint the text of the song, is not easily grasped by most listeners on first hearing, unlike those melodies drawn from the *Orpheus Britannicus* collections.

Standard with the other realisations, Britten does not alter the bass line pitches with the exception of m. 21 (3<sup>rd</sup> beat), when he changes the root note from B $\flat$  to F, creating a second inversion chord, possibly to underscore the text and create a less stable framework (“misspent”). Britten was not limited, as Purcell was, with regard to the range of the bass line, and makes full use of the lower sonorities of the piano when it serves his purpose, as seen in m. 13 when the bass line drops to a low D (an octave below Purcell’s original) to support the tenor voice as it climbs to the highest note encountered thus far in the song. Britten doubles Purcell’s bass at the lower octave at m. 19 which helps signal the start of a new and somber section of the song. He maintains the lower octave doublings as this section proceeds, not returning to Purcell’s original octave until m. 25. Britten again doubles the lower octave in the three measures leading to the lilting 3-4 section, possibly to create more aural difference between the two sections. The bass line is left intact throughout the 3-4 section, but once the final four measures of recitative begin, Britten again doubles the bass at the lower octave, to underscore the profundity of the text.

Unlike many of the other realisations, Britten frequently alters the original Purcell rhythm of the bass line in this song to underscore the chordal sonority, or to maintain momentum

in the extended recitative sections. In m. 3, for example, Purcell's bass line was a whole note D, which Britten changes to a double-dotted half note followed by an eighth, which has the effect of propelling the line forward under the singer, so that horizontal momentum is not lost. Likewise in m. 5, Britten rearticulates the D and revoices the chord, thereby adding aural interest at a point of relative melodic stasis in the voice part. Britten echoes the vocal line's momentum by altering the rhythm of the bass again at m. 9. Where Purcell had a sustained whole note low D, Britten rearticulates the D after the first beat, again propelling the action forward. This device is again employed at m. 20, m. 22, m. 27, and finally in m. 38, where Britten changes Purcell's bass rhythm from a static whole note to quarter-half-quarter, thrusting the listener and singer to the penultimate bar of the song.

Britten's editorial indications for the piano part also aid in the delivery and interpretation of this text. He makes frequent use of slur or legato markings, showing the essential phrasing required to support the vocal line. For example, he places slurs over both m. 1 and again m. 2, corresponding to and supporting the two short textual clauses at the same points, and conversely, Britten marks a three bar slur over the extended clause in mm. 3-6 ("Raised by thy goodness from the bed of sleep"). Horizontal momentum is added by the piano with the editorial hairpin at m. 4, which is a point in the song where the singer might be aided by such a device. As with other realisations, Britten is very careful to indicate crescendos when the voice ascends, to give full support to his singing colleague (mm. 6, 10, 12, 18, 19, 22, 27 and 39.). Britten calls for three different colour changes for the piano which closely underscore the text. At m. 20, when the text suddenly pivots



from joy to lament, Britten denotes the section as “dark.” Likewise, when the mood changes to lilting joy again at m. 29, he indicates “lightly.” A third indication, “sonorous,” underscores the final intensely emotional and textual climax of the song in the recitative section (m. 37). Accents in the piano part, which were abundant in some of the other realisations analysed, are fairly limited in this song. He strengthens and supports the singer’s F<sup>4</sup> (m. 13) with a *marcato* accent, and aids in the descriptive syncopated walking effect at m. 15 with another *marcato* accent. Britten adds weight to the text at mm. 27-29 (“When with such crimes they such repentance see;”) by using tenuto accents for the bass line, a device he employs again at the weighty final recitative section under the words “die” (m. 37) and “to receive” (m. 39).

Counter-melody construction, a key feature in most of Britten’s realizations, prominently underscores and supports the text in this song as well. The opening measure’s slowly descending line sounds vaguely drowsy, as if the character of the shepherd is being drawn from sleep, foreshadowing the text of m. 5. The open spacing of a 10<sup>th</sup> between the right and left hands (mm. 1-6) evokes a stark and isolated atmosphere which gives the song an immediately somber and intense quality. The voice is rarely doubled, which aids in the aural perception of the shepherd’s isolation and vulnerability. The gap of the 10<sup>th</sup> separating the right and left hand sonorities is momentarily suspended at m. 6 when the first moment of rejoicing is mentioned in the text (“offer up this hymn”) and the richness of this new texture supports the voice’s ascent and indicated *crescendo*. Momentum is increased at mm. 8-9 not only with the previously mentioned alteration to Purcell’s bass line rhythm, but also by Britten’s counter-melody construction. He lets the

voice (“May it be gracious”) make the first melodic gesture, then mimics it a tone higher (m. 7 beats 2-3) before the voice continues the pattern on the fourth beat of m. 9. The right hand 32<sup>nd</sup> note flourish with acciaccaturas (m. 12) drives the voice onward to complete the sentence (“ And do I live. . .”), and the feeling of isolation returns (open spacing of 10<sup>th</sup> m. 13) to underscore the text further. The pianist leads the voice into the “singing” (mm. 16-17) section with the two 16<sup>th</sup> notes (A, B $\flat$ ) (m. 16) and then joins the voice and helps maintain the momentum with a further 16<sup>th</sup> note flourish in m. 17. The sudden range drop of the right hand of the piano realisation (m. 20) reflects the emotional shift in text as the singer ponders a misspent life, and Britten adds no counter-melody construction, so the singer is plunged again into isolation, loneliness, and despair. The melody seems to hang sadly in mid-air, as if Britten is giving the singer time to ponder his thoughts and words. The G<sup>1</sup> (m. 26) helps to punctuate and underscore the end of the phrase (“themselves”), and adds a sense of foreboding, lest anyone follow in his footsteps. The addition of the D<sup>1</sup> (lowest note thus far) also underscores the theme of the central idea of the song on the word “repentance” (m. 28).

The 3-4 section’s lilting melody is commenced by Britten’s right hand in the piano, which the singer quickly echoes and develops (m. 28). The dotted eighth-sixteenth note rhythms are tossed between the voice, left hand and right hand (mm. 29-36). The final recitative (coda) section returns to the sonorous voiced lower right hand texture (seen before at m. 20), and the joyful mood from the previous section is eclipsed as doubts return to the singer; this is particularly reflected in the open 10<sup>th</sup> spacing of the left hand cords (m. 39), which lead into the final cadence. The final cadence and question is

underscored with very low and slowly arpeggiated chords, as if to give gravitas to the question, “who can die, so to receive his death?”

Pears’ impeccable diction was surely a great aid in the presentation of the text of these more oblique song texts from the *Harmonia Sacra* collections. Without clear enunciation the listener would have difficulty comprehending either the intent or message of the song, no matter how beautiful the vocalism and its supporting realisation. Pears’ ability to communicate text and create colour and nuance in the lower octave of his voice (an uncommon tenor characteristic) was ideally suited to this song’s vocal requirements, as the song sits in a very low tessitura. The general hushed mood of the song was also one of Pears’ strengths, and when he was joined by Britten at the piano, the effects they created with intensely soft dynamics were riveting.

#### 4.4.2. “Evening Hymn”

The last song to be analysed is Britten’s realisation of Purcell’s “Evening Hymn” which was premiered by Britten and Pears on Oct. 19, 1944, at St. Matthew’s Church in Northampton. The Purcell version can be found in Book I (pp. 1-3) of Playford’s *Harmonia Sacra* and is entitled “An Evening Hymn” with text by Dr. William Fuller. Purcell was renowned for his ground bass songs, and this song follows that form, as is indicated by Purcell (“On a Ground”) in the title of the piece. Additionally Purcell, in a rare instance of tempo indications, wrote the word “slow” over the first measure.

Britten was drawn to the ground bass form throughout his compositional life, with prominent examples being the Purcell songs “Music for a While” and “Dido’s Lament,” as well as the “Young People’s Guide to the Orchestra” (also known as “Variations on a Theme by Henry Purcell”). His fascination with the form was even incorporated into his original compositions such as the “Sea Interludes” from *Peter Grimes*. The realisation of “Evening Hymn” is a masterpiece of basic ground bass (variation) form and construction, the foundation of the song of course being supplied by Purcell’s bass and melody. The song is transformed under Britten’s hand from one of simplicity and beauty to one of complexity and subtle nuance.

The ground bass theme is heard a total of twenty-two times during the song, and Britten treats it differently each time. Following the consistency of format with his other Purcell realisations, Britten adheres strictly to the given bass line, altering only the octave in which the pitches are sounded, doublings, and a slight alteration to the rhythm in one bar. He doubles Purcell’s original bass line an octave lower, to support the first vocal climax of the song at the fifth repetition of the five-bar ground bass (mm. 21-25), and repeats the same octave doubling two statements later (mm. 31-36). As the piece finally modulates to the dominant key of D major, Britten again doubles the bass and keeps this doubling for the duration of the dominant key statements (mm. 43-53) before returning to the tonic (G) and Purcell’s original bass line (m. 54). An upper octave doubling is used for one five-measure statement (mm. 85-89), and this treatment supports a countermelody right hand texture created by Britten. Lower octave doublings are again added (mm. 89-93) to strengthen the vocal climax of the “Hallelujah” section. To support an eight-voiced

chordal texture, Britten doubles the Purcell bass one final time (mm. 99-103). The song concludes with the only two direct alterations to Purcell's bass line. Britten omits Purcell's voicing of the bass line (mm. 109-114), opting instead for a single-voiced lower octave rendering of the line and the addition of the final bass note (m. 114), and he alters the bass rhythm of the penultimate bar of the song (m. 113) to anticipate the tonic resolution and creates momentary octaves between left and right hand and voice.

Britten rarely alters the underlying harmonic structure in his Purcell realisations, and only at moments when the figures might be potentially ambiguous does he take those liberties. In this song, he finds that opportunity for ambiguity almost immediately. Purcell indicates no figures in the song, including the opening ground theme. Britten realises the opening five bar ground thus: I - V<sup>6</sup> - vi - iii<sup>6</sup> - IV - V. On the first repetition of the ground (mm. 6-11) he changes the harmonic structure, and although it is not a radical change, the subtle underlying effect is palpable and imbues the text with a peaceful rather than somber inflection. He alters the progression to read: I - V<sup>6</sup> - iii<sup>6/5</sup> - IV<sup>6</sup> - V - ii - V. As he progresses through the next two repetitions of the ground, he continues to enrich the harmonic structure creating increasingly more seventh chords on the third beat of the bars (mm. 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19) as he first does in m. 7. This device further enhances the Purcellian vocal line which is already enriched at these same points with written appoggiaturas (mm. 17-20).

The distinguishing feature of the sixth variant (mm. 26-30) is a series of 9-8 suspensions which create more tension and complexity as the song approaches the modulatory

section. To heighten the move to a new key area, Britten has the right hand move for the first time in contrary motion (upward) away from the supporting ground bass (mm. 31-34). Additionally Britten introduces a C# (m. 31), which anticipates the C# in Purcell's vocal line. There is ambiguity as to where the song is modulating through variants six and seven, and the phrases are extended by one bar (by Purcell) at these points. There is a pull towards B major as well as B minor and also a hint at the most obvious choice, the dominant key of D major, but these options are all blurred until m. 43 when the dominant key emerges as the new tonal centre.

Britten allows these brief tonicizations to be heard and carried out by Purcell's voice line, and he keeps the realisation fairly sparse and plain during this moment of the piece, adding only a descending melodic line of half-note thirds, a tenth above the bass line (mm. 37-43). Although seemingly a simple counter-melody structure, this pattern is then reworked several times throughout the dominant-key section. Britten first delays the upper voice in the right hand melody by one beat, still doubling the bass at a tenth. At this moment of the song, the voice and its text (mm. 43-47) are in a state of "rest" and stasis with repeated sustained A♯'s. Britten lets the piano create a gently rocking motion and continues the horizontal momentum of the song. He marks this section as *piu espress.* and also indicates frequent hairpin decrescendi to maintain dynamic shaping.

In the tenth variant Britten foreshadows the pedal tone (D) dominant pivot (mm. 48-50) heard in the vocal line (mm. 50-53) and also alters the counter melody, maintaining momentum through a sense of syncopation and melodic descent in the right hand.

The eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth variants make use of unexpected accents. In the first two of these variants Britten accents the third beat (instead of the regular downbeat), and in the thirteenth variant (mm. 64-68) the strong *marcato* accents fall on the second beat accompanied by rolled chords and downward leaps of a seventh. The effect is mildly disorienting in terms of bar lines and metric expectation, creating a momentary feeling of 2-4 time. The voice is momentarily silent in preparation for the second (textual) part of the song (the “Hallelujah”) which keeps the same ground bass.

As has been shown in many of Britten’s other Purcell song realisations, his counter-melody construction is often derived from the vocal line, yet he often anticipates the vocal line, and seemingly lets the right hand melody inform and inspire the vocal line. He demonstrates this compositional trait again when leading into the dotted rhythms of the “Hallelujah” section (starting in m. 69), which the voice quickly echoes and subsequently develops into florid melismas (mm. 70-71 and 72-78). The voice and right hand of the piano part frequently dove-tail each other, then continue in contrary motion (mm. 71-72 and 76) or in 3rds (m. 77). The rather consistent contrapuntal rhythm of the counterpoint melody (right hand) of the fourteenth and fifteenth variants is made more rhythmically complex by Britten for the sixteenth (m. 79) and the seventeenth (m. 84) variants by having the counter-melody enter on off-beats (m. 80) and continue in syncopated rhythms under the regular rhythm of the voice line. This creates an incredible feeling of tension and excitement underscoring the jubilant text.

Leading to this musical climax, Britten introduces one of his signature clashing semitone dissonances he so favoured in his original song compositions: the counter melody F# of the right hand (piano) clashing with the F $\natural$  of the voice part. This entire Hallelujah section is a steady crescendo to m. 91 and the vocal line's apex of pitch and dynamics. After this point there is a gradual tapering of dynamics to the hushed (*ppp*) final note of the song. Britten reinforces this crashing climax by adding right and left hand octave doublings (mm. 85-91) and slowly enriching the chordal voicing of the realised chords. Notice how, at the seventeenth variant (m. 84), Britten incorporates the added third of the chord in the right hand, then in the eighteenth variant (m. 91) he uses an added third in the bass texture for the first time in the song, creating a feeling of great density, thickness and sonority under the high lying voice line.

Moving into the nineteenth variant, Britten again anticipates Purcell's dominant (D) vocal pedal point (mm. 95-97) by introducing C# into the chordal realisation in the previous measure (m. 94) which was not indicated in Purcell's figures. Both to support the upper voice leaps (mm. 99-103) and to create more aural diversity for the twentieth variant, Britten realises the harmony with rolled full-textured, eight-voiced chords in the left and right hands, with forte and subsequent diminuendi for each bar. As the general dynamic of the song continues to taper, Britten gradually reduces the fullness of the chordal texture and starts to open the distance of the spacing between left and right hands until, by the final variant of the ground bass (mm. 109- 114), the parts are frequently three or more octaves apart, giving the feeling of stillness supporting the general feeling of evening quietude.



This song was very well suited to the specialized gifts of Pears. Although the song at first glance seems easily within the technical resources of many tenors, the reality is that the song's tessitura lies quite high, and the singer who is not comfortable singing at reduced dynamic levels in the upper passaggio will fatigue rapidly and be unable to surmount the slowly building dynamic and range climax of the song. Additionally, if the tenor's voice becomes over-weighted in order to achieve the full-voiced climax (m. 91), he will be unable to successfully execute a steady diminuendo to the end, finishing with the highly effective *un fil di voce* (*ppp*) as indicated by Pears. The haunting pianissimo singing of Pears was given ample opportunity to be displayed in this realisation.

Pears aids future generations of singers with his editorial indications. The general atmosphere of the song he marks as *dolce* and commences at the dynamic of *p*. He indicates a crescendo for the first ascent into the upper voice (mm. 22-23), which is supported and anticipated by Britten one measure earlier in the piano part. Pears marks the sequence of descending fifths (mm. 25-27) *sost.* so that the singer is not tempted to attack aggressively the first appearance of a larger intervallic leap, and further connects them with slurs. For the singer to maintain the legato through the modulatory section, Pears indicates a long legato phrase (mm. 31-37), possibly hoping that future singers will attempt this long phrase in one breath.

He includes tenuto marks over the words "can there" (m. 37) to encourage the singer to emphasize the question at that point. Pears marks the vocal pedal point A<sup>4</sup> (V of V) at m.

42 as *sonoro*, possibly trying to encourage the tenor to use as much warmth and richness as he can muster at that low note of his range. Showing his knowledge of the energy required for a male to sing in the passaggio area, he indicates a hairpin *crescendo* in mm. 51-52 so the tenor does not come to a vocal mishap in an attempt to sing softly.

In the second "Hallelujah" section of the song, Pears indicates that the tempo should not slow, although he requests that it start softly (*cominciando pp ma con moto*), and that the rhythmic vitality not sag (*sempre ritmico*). The dynamic shaping of this section is well marked, and he indicates a gradual crescendo for each successive repetition of the ground bass, until the vocal climax is achieved (*ff*) at m. 91 before reversing the process and gradually decaying the volume of sound until his justly famous intensely controlled *ppp* is reached in the final measure of the song.

## 5 Conclusion

Purcell's compositions inspired Britten to explore the intense synergy between music and language. These song realisations, while being true to the spirit of Purcell, were informed by practical contemporary performance considerations and adapted to exploit the strengths of both Britten and Pears. In these works we have a fascinating recorded musical document of the interpretations of a collaborative performance duo, which more often than not is lost after performance.

These hybrid creations utilize aspects of both early and contemporary musical idioms by Purcell and Britten, encapsulating a musical sound unique to the mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and in so doing bridge some 300 years of vocal technique through the skill and nature of Pears' voice. Blending these three musical talents together, we have a document of inspiration and collaboration that makes real the symbols on the page.

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