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A Historical analysis of three works for trebles by Benjamin Britten

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**A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THREE WORKS FOR TREBLES BY
BENJAMIN BRITTEN**

A Thesis Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music and Dance

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

by

Kristin Ann Pfeifer

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ABSTRACT

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THREE WORKS FOR TREBLES BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN

by Kristin Ann Pfeifer

This thesis addresses the topic of the historical significance of Benjamin Britten's *Friday Afternoons*, *A Ceremony of Carols*, and *Missa Brevis* in D. It will also discuss how these three pieces are interrelated as well as trace Benjamin Britten's compositional style through each of these works. In addition, the inspiration for creating each of these works will be explored.

Research on this subject reveals that throughout his life Benjamin Britten was influenced and inspired by the subjects of childhood, innocence, and youth. Through his love of children and his love of the treble voice timbre, Britten created a variety of works that are challenging, satisfying, and attainable for most children's choirs.

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I

Introduction

When writing multi-movement works for choirs most composers have written for the typical SATB choir. Benjamin Britten is one of the few who wrote multi-movement works for treble voices with varying degrees of difficulty. Throughout his composing career he wrote many multi-movement works that included treble voices. This thesis will be a historical analysis of three of Benjamin Britten's multi-movement works for trebles with varying degrees of difficulty, which were taken from three different decades. I will also analyze the historical significance of these works in the Britten repertoire. This study is limited to a discussion of only these three works. Although Britten wrote other multi-movement works for trebles, they will not be discussed in detail in this thesis.

The purpose of this study will be to answer the following questions: What is the historical significance of "*Friday Afternoons*, *A Ceremony of Carols*, and the *Missa Brevis*?" How are they interrelated? What inspired Britten to create multi-movement works for the treble voice and why are these pieces important for treble choruses to do? All choral conductors who conduct treble choirs and are considering doing a Britten work would benefit from this study. There is currently no study concentrating on all three of these works, and no study could be found documenting *Friday Afternoons*.

II

Innocence Discovered

Friday Afternoons, opus 7

Benjamin Britten's *Friday Afternoons* was begun on November 2, 1933, and finished on July 30, 1935. Although not his first music for children's voices (the *Three Part-Songs* of 1932 are "for boys' or women's voices" and *A Boy was Born* has boys as well as adult singers), it does contain a total of twelve separate songs that are all appropriate for the beginning singer. Britten was only nineteen at the time he started the work and twenty-one when he finished, therefore it gives the scholar insight into his developing composing style. All of the songs are in unison except for the third ("Cuckoo!"), which is in two parts and twelfth ("Old Abram Brown"), which is a canon that branches ultimately into four parts. When the work was finished it was submitted to the publisher with the title *Twelve Songs for Schools*, but the publisher recommended that Britten change the title to make it more appealing to potential buyers of the music. Ultimately, through his *Friday Afternoons* Britten raised the concept of unison singing to a new level with the songs' "spontaneously childlike character and melodic freshness."¹

The work was originally written for, and ultimately dedicated to, his brother Robert Britten and to the students who would eventually sing the work. Robert Britten was the headmaster of the Clive House preparatory school at Prestatyn on the rugged north coast of Wales. The singing classes were on Friday afternoons, hence the idea for the title.

¹ Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 117.

The work as a whole, although extremely simple, comes off as memorable and fresh, perhaps for its melodic invention but even more so for its varied accompaniments. The songs are lively and jazzy at times and are full of energy and wit. Although the work is very appropriate for beginning singers because the work makes no excessive demands on untrained young voices, a sensitive accompanist is necessary due to the interesting and resourceful piano accompaniments. Throughout *Friday Afternoons* there is much to stimulate the musical mind of a child in the wide range of textures and techniques employed.²

Fascination with Childhood

Throughout his composing career Britten's creativity was sparked by children and childhood. "His need for children, his observation of them, and his enjoyment of their company"³ are all aspects seen in many of his works for children, but most evidently in *Friday Afternoons*. Even from this period in his life Britten writes in his personal diary, "I am getting to such a condition that I am lost without some children (of either sex) near me." These feelings are confirmed by his diaries and letters from the time period and make sense of the creative energy that Britten put into writing music for children.⁴ Even his own childhood he looked back on fondly and with care. In his book *Letters from a Life*, Donald Mitchell describes the importance of Britten's childhood and how he remembered it:

² Christopher Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten: A Study of Stylistic and Technical Evolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 92.

³ Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5.

⁴ Ibid.

There is no doubt that this was a period of fundamental importance to him, as a man and as a creator. It is scarcely appropriate to think in conventional terms of him growing *out* of his childhood. He certainly grew up. But he did not discard his childhood so much as preserve it intact with him, and protect and conserve it throughout his adult life. The outward signs of this inner preoccupation show up in the care with which he kept his musical juvenilia which, naturally enough, mattered specially to him... But there were also associated documents and memorabilia, for example his letters to his parents, which they carefully preserved and which he as carefully kept after their deaths... I think one is not exaggerating if one senses in these letters a genuine impulse, perhaps even a compulsion, to record not only experience but the facts surrounding or giving rise to the experience. The childhood letters are indeed lively responses to events and experience - what one might expect from a lively child who clearly had, and wanted to sustain when separated from them, an intense and busy line of communication with his family, with his parents, with his mother above all.⁵

As *Friday Afternoons* effectively demonstrates, Britten's wish was to speak to children with immediacy, and this is pushed so far as to call for participation in the musical performance by children of very modest skills.⁶ Ultimately, this is part of the appeal of *Friday Afternoons* -- that it does not take great skill to be successful with this work.

Choice of Texts

⁵ Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 26-27.

⁶ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1979) 284.

The poems Britten chose for *Friday Afternoons* first and foremost show a highly developed and original taste in English verse⁷. We will see this once again when we examine how Britten chose texts for *A Ceremony of Carols*. Ultimately, the texts came from a variety of sources, but many (“Cuckoo!,” “Ee-oh!,” “A New Year Carol,” “There was a Monkey,” and “Old Abram Brown”) came from de la Mare’s extensive poetry anthology *Come Hither*, a resource Britten would turn to once again when composing *A Ceremony of Carols*. One of the important reasons why *Friday Afternoons* is significant is because it shows Britten selecting poems with a strong individuality and yet a definite idiosyncrasy. He matched the imagery of the poems with his own musical virtuosity. The texts are not what the typical reader would consider “poetic” by any means, but when combined with the delightful tunes, Britten is able to “create a fondness for a tune that insists on being sung and, once sung, lodges in the memory.”⁸

Analysis of the Individual Movements

#1 - “Begone, dull care”

The sheer fun of “Begone, dull care” is infused with life by the witty poetry and the ingenious piano accompaniment, a pattern that is seen throughout *Friday Afternoons*. Written in 2/4 time in the key of C major, Britten indicated that it should be sung “with spirit,” and anything less is hardly possible with the bouncy rhythms of the piano. This work was actually the last completed, on July 30, 1935, and it ultimately replaced the work that had to be removed, “Lone Dog.”

⁷ Christopher Palmer, ed., *The Britten Companion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 273.

⁸ Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1946), 51.

#2 - “A Tragic Story”

Completed November 13, 1933, “A Tragic Story” has a radically different feel than the first movement. The piano accompaniment is sparse and subtly enhances the text, never detracting from the song or drawing attention to the piano. It sets the mood simply, which is exactly what Britten intended. Although it starts slowly, it accelerates to as fast as the singers can enunciate the words, and then falls back to a resolute ending.

#3 - “Cuckoo!”

One of the two works that is not strictly in unison, “Cuckoo!” has almost a magical and ethereal quality to it. The alto voice (marked “second voice”) has a repetitive “Cuckoo” that continually drops a major third. The melody is then sung over this repetitive motion. Crescendos and decrescendos written within this piece are extremely effective because they are what the voice naturally wants to do. The piano accompaniment, which is at its most simple in this work, has rolled chords with some small emphasis on what the choir sings. For a beginning children’s choir, this movement would be a wonderful selection to introduce part singing. This movement was completed on November 11, 1933.

#4 - “Ee-Oh!”

Written between December 15-20, 1933, “Ee-Oh!” is a lively song with a constantly changing time signatures. Beginning in 2/2, it constantly switches back and forth from 2/2 to 3/2. Written in D major, the piano accompaniment is subtle and

understated, once again never drawing attention to itself. Although it is the longest song of all the works in the collection, “Ee-Oh!” is simply the same melody repeated six times with little variation in the voice (all variation, and consequently energy, being driven by the piano accompaniment).

#5 - “A New Year Carol”

One of the most memorable movements of *Friday Afternoons* is also one of the simplest. Written in E-flat major with a 3/4 time signature, the work quietly begins with open rolled chords in the piano’s left hand that continue throughout the work. Consequently, the piano accompaniment is in many ways similar to that of “Cuckoo!” The serene simplicity of all three verses is enhanced by the sheer beauty of the melody. It is interesting to note that although originally completed on May 15, 1934, in 1971 Britten revisited this work and arranged it for SSA. Of the twelve songs contained in *Friday Afternoons*, this piece is the only one with a sacred text. The text is anonymous and over the years there has been some speculation over the origin of the words “levy dew.” One theory is that it is a shortening of the French “Élevez le Dieu” signifying the raising of the host (bread and wine) at the altar at a Christian mass.

#6 - “I mun be married on Sunday”

Written on November 2, 1933, “I mun be married on Sunday” is a bouncy song that is full of fun and life. Switching back and forth from *forte* to *piano* and then from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, this work is wonderful for teaching beginning singers the importance of dynamics. Written in the key of F and with a 6/8 time signature, the piece

goes by quickly. Good diction is important. The piano accompaniment constantly supports and enhances the singers.

#7 - “There was a man of Newington”

Possibly the shortest song in *Friday Afternoons*, this movement is marked “brisk.” It is in common time and in the key of E. Britten introduces subtle composing touches in this work, for instance the use of inversion toward the end of this work to illustrate the “scratching-in” of eyes. The piano either plays *staccato* or is accented through out most of the work.

#8 - “Fishing Song”

Written in the key of C major, “Fishing Song” is unusual for the fact that it is the only song that is in 5/4 from beginning to end. Typical of many of the songs in *Friday Afternoons*, we also have wide swings in tempo. The piece starts “flowing” with the piano imitating waves gently rocking a boat out at sea. As the song moves into the third verse Britten writes *rallentando* and then “slower-lazily.” Five measures later Britten writes another *rallentando* which is then followed by “very slow.” A few measures later we then have an *accelerando* that returns us to the original tempo. The piano is more complex in this work with a very active right hand toward the end of the piece with constant sixteenth note runs.

#9 - “The Useful Plough”

Completed May 14, 1934, “The Useful Plough” is smooth and flowing. One of

the more simple songs of the set, the work is in D major and the time signatures, like that of “Ee-Oh!” periodically switches back and forth between 2/2 and 3/2. The piano plays open chords written as half notes throughout the entire piece until the last five measures, when the chords change to slowly diminishing whole notes, ending on a triple *pianissimo*.

#10 - “Jazz-Man”

Britten indicates that “Jazz-Man” is to be played and sung “quickly, with fire.” The infectious words and interesting rhythms make it fun and exciting. Britten also gives the singer some fun text painting on measure 31 with the word “howling.” Beginning in 2/2 and in the key of A-flat major, the time signature switches once to 3/2, but returns immediately to the 2/2 time signature. This movement was completed November 15, 1933.

#11 - “There was a Monkey”

If you reduce “There was a Monkey” to its simplest form, it is simply nine sentences all sung the exact same way. What makes this movement interesting and fun is that the accompaniment part is never the same. It is constantly changing and growing in intensity, making it almost more fun for the accompanist than for the singers. “There was a Monkey” is written in G major and with a 4/4 time signature.

#12 - “Old Abram Brown”

Completed November 27, 1933, “Old Abram Brown” is an early indication of Britten’s obsession with canons as well as the theme of death. The melody is by itself a

very simple canonic dirge beginning with repeated notes that are followed by an octave leap and then a descending sequence. It begins on a *pianissimo* unison, then breaks into a two part canon followed by a four part canon. It then returns to a two part canon, but with one group singing half as slow as the other. The piece ends in unison on a haunting triple *pianissimo*. This final movement is the only movement written in a minor key -- e minor.

Removed - “Lone Dog”

Although completed on November 10, 1933, “Lone Dog” ultimately had to be withdrawn from the published set due to copyright difficulties at the time revolving around the poem. Because of these difficulties and the removal of this song, Britten wrote “Begone, Dull Care” to ultimately replace it. A fun and rhythmic song, it is in common time and is indicated to be sung *Allegro con fuoco*. It also has an optional two part split at the end of the work.

On the verge of leaving his childhood behind and beginning his life as an adult, Benjamin Britten discovered that a part of him would always be inspired by innocence. That innocence, most easily seen through children, became his inspiration. Children became his muse. Through his brothers’ preparatory school, Britten not only was able to write thirteen delightful and fresh songs to be sung and enjoyed by children, but he also began honing and further developing his compositional talents.

III

Ceremony of Innocence

A Ceremony of Carols, opus 28

A Ceremony of Carols, for treble voices and harp, is Benjamin Britten's first mature work for treble voices. The text is based upon nine Medieval and Renaissance texts and one antiphon from the *Liber usualis*. Throughout the work a Medieval flavor, a child-like joyfulness, and an affirmation of life shine brightly. What were the aspects of Britten's life that influenced his writing of *A Ceremony of Carols*? This chapter will examine Britten's own loss of innocence with his stay in the United States, as seen most vividly as World War II grew ever increasingly worse for England, and his ultimate decision to return to his homeland, which was plagued by war. Britten was also heavily influenced by the musical renaissance of English composers of the time period.

A Ceremony of Carols is a ceremony of innocence representing a time before the Biblical fall of man, when the Garden of Eden still provided all. Britten depicts this innocence with musical simplicity. Even the ultimate choice to use boys' voices instead of adults' shows his desire for a more "innocent" and ethereal sound. Throughout *A Ceremony of Carols*, Britten keeps the music innocent by writing "child-like" ostinato patterns and canons and by evoking dance-like rhythms. The use of these child-like musical techniques in turn enhances a nostalgia for lost childhood.

Because *A Ceremony of Carols* is written to be sung by boys and is simple in nature, the listener may think it is tonally simplistic and is sung with ease. Consequently,

the listener might well be advised to read several layers of meaning simultaneously into *A Ceremony of Carols* (and really any of Britten's music for children). Although aspects of the music may at times seem simplistic in nature, the complexity of the piece comes from the mixing of these simple layers. Broken down, each layer is relatively simple in keeping with Britten's own desires as a composer, but when all the layers are put together they transform the work into a highly complex one. In Britten's own words, "Music for me is clarification; I try to clarify, to refine... My technique is to tear all the waste away; to achieve perfect clarity of expression, that is my aim."⁹

The English Musical Renaissance

English composers during this period struggled against what Vaughan Williams once called the "cigar theory" of music in England. He insisted music was regarded in England as a "luxury" that could not be made at home, much like the imported cigar. Consequently, there was a resistance to English music by England itself.¹⁰ Foreign music was preferred because it was erroneously thought of as being more sophisticated. Many composers before and during Britten's time thought that they might fare much better with foreign sounding names. Critics would label various English composers as the "English Wagner" or the "English Debussy," adding to the feelings of a national inability to take the music of English composers seriously on their own terms.¹¹ Against these prejudices Benjamin Britten and the other composers of the period struggled. The composers who

⁹ Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 157.

¹⁰ Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 6

went against this school of thought (Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Bax, Bliss, Walton, Lambert, and Britten) were to be ultimately considered part of this new English Renaissance.¹²

The general image of a “renaissance” of English music was common in the musical world for many years. The nature of the renaissance was usually defined through the use of an interesting botanical metaphor: “English music was a growing thing, a plant perhaps, or a tree, and the progress of English music was judged as one would a specimen.”¹³ Many musical scholars and critics used this metaphor to illuminate how the English musical renaissance was viewed -- as something organic whose growth needed the right conditions to become established. Many “plants” were uninteresting, but there was the occasional one or another that would bloom into the most magnificent flower.

Many of these composers, including Britten, looked for inspiration in English music of earlier periods, and Britten himself was considerably influenced by Henry Purcell.¹⁴ The connection to the English countryside and the belief that music can grow out of words were also important in leading to a renewed interest in the English folksong. At the time English composers were searching for usable ways of setting the English language to music. Many composers turned to authors such as William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, and the large body of Medieval anonymous English texts for inspiration. The choice of texts made by these composers is often highly revealing. This can be seen in the Medieval texts selected for Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols*.

During this period it was now possible to publish books about English music and

¹² Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 3.

¹³ Ibid, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid, 2.

composers, previously impossible in the two centuries preceding the twentieth century, the so-called “Dark Age” of English music.¹⁵ English music of this period often expresses the feelings of a country at war, but not crushed, as it attempts to rise from the ashes of destruction. In much of this music there is an energy, enthusiasm, optimism, and sense of confidence not found outside this period. The composers learned to move beyond imitation of other European composers. This movement was as much one of musical independence as one of national music. These composers, but especially Benjamin Britten, changed, transformed, and ultimately redefined what was considered “Englishness” in music. In the end the term “English Renaissance” ceased to be used to describe the new English composers of the post Second World War era. By the dropping of the term “English Renaissance” people believed that the need for a renaissance had come to an end.¹⁶

In America and the Voyage Home

For many reasons, but especially the fact that he felt his music was not accepted or appreciated, Britten had become unhappy in England and decided to move to the United States in May 1939. He would later say of this decision, “I was a discouraged young composer -- muddled, fed up and looking for work, longing to be used.”¹⁷ Britten decided to return to England, which had been torn by the Blitz and had not yet turned the corner against the Nazis, when he read an article in *The Listener* by E. M. Forster on

¹⁵ Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 4.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2

¹⁷ Ibid, 234.

George Crabbe, the poet of East Anglia and more particularly of Aldeburgh. The article had an enormous influence on him. Forster wrote:

To talk about Crabbe is to talk about England. He never left our shores... He did not go to London much, but lived in villages and small country towns. [He] was born at Aldeburgh, on the coast of Suffolk. It is a bleak little place, not beautiful. It huddles round a flint-towered church and sprawls down to the North Sea - and what a wallop the sea makes as it pounds at the shingle! Near by is a quay at the side of an estuary, and here the scenery becomes melancholy and flat; expanses of mud, saltish commons, the marsh-birds crying. Crabbe heard that sound and saw that melancholy, and they got into his verse.¹⁸

Before the move from America back to England, Britten faced frustrated idealism and growing embitterment. Britten could not identify with the American way of life. The dissatisfactions that had clouded his view of English life now cleared and he saw how deeply rooted was his affection for his native heritage. He realized he was not, and could never be, American -- he was English to the core. However, Britten's sojourn in the United States was remarkable not only for its productivity, but also for the quality of the music. He made substantial technical advances and purified his style, particularly in the later works of the period.¹⁹

He had to return to England -- a country that had been ravaged by war. Being a pacifist his future in England was uncertain, and he feared he would be faced with prejudice and animosity as well as possible imprisonment if he was not granted

¹⁸ Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 234.

¹⁹ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1983), 44.

exemption from military service. The situation would not be an easy one but Britten, with his long time companion Peter Pears, believed they should be in England at this time. "I suddenly realized where I belonged and what I lacked," Britten later recalled, adding, "I had become without roots."²⁰ He was now ready to put down his roots. This would greatly affect his music and musical language. Pears wrote of the time in America, "It was not for three years that he was to realize that his roots (and his language) were English."²¹

Making up their mind to return to England, they were faced with the challenge of securing passage across the Atlantic, not easy at that stage of the war. Britten and Pears were to wait six months on the East Coast before being able to sail on March 16, 1942. Eventually they were able to cross in a small Swedish cargo boat (the *Axel Johnson*) with some passenger accommodation. Boarding the ship in New York, they made their way up the coast with various stops before actually crossing the Atlantic. Consequently, the voyage took a full month. Stopping in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Britten found the book *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems*, containing most of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Medieval poems he used in *A Ceremony of Carols*.

In the confined and oppressive conditions aboard ship and fearful of U-boat attacks, Britten was able to write both *A Hymn to St. Cecilia* and the "7 Christmas Carols," the first draft of *A Ceremony of Carols*, which radiate a relaxed joyfulness. Perhaps this hopeful attitude in the music could be attributed to a sense of relief at the ending of three years' indecision about where he should live and work. Or, as had happened in the past and as would happen in the future, tension and worry accompanied

²⁰ Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance* (New York : Schirmer Books, 1985), 234.

²¹ Ibid, 235.

by a resignation to the situation accelerated his creative process.²² The joyfulness in the composing could also be attributed to the nature of the Hymn and the Ceremony.

Consciously, he identified some of his need to return in terms of friends and family. Unconsciously, the whole world of his childhood was drawing him home. Throughout the *Ceremony of Carols*, we hear a childlike innocence along with that innocence being lost. He was returning home to the place of his childhood and adolescent dreams, but America had changed him. He had come to maturity both as a musician and as a man. England as well would be radically changed by war. Although throughout the *Ceremony of Carols* we hear that childlike innocence, many times it is coupled with a sense of innocence irretrievably lost. The sense of lost innocence remains painfully keen at times, especially in the eighth movement, "In Freezing Winter Night."

During the voyage his musical mind was directed towards England and all things English, and not the music of exile. Just as his physical self was traveling "home," he was intent on discovering how effectively he could contribute to the English tradition on his own terms.²³ He expresses these terms in *A Ceremony of Carols* by his preoccupation with modes and modality, his concern for careful tonal planning across the entire work, organum-like blocks of choral tone, and a textural range inclining toward the single line and its canonic multiplication. Instrumental patterns also contribute a distinctive character and structural scaffolding, not simply adding additional harmonic fluff to each movement.²⁴

Britten and Pears arrived in Liverpool on April 17, 1942, having been away for a month short of three years. Many of Britten's old friends had already been killed in the

²² Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 58.

²³ Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 60.

²⁴ Alan Payne, "Dramatic Use of Tonality in Peter Grimes," *Tempo* 66/67, 1963, 22.

war. While in America, Britten came to realize his belief that violence would breed nothing but violence, and his fundamental objection to meeting hatred with hatred. This personal philosophy would make acceptance in war-time England difficult. Luckily, England exempted him from military service, and like musicians in other countries, he was allowed to continue his life as a composer and as a performing musician. Britten brought back with him to England a quality of music that had not been heard before, and, as a result, he was received enthusiastically.²⁵

Probably nothing could have been better for his career in England than his brief stay in America. It broadened his horizons (which can be seen in his decision to use a harp as accompaniment in *A Ceremony of Carols*) and provided a stimulus that may have been the challenge of novelty or a reaction to unusual surroundings. Unrealized by Britten at the time, he had come to maturity in America while coming to terms with his true "Englishness."

During the war any opportunity to hear new music in England was all the more welcome because of its infrequency and apparent mediocrity. In a letter to his friend Elizabeth Mayer, Britten writes:

Musical life doesn't really exist, except for this extraordinary demand for organized sound, which makes people crowd into the Albert Hall, to hear bad orchestras, conducted by mediocre conductors, under the worst acoustic conditions possible, play a few popular classics (Mainly Beethoven, and then only the third, fifth, or seventh). Scarcely a musical life.²⁶

²⁵ Donald Mitchell, *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works From a Group of Specialists* (New York : Philosophical Library, 1953) 5.

²⁶ Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976.*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1037.

Britten's new compositions were readily accepted because it was immediately apparent that during his three years' residence in the United States his mind and music had strikingly matured. *A Ceremony of Carols* was premiered to celebrate his first Christmas at home.

The Use of Harp

Britten's choice to use the harp as an accompanying instrument was partly influenced by the fact he had intended to work on a harp concerto during the voyage home.²⁷ In order to do so he had brought along two harp manuals for the voyage. The use of the harp in *A Ceremony of Carols* was another of Britten's innovations, and at the time of the premiere the harp was considered a radical and unusual musical step. Though harps may have been used in churches from time to time in the Middle Ages, there was no established tradition for their use in church ceremonies. In *A Ceremony of Carols* it seems difficult to envision any other instrument besides the harp being used. The ingenious use of the harp contributes to a cyclical unity and to the work's haunting appeal. Additionally, Britten exploits the inherent qualities of the instrument, as seen in the *Allegro con brio*, dotted quarter equaling 126, opening to the first carol "Wolcum Yole!" which is marked *pesante ed arpeggiando* (heavy and arpeggiated) in the harp part, as well as the glittering, frosty triplets in the upper register for the central section (marked *ma distinto* -- distinct and clear).

²⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 168.

Medieval English Texts

Folk music was, according to Vaughan Williams, “an applied art not art for art’s sake.”²⁸ Folk themes, handled with integrity and love, could -- and should -- be used by serious composers, because folksongs “for generations voiced the spiritual longing of our race.”²⁹ In many of Britten’s compositions, but especially with *A Ceremony of Carols*, we can see that Britten took Vaughan Williams’ sentiment to heart.

The English lyrics in *A Ceremony of Carols*, some of known authorship and others anonymous, represent a 300-year period from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Of the nine carols all are from either the Medieval or Renaissance periods; one is by James, John and Robert Wedderburn, two are by Robert Southwell and one is by William Cornish. The first two, “Wolcum Yole” and “There is No Rose,” from the fourteenth century, are “carols” by the strict (or Medieval) definition. These are poems for singing that have regular stanzas with a short “burden” or chorus to be sung at the beginning and then repeated after each stanza. Songs such as these must have been common entertainment in Medieval time for there are numerous references to them in English literature. For example, the first carols were ring dances, but soon became songs associated particularly with Christmas feasts. When in the most famous of fourteenth century Arthurian narratives, Sir Gawain comes to the Castle of Berrcilak, he is welcomed to the festivities for St. John’s Day when “they drank the wine and danced graceful carols with great joy.”³⁰

²⁸ Michael Trend, *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance, Edward Elgar to Benjamin Britten* (New York : Schirmer Books, 1985), 9.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ <http://www.jps.net/pdeane/fgr/Pearl.htm>.

Most importantly, *A Ceremony of Carols* proved beyond a doubt that Britten had the ability to get behind the feel of words and translate them into musical terms, and not simply set text to music. He was particularly successful with Medieval lyrics, and time and time again he used Medieval material for his compositions. There was something in the simplicity of the Medieval writing that Britten appreciated and was able to translate into contemporary terms.

The majority of the Medieval texts that Britten set were found in *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems*. The volume contains five of the original poems which appear in the finished work:

“There is no rose” - page 5

“I sing of a maiden” [Britten: “As dew in Aprille”] - page 6

“This little babe” - page 115

“In freezing winter” [Britten: “In freezing winter night”] - page 113

“Adam lay ibounden” [Britten: “Deo gracias”] - page 4³¹

Transcribed on the inside back cover was also “O my deare hert,” which Britten renamed “Balulalow.” The texts for “Wolcum Yole” and “Spring Carol” are found in *Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes and Poems for the Young of All Ages*, the same book that he used the majority of songs from *Friday Afternoons*. The source of “The Yonge Child” is unknown.

³¹ Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters from a Life: The selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1976.*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press , 1991), 1040.

Analysis of the Individual Movements

#1 - Procession (and #11 - Recession)

Britten's predilection in several of his religious works, especially in the church parables, for a processional based on plainsong perhaps derives from Holst's example in *The Hymn of Jesus*.³² The same tune is repeated for both the Processional and Recessional in *A Ceremony of Carols*, functioning as a frame for the piece. The concept of framing would be an idea he would revisit in other works. For instance, in the *Serenade* for tenor, horn and strings, the horn has a solo prologue and epilogue. In the *Ceremony of Carols* Recessional the listener can hear how the final Alleluias slowly die away as each singer left the church or stage. In his *Serenade* Britten has the Epilogue played from off-stage, giving a similar effect.³³ The plainchant tune never leaves the listener's memory, and Britten revisits it periodically throughout the piece, specifically in the Harp *Interlude*.

Britten's adoption of the plainsong antiphon "Hodie Christus natus est" from the Magnificat at the second Vespers of the Nativity is simple and yet haunting. Instead of a celebration of the birth of the Christian savior, the listener is instead asked to acknowledge the holiness of the birth. Both the plainsong and the next movement ("Wolcum Yole!") are in A major. The tritone, which Britten revisits many times throughout the work, is introduced in the plainsong as the Lydian fourth (D-sharp, alternating with D-natural).

For Britten, the initial statement of the plainchant, sung in unison with the timbre

³² Michael Kennedy, *Britten* (Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1981), 164.

³³ Alan Kendall, Benjamin Britten (London: Macmillan, 1973) 50.

of the children's voices, is a statement of innocence. In the final movement when the plainchant repeats but fades away as the singers leave, shows the innocence leaving or the ultimate loss of that innocence.

#2 - "Wolcum Yole!"

This movement is joyful and light-hearted, but has a quieter, more subdued middle section and ends with a might shout. The listener gets the impression of all the joys, chaos, and innocence of children playing together and welcoming all to their fun.

As the "Wolcum Yole's" repeat in rapid succession toward the end of the movement, the listener is reminded of the sounds of bells, as if calling the faithful to a church. Bell sounds (as also seen in *Deo Gracias*) is a motive the composer was to develop more fully in the opera *Peter Grimes*.³⁴

Clearly Britten's musical mind was now directed towards England, just as his physical self was traveling home. Britten is moving toward home, both physically and mentally, and possibly pondering the joys of his youth.

#3 - "There is no Rose"

The close relation between the vernacular songs and the Latin liturgy text is especially evident in the mixing of the two languages in "There is no Rose." The exquisite beauty of this movement is heightened by some sharp, almost violent clashes of tonality between the choir's harmonies and the insistent ground bass of the harp (see measures 26-32). The medieval atmosphere is most convincingly expressed by the bass ostinato and the harmonic excursions of the harp which offset the mysterious liturgy of chanting

³⁴ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1979), 86.

voices, as in the magical passage in measures 8-9.

“There is No Rose,” more than any other movement, contains the most extended use of ostinato and is extremely repetitive in nature. Once again, Britten depicts innocence by musical simplicity. Repetition, simplistic ostinato patterns, and canons are all elements often seen in children’s music, and Britten uses these elements to paint a picture of that innocence.

#4a - That Yongē Child

After the lush harmonies of “There is no Rose,” which shares its F-major key with the central section of “Wolcum Yole,” we are suddenly brought into an altogether different world. The sense of an innocence lost remains painfully keen throughout this movement. “That Yongē Child” is notable for a delicate, almost sobbingly caressing little phrase for the harp that has a characteristically different sound than many of the later movements. This can most likely be partly explained because “That Yongē Child” was added by Britten, along with the harp interlude, just prior to the work’s publication in 1943 -- and also during some of the most intense times for England during WWII. This

movement along with “Balulalow” also illustrates, respectively, the “wrong” song of the nightingale (this movement) and the implicitly “good” song of Mary (the following movement -- “Balulalow”). The accompaniment centers upon a semi-tonal ostinato (D-flat/C), which may symbolize the impoverishment of the nightingale’s song. This song is first harmonized in F minor but at the beginning of the second verse enharmonically reinterpreted in A major/minor.

4b - “Balulalow”

In “Balulalow,” the mother sings her child a soothing lullaby. The cradle song is set to a rocking accompaniment with beautiful sensitive interplay between 6/4 and 3/2 time signatures. The major/minor ambiguity, which has been heard briefly in the movements before (especially in “That Yongē Child”), is now painted across a broader canvas (F sharp major/minor, i.e., relative of A major). “Balulalow’s” essentially classical minor/major oscillations give way to a climactic swing of the center (illustrative of “The knees of my heart shal I bow”).

#5 - “As Dew in Aprille”

“As Dew in Aprille,” idealizing the mother/son relationship, is perhaps the most famous of the texts on the Annunciation and Virgin Birth and is one of the best known medieval poems in *A Ceremony of Carols*. It has a more personal tone than many other medieval songs and poems in praise of Mary, which characteristically list her virtues from the Old Testament (beauty and serenity) suggesting how she is a realization or fulfillment of them all. The song also has a suggestion of intimacy that is surprising to the modern

reader. The setting opens and closes with flourishes that make the unexpected harmonies in the section which starts “He came al so stille” all the more effective.

In this piece the word “moder” (mother) is used in almost every stanza. Britten is returning home to family and friends and most importantly to his mother country. There is a joy and a freedom that he feels in this decision, and consequently it is heard throughout this movement.

#6 - This Little Babe

“This Little Babe,” a text describing Christ’s battle with Satan, is projected as a *con fuóco* [with fire, energy or passion] chase; the canonic writing commonly found in Britten’s music for children accentuates the mood of tension and insecurity. The belligerently canonic movement is rigidly Aeolian except for a Lydian insertion that provides cadential momentum. Interestingly enough, this is one of the few movements where there is a clear V-I cadential movement -- in most of the other movements we never have a clear V-I cadence. Throughout the harmonic surprises and intensifications we have a highly imaginative setting. It also should be noted that this movement is the most difficult of all the carols to sing, with close two and three part canons, but ending after the harp has sounded the “angels’ trumps.” The canonic writing of “This Little Babe,” which precipitates its vocal lines with awe-inspiring power, is intended to be amplified by a natural acoustic of a church or other suitable space, resulting in a truly dramatic effect -- an effect which can scarcely be imagined from an examination of the score and a knowledge of the singers being only children.

The listener imagines Britten’s fears about WWII and arriving home safely with

the U-boat threat at its height in the Atlantic ocean during their voyage. His fears, how he must imagine battle, of his views on the uselessness of war are all being played out within the movement's turmoil. Ultimately the audience is painted a picture of a war between the Christ child and Satan and how a little babe won a war against what seemed (on the surface) to be a far superior opponent. It is easy to see the parallel between Nazi Germany and England at the time.

#7 - Interlude

The chaos of "This Little Babe" is effectively interrupted by an "Interlude" for the harp. It is easy to hear that Britten no longer has the fear and turmoil ranging within him. When this movement was written he was home safe. He was accepted by society as well as by his country. Through this movement Britten is able to transport the listener to another world.

Part of the English music Renaissance was that English composers wanted to depict their own feelings for the countryside in their music. The sound produced by string instruments was found to be particularly appropriate for creating musical pictures with specific English connotations. There are many "rhapsodies" and other lyrical pieces written for strings or similar ensembles that successfully evoke an impression of the English countryside. Many composers of the period chose, or preferred, to live in the countryside and were deeply influenced by it. Some held the view that their music could grow from the world around them.

As stated before, the final impetus for Britten to make the journey home was the poem he read by Crabbe. Britten ultimately made his home in the countryside, the very

place that Crabbe wrote of. The pastoral feelings are quite evident throughout the movement. Although Crabbe obviously found the place to be uninspiring, Britten found it to be quite beautiful, and he was quite at home and inspired by his home in Suffolk.

The harp interlude is interestingly rhapsodic and on repeated listening motives of some of the carols heard earlier can be heard once again. This is most vividly seen in the first phrase, which is a restatement of the plainchant tune. Harmonic overtones and chordal progressions are piled up over an ostinato that tolls its four note motif in sweet calmness and impassivity. An ostinato four note motive forms the background for a chordal melody that starts almost atmospherically, assumes nobility in the middle, and ends with sweeping glissandi that suggest the sound of the wings of the angels who appeared to the shepherds in the countryside near Bethlehem.

#8 - In Freezing Winter Night

Through the interlude we begin a transportation to a new world, and it is “In Freezing Winter Night” that signals our arrival -- but not where we expected. The voices no longer seem to represent the happy state before the fall, but suggest the tragedy of lost innocence. Through Britten’s imaginative tone painting, the listener feels an icy stillness as the music shivers with cold, an effect caused by the Phrygian intervals that collide canonically. The harp suggests by its repeated tremolo pattern the bitter cold of the night when shelter was sought for the new-born child. The Phrygian G minor of “In Freezing Winter Night” shifts to G major for the central section when the texts describes the child’s court and that even in the poor surroundings he will survive. However, the “freezing” tremolos continue on the harp and the tritone is continually used. The layered

use of ostinato in imitation and of dissonance centered on the tritone serve both practical and illustrative purposes. The range of the final solos, featuring a two octave range from high G to low G, is also a darkly effective use of the boys' timbre, the overall effect being poignantly illustrative of the price paid for man's fall.

The use of canonic writing greatly adds to the extraordinary atmosphere, as does Britten's employment of plain and elaborated versions of the same melodic line that are heard simultaneously. Britten puts canon to quite other ends as he repeats pitilessly the shiver motive created by the clash of its Phrygian intervals. The harp's *tremolando* and the 6/4 chord position only intensify the unrest. Yet a simple switch to the Lydian changes the entire character of the movement. Modulation again creates a climax before a return to the Phrygian motive, now background to more assertive lines capable of achieving a tonic root.

#9 - Spring Carol

The mood now changes abruptly in the "Spring Carol." It is full of joy and has a deliciously rippling accompaniment that shows how music, and Benjamin Britten, can rescue even the most downcast spirit.

The harp's figuration is clearly in D major despite the conspicuous absence of the leading tone, a fairly constant trait throughout this entire cycle, together with the avoidance of the direct V-I. However, the vocal line is heard rather as Dorian on E, so that the piece points both as IV and as V towards the returning A of the next movement, "Deo Gracias."

#10 - Deo Gracias

After “Spring Carol,” the A major/minor ambiguity returns for the final unbounded jollity of “Deo Gracias.” Somewhat more intellectual in its appeal, “Deo Gracias” turns on the comparison of Adam and Eve, who brought sin (as well as sadness, war, and all things evil) into the world, and Mary, through whom it was overcome. The final stanzas reflect on the thought that providence has brought a greater good out of man’s original error. The moment the apple of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is taken, the music flowers into a symbolically pure A major in a gesture of extreme irony. It is ironic because the music turns joyful. The Christian text argues that if the apple had not been taken and if sin had not entered the world, the Virgin Mary would never have become heaven’s Queen. Britten reminds us that without the fall of man there would be nothing: no Christian story, no love, no life, no art, no music.

From the early Baroque oratorios of Schütz through the large-scale dramatizations by Berlioz and Liszt, the story of the Nativity has never ceased to inspire composers with its mystery, tenderness, and lofty spiritual message. The *Ceremony of Carols* has a definite liturgical character, but the work is neither a medley of carols nor an actual ceremony, unless one regards the opening and closing procession and recession as ceremonial. Was Britten already thinking of Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming,” which is quoted in *The Turn of the Screw*?

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned...³⁵

Many of the techniques Britten used in *A Ceremony of Carols* are common to all Britten's music sung by children, most notably, the use of canon to create an impression of contrapuntal sophistication from a single melodic line and diversity from a very simple melodic and harmonic language (as we saw in "Old Abram Brown" of *Friday Afternoons*). Canons and rounds are both fun to sing and, especially in the context of *A Ceremony of Carols*, such imitation tends to produce an impression of timelessness and innocence, enhancing the effect of non-development. Britten blends elements of modal, major, and minor tonalities in a wide chromatic range that achieves great variety despite the obvious limitations of writing for children's voices. Britten did ultimately succeed in welding together an exquisite selection of ancient carol texts and creating a cyclic unit.

The style that Britten chose to compose in is one that was easily grasped by audiences, to whom much of 20th century music was still rather forbidding. He was willing to accept that modality, whether in very old or entirely new scale constructions, could provide some basis for a fresh technique. The color transformations within the work and the easy aptness of the vocal writing, together with the poetic harp part, explain why the public has always enjoyed it.

Britten consciously wrote for humanity -- "for human beings - directly and

³⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 168.

deliberately... to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives.”³⁶ His success in reaching people of different ages, cultures, political, and religious views was unique among the composers of his generation as well as the composers of the English renaissance.

Through his trials in the United States and ultimately the voyage home, his own loss of innocence with the ways of the world plagued by war, and with the ongoing musical English renaissance, Britten was able to give the world a work of both simplicity sophistication and one of the very essence of “Englishness.” Consequently, *A Ceremony of Carols* remains one of Benjamin Britten’s most beloved works to this day.

³⁶ Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 157.

IV
Innocence Lost
Missa Brevis in D, opus 63

The Missa Brevis in D, a setting of the Ordinary excluding the Credo, was composed in 1959 for George Malcolm and the boys of Westminster Cathedral choir. This enchanting work is laid out for three part treble choir and organ, and in writing it Britten clearly had in mind the brilliant, passionate, and wind-like tone quality characteristic of treble voices. The mass is full of simple, almost naive ideas and motives, and the inspired and skillful treatment of them is proof of Britten's genius working in this medium.

Malcolm and the Boys

The Missa Brevis manuscript bears the date "Trinity Sunday, 1959," and the work was written to honor George Malcolm's retirement as the organist and choir director. George Malcolm was a well known trainer of boys' voices and a staunch opponent of the artificial and unnatural sound known as "cathedral tone" that was popular in Europe at the time. He was a firm believer that it was perfectly feasible "to train a boy's voice -- to refine it, and develop it, and turn it into a medium of real musical beauty -- without destroying its natural timbre, and without removing from it the characteristics of the normal human boy."³⁷ Consequently he was able to bring out their

³⁷ Eric Walter White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 91.

natural timbre with its raw edge and wind instrument-like quality. Malcolm was notable for his creation of a boys' tone that was hard-edged, full of brilliance, and with no hints of vibrato. This is not to say that it was not beautiful, but it was different compared to anything heard in England up to this point.

When Britten heard Malcolm's boys in January 1959 he wrote to him, "the whole choir sang with a brilliance and authority which was staggering -- owing to you, my dear, I know." In a different letter Britten referred to Malcolm's "incredible boys" making a reference to their strident tone. A little later in that same year Malcolm met up with Britten by chance and he mentioned that he would unfortunately be leaving his choral post in the cathedral that summer to do freelance work. As George Malcolm remembers the conversation:

He didn't say, as some of my friends kindly had, "What a loss for English church music." He [Britten] just said, "What about my Mass?" Three weeks later he delivered it, very badly copied and duplicated by Boosey's, just in time for me to conduct it. I was immensely pleased.³⁸

In this work Britten exploits the wind instrument timbre that was a notable result of Malcolm's training, shunning the sophisticated *espressivo* nuances of the trained adult singer.³⁹ Britten was able to write the *Missa Brevis* in only a few days, even though he had been thinking about it for over six months. The work was first performed at Westminster Cathedral at a service on July 22, 1959, under Malcolm's direction and with Britten in the congregation.⁴⁰

³⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 390.

³⁹ Peter Evens, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1979), 436.

⁴⁰ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 390.

The Key: "In D"

Although Benjamin Britten states that the work is "in D," it actually tends to revolve more around the key of D than stay within the key. Britten's cello sonata "in C" is an obvious comparison. Throughout the *Missa Brevis* the harmonies are subtly ambiguous, and it can be said that this piece anticipates the sound-world of the *War Requiem* on which Britten worked soon afterwards.⁴¹ For the opening Kyrie (which was one of Britten's favorite texts), D major is apparently no more than an alliance to F-sharp major/minor. F-sharp is the dominant of B, relative minor of D, which is then heard at the climax on "Christe eleison." In the Gloria, the D now predominates over F-sharp major. In the Sanctus, D is encircled by F-sharp but also by B-flat, which creates a major third chain. False relations between F-sharp and F-natural in the Benedictus create a new conflict between modal regions on C and D. Finally in the Agnus Dei D has become minor and B-flat the most insistent counter attraction.⁴²

⁴¹ Mervyn Cook, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 288.

⁴² Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1979), 437.

The Treatment of the Text

The plainchant intonation of the Gloria, to which the motivic structures of the other movements are related, is from the Mass Dominator Deus, the Ordinary for Commemorations and Ferias of the Christmas season in the *Liber usualis*.

A correlation can be made between this plainchant intonation and the plainsong used in *A Ceremony of Carols*. Throughout the *Missa Brevis*, Britten makes little concession to the liturgical words, and consequently the composer sets the Latin text with the freedom that characterizes his English works. As Stravinsky did in *Oedipus Rex*, Britten treats the Latin words as “phonetic material,” to be subject to whatever rhythmic treatment seems appropriate. Consequently, the words are savored more for their form than for their content.⁴³ The syllabically set words to the 7/8 time signature Gloria is a good example of this, which a correlation can be found to the “Laudate Dominum” in Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*.⁴⁴ Although in contrast to Stravinsky, Britten strove for more of a “naturalism, ignoring Stravinsky’s more ceremonial and ritualistic disregard of natural stress and syllabic weight.”⁴⁵ Through words, Britten provides a rhythmic foundation for a work that blends exuberance with musical genius.

⁴³ Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 269.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 288.

Analysis of the Individual Movements

Movement 1 - Kyrie

In the beginning of the mass, the words “Kyrie, eleison” repeat through all three voices and are set to a passionate falling phrase embracing the interval of a perfect fourth. The D major / F-sharp major relationship of the accompanying harmony is important because it is a unifying element that recurs prominently in the Gloria and then again in the Sanctus. Once all three voice parts have sung this motive individually the voices unite at a piano three part harmony. As a contrast, the following Christie, which forms the B section of this ABA movement, reverses the melodic direction of the Kyrie. The Christie is an inversion of the original Kyrie motif that, like the Kyrie, goes through all three voices, but this time climaxes to a *fortissimo*. Lastly, the opening Kyrie motif is repeated exactly except for the final phrase, which is extended in three part harmony ending on a F-sharp major cadence.

Movement 2 - Gloria

After four measures played by the organ of introductory and tonally ambiguous

music, the Gloria lands in D major. It is important to note though that the F-sharp major of the Kyrie continues to play an important and substantial role. The entire movement is based on a 7/8 ostinato pattern derived from the liturgical intonation. The pattern is maintained through the organ accompaniment through most of the movement.

The 7/8 time signature accommodates the text perfectly. It allows for varied rhythmic groups and subtleties of verbal stress and duration to fit the phrasing and stress of each word. This is then offset by the phrasing of the organ ostinato, which accompanies the voices in varying octaves. A dramatic shift of key takes place at the “Qui tollis” section when F sharp major becomes simply F major. Because a solo voice sings this line, the contrast is further emphasized. As the voices return with a tutti unison, the melody is an inversion of the organ ostinato. The key of D major is then found in an exciting transition as the voices repeat “Tu solus Dominus, Tu solus altissimus” in overlapping phrases. As the movement ends, Britten unexpectedly changes the time signature to 5/8 for four measures and then returns to a final 7/8 measure all the while with canonic “amens” being sung. The final “amen” is sung on a *pianissimo* D first inversion chord.

Movement 3 - Sanctus

The bitonal Sanctus starts broadly. The voices enter on a forte forming a twelve tone row. The organ, in its simplicity, only plays a D major chord in second inversion, which increases in dynamics.

The image shows a musical score for a Sanctus. It features four staves: three for voices (I, II, III) and one for the organ. The tempo is marked 'Broadly' and the dynamics range from 'pp' (pianissimo) to 'f' (forte). The organ part is in the bottom staff, showing a D major chord in second inversion. The voices enter on a forte, forming a twelve tone row. The organ part is in the bottom staff, showing a D major chord in second inversion. The voices enter on a forte, forming a twelve tone row.

Here a single melodic line dominated by the interval of a perfect fourth (as seen with much of Britten's music) is shared out between the three enharmonically overlapping voices to form a sonorous, bell-like polyphony (bell-like phrases also being seen in much of Britten's music), which passes through D major, F-sharp major, and F. In the "Pleni sunt caeli" section, this polyphony is then transferred to the organ pedals in the shape of a single melodic ostinato while counterpoint shapes the voices.

The movement then ends on a fortissimo and ecstatically on “hosanna in excelsis.”

Movement 4 - Benedictus

The Benedictus, which is once again bitonal like the Sanctus, forms a serene landscape that is all together different from anything else the listener has heard up to this point. Over an ostinato of staccato fourths (which again is clearly related to those of the Sanctus), a solo sings the G major melody. Once this melody concludes, the key changes to C major (a perfect fourth higher) and a second soloist sings the same melody as the first, but now in the new key. The two voices then unite in a canonic duet (G major against C major).

The duet concludes with both voices descending on parallel fourths and concluding on a minor third with the organ on a D major chord in second inversion -- exactly how Britten ended the Sanctus movement. We then have a small reprise of the “Hosanna’s” from the end of the Sanctus movement.

Movement 5 - Agnus Dei

As we return to D in the Agnus Dei, we are brought into a different world altogether. We are at the end of the piece, but not where we expected to be. The D minor “Agnus Dei” in 5/4 time is reminiscent of a desolate dirge. The unchanging ostinato of rising thirds in the organ pedals reaches a minor ninth, an interval which with its opposite, the minor second, forms the crucial dissonance in the working of this piece. The grief and pain of the sins of the world are symbolized in the grief laden phrases of the choir as they sing each line “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi.” At the words “miserere nobis” the semitonal harmonic tension is momentarily relaxed in a second inversion D minor cadence of strange beauty between each grief laden phrase of “Agnus Dei,” which is sung three times. Tension is then increased on the words “dona nobis pacem” where Britten

intensifies the prayer into one of overwhelming urgency. The three voices, on a repeated note motive, enter closely at the interval of a minor and major second.

The work then comes to a rest on a whispered D minor chord in second inversion, leaving the listener wanting more.

The sound-scape that Britten creates in the *Missa Brevis* is an all together different one from anything the listener had heard in Britten's music up to this point. This change is a direct result of George Malcolm's influence and his use of the boy's voice as more of a wind instrument. The *Missa Brevis* exudes the wonderful tunefulness, charm, and ingenious use of text that is characteristic of many of Britten's works, both large and small.

V

Conclusion

There is no mystery about Britten's near obsession with childhood and the nature of innocence. The theme is evident everywhere in his works, and it takes many forms, from the familiar "innocence and its eventual corruption" to a simple longing for the carefree and cared for delight of youthful pastimes. Childhood's delightful aspects are captured in many of the works for children's voices, but specifically *Friday Afternoons*, *A Ceremony of Carols* and *Missa Brevis* in D.

Benjamin Britten wrote many multi-movement works for children, but few works really show his development of style as do *Friday Afternoons*, *A Ceremony of Carols*, and *Missa Brevis* in D. *Friday Afternoons* shows us a composer who is fresh, young, and just beginning his adulthood and his composing career. Being young and fresh out of college, he has a style that is only just beginning to assert itself, but that style would change, grow, and develop all his composing life. *A Ceremony of Carols* was written in a period in Britten's personal life when he was in great personal turmoil and transition. The work demonstrates large technical leaps in his composition style, yet still we can see interrelations between *A Ceremony of Carols* and *Friday Afternoons*. *Missa Brevis*, written right before his great *War Requiem*, shows a composer reaching toward the pinnacle of his career and creativity. In all three of the works described in this thesis, his love of canon, repeating motives, simplicity, and unusual accompaniment to the voices are all aspects that can be documented and traced.

A good example would be the use of canon. A canon is an extremely simple way for an inexperienced singer to become quickly successful and enjoy the art of choral singing. Seen first in "Old Abram Brown" of *Friday Afternoons*, Britten takes an extremely simple melody and allows beginning singers to feel great success in the production of the piece. In *This Little Babe* of *A Ceremony of Carols*, the canon is no longer something elementary that all singers can be successful at, but instead something that has transformed into a highly complex compositional technique. Finally, in the *Benedictus* in the *Missa Brevis* we see canon returning to the simplistic, but yet changed and transformed by having each voice part singing in a different mode.

Inspired by childhood, innocence, and youth Britten created multi-movement works for children. These works, varying in difficulty from the simplistic to complex, are important for any children's choir to attempt. Through his love of children and his love of the timbre of treble voices, Britten has created a variety of works that are challenging, satisfying, and attainable for most children's choirs.

VI

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VII Appendix

Text - Friday Afternoons

#1 - Begone, dull care!

Anonymous, seventeenth century

Begone, dull care! I prithee begone from me!
Begone, dull care! You and I shall never agree.

Long time hast thou been tarrying here and fain thou would'st me kill,
But, i' faith, dull care, thou never shall have thy will.

Too much care will make a young man turn grey,
And too much care will turn an old man to clay.

My wife shall dance and I will sing, and merrily pass the day,
For I hold it one of the wisest things to drive dull care away.

#2 - A tragic story

Thackeray

There liv'd a sage in days or yore,
And he a handsome pigtail wore,
But wonder'd much and sorrow'd more,
Because it hung behind him.

He mus'd upon this curious case,
And swore he'd change the pigtail's place,
And have it hanging at his face,
Not dangling there behind him.

Says he, "The mystery I've found, -
I'll turn me around," He turn'd him round,
(He turn'd him round, he turn'd him round,)

But still it hung behind him.

Then round and round, and out and in,
All day the puzzled sage did spin;
In vain - it matter'd not a pin,-
The pigtail hung behind him.

And right and left, and round about,
And up and down, and in and out,
He turn'd, but still the pigtail stout
Hung steadily behind him.

And though his efforts never slack,
And though he twist, and twirl and tack,
Alas! still faithful to his back,
The pigtail hangs behind him.

#3 - Cuckoo!

Jane Taylor

Cuckoo, Cuckoo.
What do you do?

"In April I open my bill;
In May I sing night and day;
In June I change my tune;
In July Far-far I fly;
In August away I must."

Cuckoo!

#4 - Ee-oh

Anonymous

The fox and his wife they had a great strife.
They never eat mustard in all their whole life;
They eat their meat without fork or knife,
And lov'd to be picking a bone, ee-oh!

The fox jump'd up on a moonlight night;
The stars they were shining, and all things bright;
"O-ho" said the fox, "it's a very fine night,
For me to go through the town ee-oh!"

The fox, when he came to yonder stile,
He lifted his lugs and he listen'd a while!
"Oh, ho!" said the fox, "it's a very short mile
From this unto yonder wee town, ee-oh!"

The fox when he came to the farmer's gate,
Who should he see but the farmer's drake;
"I love you well for your master's sake,
and long to be picking your bone, ee-oh!"

The grey goose she ran round the farmer's stack,
"Oh, ho!" said the fox, "you are plump and fat;
You'll grease my beard and ride on my back,
From this into yonder wee town, ee-oh!"

The farmer's wife she jump'd out of bed,
And out of the window she popp'd her head!
"Oh, husband! oh husband! The geese are all dead,
For the fox has been through the town, ee-oh!"

The farmer he loaded his pistol with lead,
and shot the old rogue of a fox through the head;
"Ah, ha!" said the farmer, "I think you're quite dead;
And no more you'll trouble the town, ee-oh!"

#5 - A New Year Carol

Anonymous

Here we bring new water from the well so clear,
For to worship God with, this happy New Year.

Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;
The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.

Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her toe,
Open you the West Door, and turn the Old Year go.

Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her chin,
Open you the East Door, and let the New Year in.

#6 - I mun be married on Sunday

Nicholas Udall

I mun be married on Sunday,
Whosoever shall come that way,
I mun be married on Sunday.

Roister Doister is my name,
A lusty brute I am the same,
I mun be married on Sunday.

Christian Custance have I found,
A widow worth a thousand pound,
I mun be married on Sunday.

Custance is as sweet as honey
I her lamb and she my coney,
I mun be married on Sunday.

When we shall make our wedding feast,
There shall be cheer for man and beast
I mun be married on Sunday.

Whosoever shall come that way,
I mun be married on Sunday.

#7 - There was a man of Newington

Anonymous

There was a man of Newington,
And he was wondrous wise,

He jump'd into a quickset hedge,
and scratch'd out both his eyes.

But when he saw his eyes were out,
With all his might and main
He jump'd into another hedge,
And scratch'd them in again.

#8 - Fishing Song
Izaak Walton

Oh, the gallant fisher's life,
It is the best of any!
'Tis full of pleasure, void of strife,
And 'tis belov'd of many;
Other joys, are but toys;
Only this lawful is,
For our skill, breeds no ill,
But content and pleasure.

In a morning up we rise,
Ere Aurora's peeping,
Drink a cup to wash our eyes,
Leave the sluggard sleeping;
Then we go to and fro,
With our knacks at our backs,
To such streams, as the Thames,
If we have the leisure.

If the sun's excessive heat,
Makes our bodies swelter,
To an osier hedge we get
For a friendly shelter:
Where in a dyke, perch or pike,
Roach or dace, we go chase
Bleak or gudgeon, without grudging;
We are still contented.

#9 - The useful plough

Anonymous

A country life is sweet,
In moderate cold and heat,
To walk in the air, how pleasant and fair,
In ev'ry field of wheat.
The fairest of flowers adorning the bowers
And ev'ry meadow's brow;
So that I say, no courtier may
Compare with them who clothe in grey,
And follow the useful plough.

They rise with the morning lark,
And labour till almost dark,
Then folding their sheep, they hasten to sleep,
While ev'ry pleasant park,
Next morning is ringing with birds that are singing,
On each green tender bough,
With what content and merriment,
Their days are spent, whose minds are bend,
To follow the useful plough.

#10 - Jazz-Man

Eleanor Farjeon

Crash and Clang! Bash and Bang!
And up in the road the Jazz-Man sprang!
The One-Man-Jazz-Band playing in the street,
Drums with his Elbows,
Cymbals with his Feet,
Pipes with his Mouth,
Accordion with his Hand,
Playing all his Instruments to Beat the Band!

Toot and Tingle! Hoot and Jingle!
Oh, What a Clatter!
How the tunes all mingle!
Twenty children couldn't make as much Noise as

The Howling Pandemonium of the One-Man-Jazz!

#11 - There was a monkey

Anonymous

There was a monkey climb'd up a tree,
When he fell down, the down fell he.

There was a crow sat on a stone,
When he was gone, then there was none.

There was an old wife did eat an apple,
When she'd ate two, she'd ate a couple.

There was a horse agoing to the mill,
When he went on, he stood not still.

There was a butcher cut his thumb,
When it did bleed, the blood did come,

There was a lackey ran a race,
When he ran fast, he ran apace.

There was a cobbler clouting shoon,
When they were mended, they were done.

There was a chandler making candle,
When he them strip, he did them handle.

There was a navy went into Spain,
When it return'd, it came again.

#12 - Old Abram Brown

Anonymous

Old Abram Brown is dead and gone,
You'll never see him more;
He used to wear a long brown coat,

That button'd down before.

[ultimately removed] - Lone Dog

Irene R. McLeod

I'm a lead dog, a keen dog, a wild dog, and lone;
I'm a rough dog, a tough dog, hunting on my own;
I'm a bad dog, a mad dog, teasing silly sheep;
I love to sit and bay the moon, to keep fat souls from sleep.

I'll never be a lap dog, licking dirty feet,
A sleek dog, a meek dog cringing for my meat;
Not for me the fireside, the well-filled plate,
But shut door, and sharp stone, and cuff, and kick and hate.

Not for me the other dogs, running by my side,
Some have run a short while, but none of them would bide;
O mine is still the lone trail, the hard trail, the best,
Wide wind, and wild stars, and the hunger of the quest!

Text - A Ceremony of Carols

#1 - Procession (and #11 - Recession)

Anonymous. Taken from the *Liber usualis*.

Hodie Christus natus est.	<i>Today Christ was born.</i>
Hodie Salvator apparuit:	<i>Today the Savior appeared:</i>
Hodie in terra canunt angeli,	<i>Today on earth the angels sing,</i>
Laetantur archangeli:	<i>The archangels rejoice:</i>
Hodie exsultant justi, dicantes	<i>Today the righteous exult, saying</i>
Gloria in excelsis Deo. Alleluia.	<i>Glory to God in the highest.</i>
	<i>Alleluia.</i>

#2 - Wolcum Yole!

Anonymous, fourteenth century

Wolcum be thou hevene king,
Wolcum Yole.
Wolcum, born in one morning,
Wolcum for whom we sall sing.

Wolcum be ye, Stevene and Jon
Wolcum, innocentes every one,
Wolcum, Thomas mater one,
Wolcum be ye good New Yere,
Wolcum, Twelfthe Day both in fere
Wolcum, seintes lefe and dere,
Wolcum Yole, wolcum.

saints

Candelmesse
Quene of bliss
Wolcum bothe to more and lesse
Wolcum, wolcum.

Wolcum be ye that are here,
Wolcum Yole.
Wolcum alle and make good cheer,
Wolcum alle another yere
Wolcum Yole, wolcum.

#3 - There is no Rose

Anonymous, fourteenth century

There is no rose of such vertu
As is the rose that bare Jesu.
Alleluia.

virtue

For in this rose containèd was
Heaven and erth in litel space
Res miranda.

a wonderful thing

By that rose we may well see
There be one God in persons three,
Pares forma.

equal in form

The aungels sungen the shepherds to:
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gaudeamus.

*glory to God in the highest
let us rejoice*

Leave we all this werldly mirth,
And folwè this joyful birth
Transeamus.

*follow we
let us go*

#4a - That Yongē Child

Anonymous, fourteenth century

That yongē child whenit gan weep
With song she lulled him asleep;
That was so sweet a melody
It passed alle minstrelsy.

The nightingale sang also,
Her song is hoarse and nought thereto:
Whoso attendeth to her song
And leaveth the first, then doth he wrong.

4b - O me deare Hert

(Britten: Balulalow)

James, John and Robert Wedderburn, sixteenth century

O me deare Hert, young Jesus sweit,
Prepare thy creddil in my spreit,
And I shall rock thee in my heart
And never mair from thee depart.

But I shall praise thee evermoir
With songes sweit until thy gloir;
The knees of my hert shal I bow
And sing that richt Balulalow.

#5 - I sing of a maiden

Britten: As Dew in Aprille
Anonymous, sixteenth century

I sing of a maiden
That is makèles: *matchless*
King of all kings
To her son she ches. *chose*

He came al so stille
There his moder was,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the grass.

He came al so stille
To his moder's bour
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flour.

He came al so stille
There his moder lay,
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.

Moder and maiden
Was never none but she:
Well may such a lady
Goddess moder be.

#6 - This Little Babe

Robert Southwell, sixteenth century

This little Babe, so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake,
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell he will surprise.

With tears he fights and wins the field,

His naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows looks of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns Cold and Need,
And feeble Flesh his warrior's steed.

His camp is pitchèd in a stall
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, hay-stalks his stakes;
Of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
The angels' trumps alarum sound.

My soul, with Christ join thou in fight;
Stick to the tents that he hath pight.
Within his crib is surest ward;
This little Babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
Then flit not from this heavenly Boy.

#8 - In Freezing Winter

(Britten: In Freezing Winter Night)

Robert Southwell, sixteenth century

Behold, a silly tender babe,
In freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies-
Alas, a piteous sight!

The inns are full; no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed.
But forced he is with silly beasts
In crib to shroud his head...

This stable is a Prince's court,
This crib his chair of state;
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.

The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The Prince himself is come from heaven;
This pomp is prized there.

With joy approach, O Christian wight
Do homage to thy King;
And highly praise his humble pomp,
Which he from heaven doth bring.

#9 - Spring Carol

William Cornyshe, sixteenth century

Pleasure it is
To hear, iwis *truly*
The birdes sing.
The deer in the dale,
The sheep in the vale,
The corn springing;
God's purveyance
For sustenance
It is for man.
Then we always
To Him give praise,
And thank Him than,
And thank Him than.

#10 - Adam lay ibounden

(Britten: Deo Gracias)

Anonymous, fifteenth century

Adam lay ibounden,
Bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter
Thought he not too long.

And all was for an appil
An appil that he tok,

As clerkès finden
Written in their book

Ne had the appil takè ben,
The appil takè ben,
Ne haddè never our lady
A ben hevenè quene.

Blessèd be the time
That appil takè was.
Therefore we moun singen
Deo gracias.

Thanks (be) to God

Text - Missa Brevis in D

#1 - Kyrie

Kyrie eleison
Christe eleison
Kyrie eleison

*Lord have mercy
Christ have mercy
Lord have mercy*

#2 - Gloria

Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Et in terra pax hominibus
bonæ voluntatis.
Laudamus te. Benedicimus te.
Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.
Gratias agimus tibi propte rmagnam
gloriam tuam.
Domine Deus, Rex cælestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei,
Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Miserere nobis.

*Glory to God in the highest
And on earth peace to men of
good will.
We praise you. We bless you
We worship you. We glorify you.
We give you thanks for your
great glory.
Lord God, Heavenly King,
God the Father Almighty
Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten son
Lord God, Lamb of God
Son of the father
You who take away the sins of
the world,
Have mercy on us.*

Suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,

Miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus sanctus.
Tu solus Dominus.
Tu solus altissimus.
Jesu Christe.
Cum Sancto Spiritu
In gloria Dei Patris.
Amen

*Receive our prayer.
You who sit at the right hand of the
Father.*

*Have mercy on us.
Because you alone are holy.
You alone are Lord.
You alone are Most High.
Jesus Christ
With the Holy Spirit
And the glory of God the father*

#3 - Sanctus

Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt cæli et terra gloria tua.

Hosanna in excelsis.

*Holy Lord, God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your
glory.
Hosanna in the highest.*

#4 - Benedictus

Benedictus qui venit in nomine
Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis.

*Blessed is he who comes in the
name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

#5 - Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei,
Qui tollis peccata mundi:
Miserere nobis:
Dona nobis pacem.

*Lamb of god,
You take away the sins of the world:
Have mercy on us.
Grant us peace.*