MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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recent critics, notably Philip Brett, have suggested that there is indeed a level at which the contradiction is resolved (or, more precisely, eliminated) through allegory. But the crucial allegory entailed so touchy and ticklish and unresolved a social issue in contemporary life that (as Ellen says when she finds the apprentice's jersey) it became "a clue whose meaning we avoid."

That issue is homosexuality: or more specifically, hidden, "closeted" homosexuality, "the love that dare not speak its name," which was for many, and remains for some, a tormented way of life. Among them were Britten and Pears. That they were "out of it" — social misfits — not only as conscientious objectors but as homosexual lovers was widely known (that is, widely and correctly assumed) at the time of their exile and return. It has been plausibly adduced as one of the reasons for their emigration, along with Auden and Isherwood and many others: "that desire," as Philip Brett describes it, "so common in young gay men, to seek anonymity and freedom by going to the big city, the far-off country — any place, that is, away from the home where they feel at best half-accepted."[28] And it must surely have contributed to the "tremendous tension" that, as Britten put it in a paragraph already quoted, he and Pears "naturally" experienced at the time of their return from America, and led them to transform their Peter Grimes into "a character of vision and conflict."

Their apprehension was justified. Homosexual acts between consenting adults were illegal in Britain and (as the case of Oscar Wilde so dramatically demonstrated) could be vengefully prosecuted, no matter how eminent the offender. Even when unprosecuted, they could brand otherwise respectable figures with a social stigma. This definitely happened to Britten and Pears. Their musical achievements, and the punctilious discretion with which they conducted themselves in public (no longer so pressingly demanded of homosexual couples by today's society), allowed them to become the world famous recipients of official honors (a knighthood for Pears, a peerage for Britten). But they were never at liberty to acknowledge their relationship: the closest Britten ever came was to refer to Pears in a speech as "a congenial partner" with whom "I like giving concerts."[29] And as their fame grew they were also increasingly the butt of cruel jokes intended to diminish them not only as persons but also as artists.

Such jokes were usually uttered in private. But just as fame could shield Britten and Pears from overt harassment, fame protected their most eminent detractor. Sad to say, the most open, public insults ever addressed to them were delivered by none other than Stravinsky, who in his last years dictated several volumes of memoirs and observations to his assistant Robert Craft, and used them to settle scores not only with many figures from his past but also with many contemporaries, including younger composers whom he had reason to envy. Britten, whose extraordinary public success represented something Stravinsky had possessed in youth but had tried in vain to recapture in later life, was a special object of the old man's taunts. He referred to Britten in print, maliciously, as a "bachelor composer,"[30] and even permitted himself a reference to "Aunt Britten and Uncle Pears"[31] in a letter that Craft published after his death.

Britten's and Pears's relationship, officially regarded not only as socially deviant but as diseased by the medical science of the time, was an open secret even when

not disparaged. It was always among the subtexts that informed views of the works in which they collaborated. Read as part of an allegory depicting the plight of social misfits, Grimes's implicit acceptance of his "guilt" might be explained even without evoking sexuality. But in light of the stigma attached to his creators' sexual relationship, that acceptance is among the opera's most compelling social themes — one that communicated itself strongly to audiences even without speaking its name. In conjunction with the music, to whose powerful effects Garbutt drew attention, it surely contributed to the opera's lasting hold on the imaginations of listeners. Or as Brett puts it, "the successful realization of so modern a dramatic character is one of the main reasons for the opera's wide general popularity."[32]

Brett continues, "it is the special characteristic of the homosexual stigma (unlike that attached to being black or Jewish) that it is almost always reinforced at home and is thus the more readily 'internalized,' that is, accepted as valid and to a greater or lesser extent incorporated into the values and sense of identity of the person in question."[33] One who has internalized that shame might indeed regard himself as condemned, like Grimes, not for what he has done but for what he is. In addition to introspection (or the exercise of "common sense"), Brett supported his observations by citing the recent literature of "gay and lesbian" or "queer" theory, which has only existed as such since Britten's death. But in offering a convincing interpretation of the opera's most harrowing and problematical issue, namely Grimes's acknowledgment of guilt, Brett is surely justified in his once alarming, now celebrated assertion that "it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed."[34] As such an allegory, he further maintains, the work becomes "all the more poignant and relevant to people today," whatever their sexual preferences or life style; for the social message is all the stronger for its being expressed — nonexplicitly yet unmistakably — in terms of what was in its day a still actively practiced intolerance. The opera thus becomes an indictment of its own contemporary society, not just "the Borough," and Britten's treatment of what was necessarily in its day a tacit social issue can, by anticipating (or even helping to precipitate) changes in public attitudes, appear in retrospect to have been as prescient or "prophetic," in its way, as Crabbe's or Büchner's had been. "One of the things Britten's operas (as well as his other works) seem to achieve is an exploration of various issues surrounding sexuality that the composer could not discuss in any other public form," Brett writes, and he goes on to offer the judgment that Britten's "perseverance in this endeavor is one of the truly remarkable and even noble features of his career."

That the treatment, though veiled in allegory, was conscious and deliberate can be seen clearly enough in retrospect if we reread Pears's characterization of Grimes ("an ordinary weak person, . . . classed by society as a criminal") in the light of his and Britten's "crime." And if any doubt remain, there is a letter from Pears to Britten, written in February or March 1944, about a month after Britten had started sketching the music, but only published in 1991, in which he reassured the composer that "the queerness is unimportant & doesn't really exist in the music (or at any rate obtrude)."[35] For they both knew that the theme of social persecution of homosexuals, however

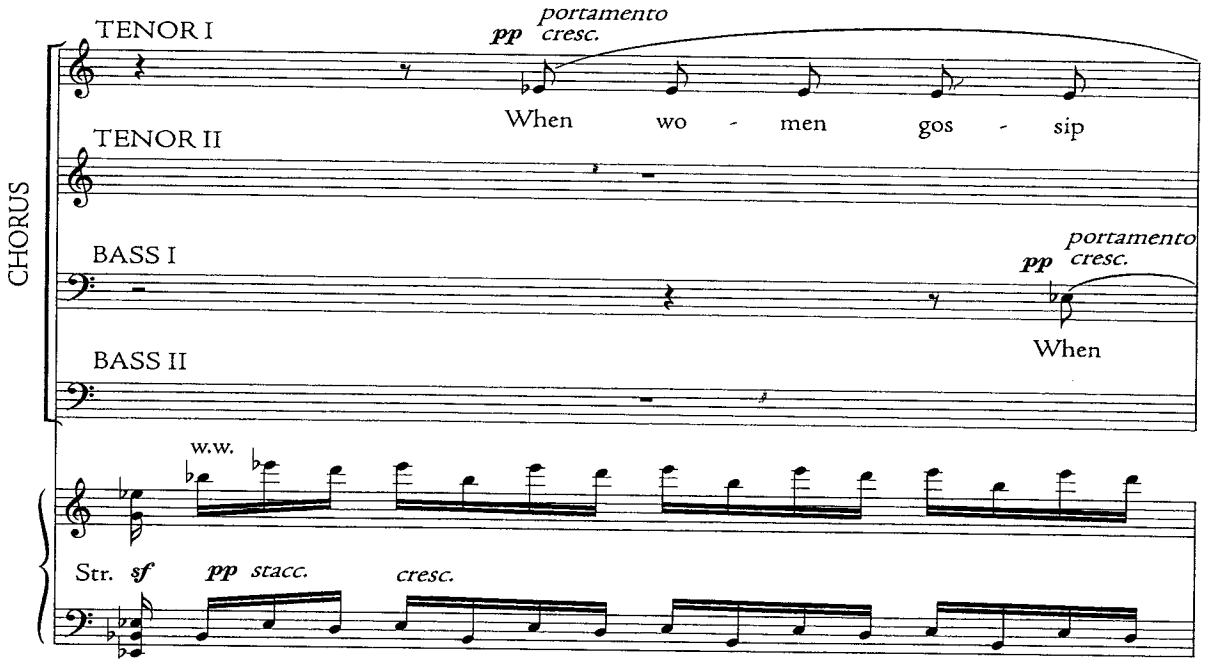
real and pressing, had to remain implicit if the opera was to be received by their contemporaries as bearing a "universal" message about human tolerance.

Armed with these insights, Brett located prefigurings of Grimes's "internalization" of society's condemnation much earlier in the opera than the turning point in the middle of act II. We have already seen what a potent dramatic device Britten made of the musical technique of inversion, turning Grimes's aspiring upward leap of a ninth into a crashing descent to connote the destruction of his aspirations and his doom. The other leitmotif introduced in Ex. 5-1, derived from the music associated with the gathering storm, can also be described, as Brett points out, as an inversion of the "hubbub" motif that accompanies the indignant muttering of the crowd in the opera's opening scene, the inquest Prologue (Ex. 5-8). Nor would it be irrelevant to add in this context, when dealing with a composer as literate and self-conscious as Britten, that the word "inversion" is a frequent code word or euphemism for homosexuality, not only in colloquial speech but also in works of literature (most famously, perhaps, in Proust's monumental novel, *In Search of Lost Time*).

EXOTIC/EROTIC

None of this means that Peter Grimes was actually envisioned or presented by Britten and Pears as homosexual, or that he should be played that way. The plight depicted is not that of sexual "inversion" as such but rather its social consequences, which do not differ in the case of homosexuals from those affecting other persecuted minorities. And yet there are other aspects of the opera that indirectly broach matters associated with, or tangential to, the theme of homosexuality, matters that recur in later works of Britten as well. Unlike Chaikovsky or Copland, or any other previous composer known

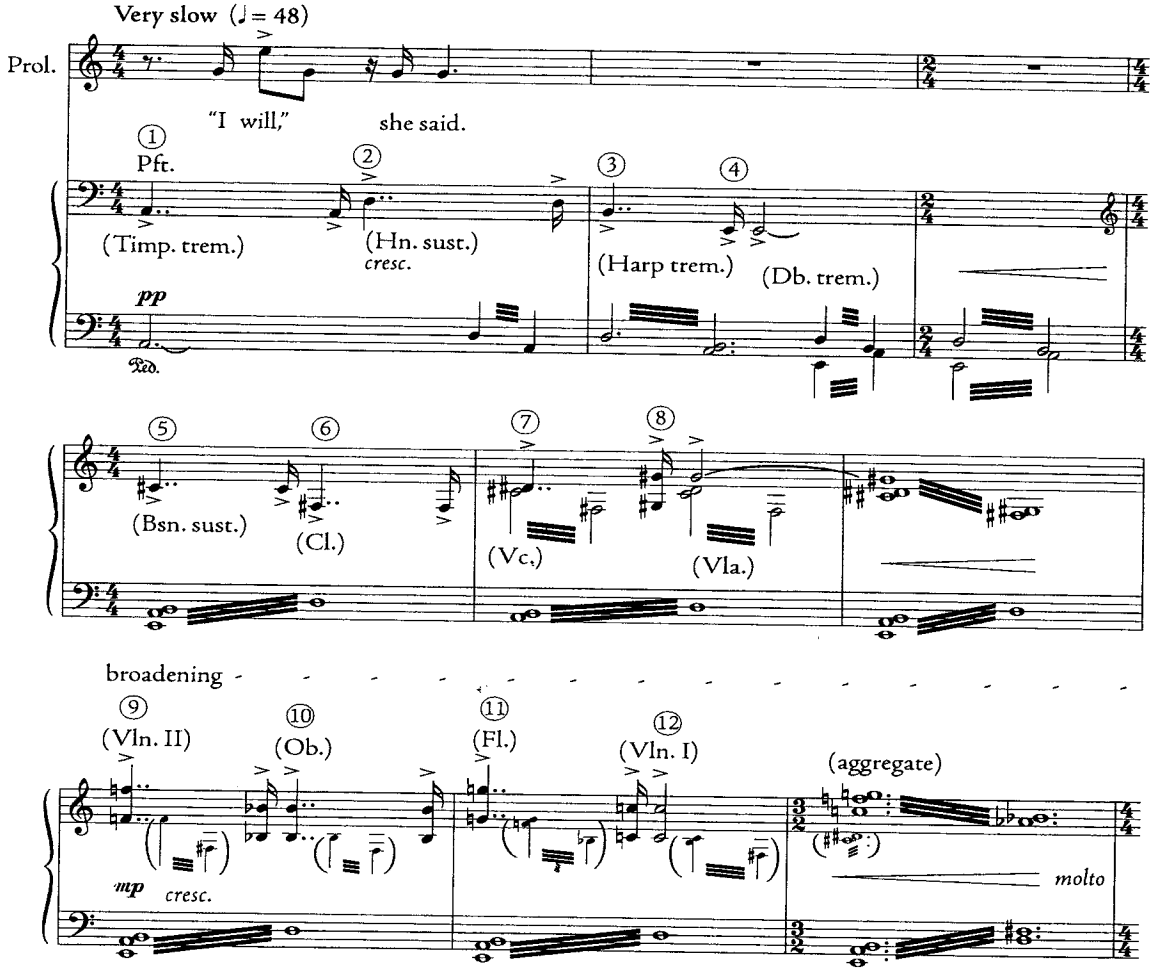
EX. 5-8A Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Prologue, "When women gossip. . ."



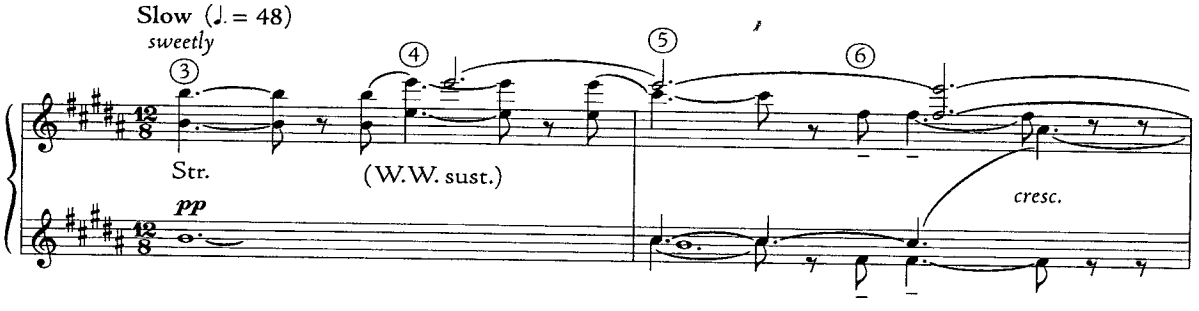
techniques and could easily have occurred to a composer who had no knowledge of them. Rather, they are complete rotations or traversals (or "turns") of the chromatic spectrum within a traditional (if not an entirely conventional) key scheme. They illustrate and were no doubt motivated by, the title concept — a turn that tightens a trap.

In Britten's last opera, *Death in Venice*, he at last hazarded a subject in which pederastic attraction was an explicit theme — and a destructive one, reflecting Britten's own puritanical acceptance (like Peter Grimes's) of society's judgment of his real-life

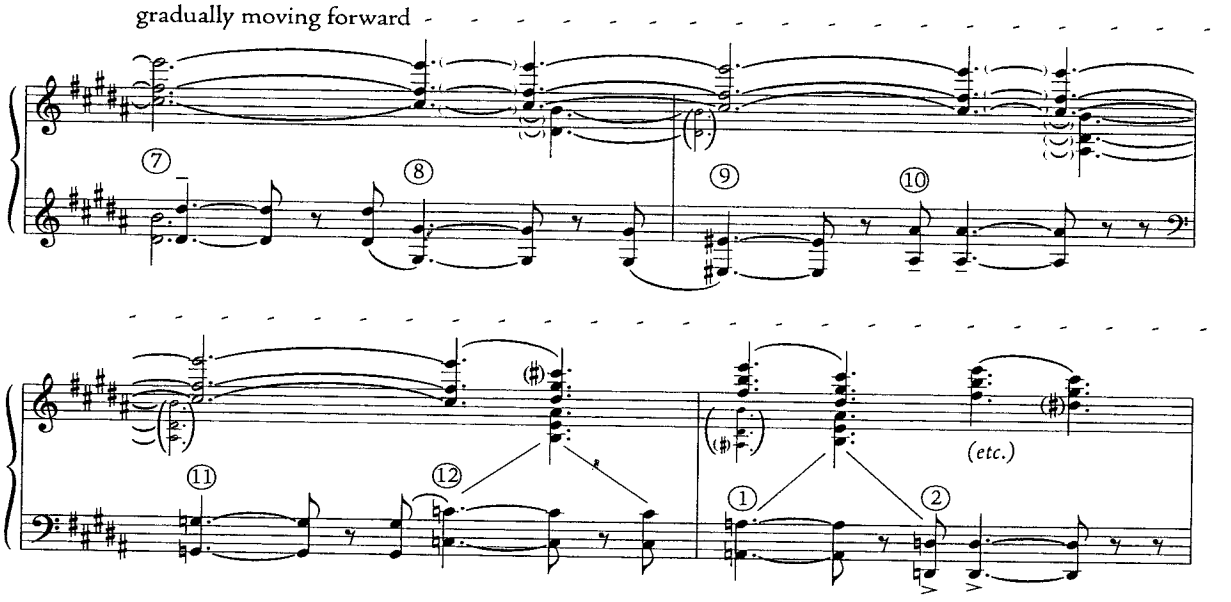
EX. 5-11B Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, Theme with pitches numbered



EX. 5-11C Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, Variation I with pitches numbered



EX. 5-11C *(continued)*



predilections. Mann's novella concerns a great writer, Gustav Aschenbach (thought to have been modeled on Gustav Mahler), who prides himself on the "Apollonian" control he exercises over his work, but who unexpectedly conceives an uncontrollable "Dionysian" passion for Tadzio, a young Polish boy he espies while on vacation in Venice. Aschenbach not only humiliates himself but even destroys himself physically on account of his homoerotic attraction. Unable to bear parting from the object of his forbidden affection, he responds too late to health warnings and perishes in an epidemic.

To convey Tadzio's unselfconscious, dangerous allure, Britten gave a new twist to an old device. He painted the boy (who does not sing) in exotic "oriental" colors, surrounding him with an aureole of Balinese gamelan music. It was not the first time Britten had used these sounds. He first encountered them in the United States, where he met the Canadian composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee (1900–64), who had lived in Bali from 1931 to 1938. McPhee had made arrangements for two pianos of some of his transcriptions of gamelan performances. He and Britten recorded a few of them for the firm of G. Schirmer in 1941.

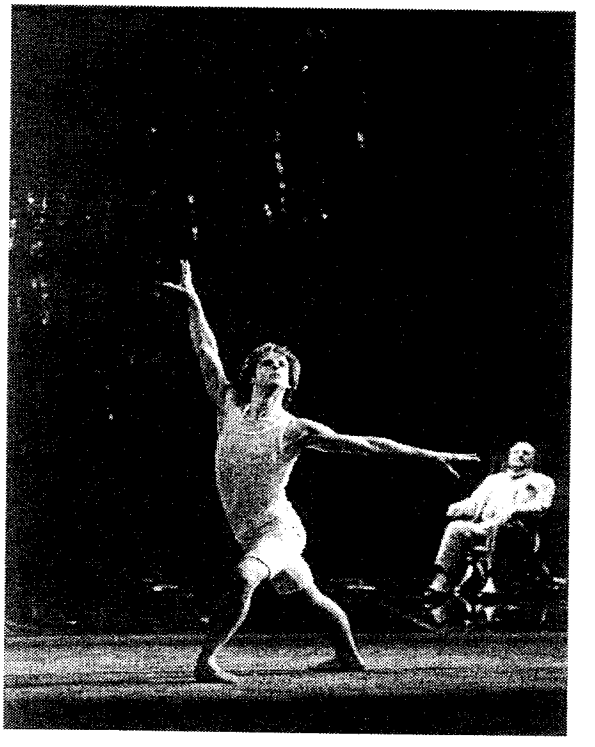


FIG. 5-3 Britten's *Death in Venice*, act II (Aschenbach observes Tadzio on the Lido beach in Venice). San Francisco Opera, 1997.

The connection with homosexuality was drawn even then: McPhee, like many Euro-American artists, was drawn to Bali not only by its indigenous art, but also by its reputation as a sexual paradise where one could practice "deviant" sex with greater freedom and far less risk of social stigma than one could at home. "Thus," the music historian W. Anthony Sheppard has observed, "Britten's first impressions of Bali and first exposure to gamelan music were filtered through McPhee's unique descriptions, transcriptions, and experiences."[38]

Some scholars have detected echoes of McPhee's transcriptions in the second act of *Peter Grimes*. In 1956 Britten visited Bali and made some transcriptions of his own, mainly of music performed by a boys' gamelan that had actually been organized by McPhee a couple of decades earlier. Thus, even his hands-on experience with gamelan "reinforced an imagined realm of sexual permissiveness that would remain in his Orientalist memory," as Sheppard puts it, establishing a firm "connection between the musical exotic and homosexual opportunity."[39]

Britten almost immediately turned his new gamelan experiences to creative account in a ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, first performed at Covent Garden in 1957. Thus Britten's Tadzio music, for all its idiosyncratic associations, was the work of a genuine gamelan connoisseur. Like McPhee's, Britten's gamelan style employs authentic scales (as closely as Western instruments allow) in the seven-tone *pelog* tuning (Ex. 5-12), scored for an ensemble of mallet percussion instruments including xylophones, marimbas, glockenspiel, and vibraphone.

Like his nineteenth-century French and Russian predecessors, Britten has come in for some criticism on account of his appropriation of exotic music for sensual and sinister effect, a use that tends to encourage the stereotyping of "others." His "orientalism" is more plainly metaphorical than most earlier examples, however; it does not portray an actual oriental subject (as Peter Grimes did not represent an actual homosexual protagonist), but characterizes Aschenbach's way of seeing the object of his desire, and his fantasies. The opera's distinctive musical style arises out of the confrontation of unmarked "Western" music, suggestive of normality and respectability, and the marked music of the East, suggestive of irrepressible and illicit desire. The conjunction presented Britten with new, dramatically charged opportunities for the sort of "surrealistic" layerings and juxtapositions that had always characterized his modernism.

Of course neither side "wins." As in *Peter Grimes*, Britten confronts his audience with an unsolved problem, another mark of a quintessentially modernist sensibility. Interpreted by sympathetic critics like Brett and Sheppard, Britten's operas emerged in the late decades of the twentieth century with renewed force, as (in Sheppard's words) "personal allegories of specific contemporary social issues — whether of homosexual oppression, racial and ethnic intolerance, or of the pacifist's precarious position in a militant, nationalistic society."[40]

TO SERVE BY CHALLENGING

This is an achievement that the adoption of an alienated "avant-garde" stance, and a difficult musical style more typical of midcentury modernists, might well have thwarted.