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BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND HIS VIOLIN CONCERTO

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BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND HIS VIOLIN
CONCERTO

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Introduction

What Britten's *Violin Concerto* Means to Me

As a violinist, it is not surprising that I am drawn to Benjamin Britten's *Violin Concerto*. After hearing it in concerts a few times, I started learning it in 2016 in preparation for a performance in the United States the following year. It was my first time studying a piece by Britten, and from the moment I began playing the *Violin Concerto*, I was captivated by the composer's powerful and expressive writing and was keen on familiarizing myself with his musical language and other works. Britten's use of virtuosic and challenging techniques throughout the *Concerto* gives it a flair reminiscent of composers-violinists such as Hubay, Sarasate, Paganini, or Wieniawski. However, this work is far from just a virtuoso piece with a series of 'gymnastics' on the violin. What sets Britten's music apart is the pureness of his musical language and the seriousness of his compositions despite the virtuoso techniques he used. In the *Concerto*, the dialogues between the solo violin and the instruments of the orchestra furthermore the mystifying encountering of motives determining destiny as well as the soaring, dramatic melodies that highlight the full range of the violin give the performers abundant opportunities to communicate a large span of emotions with the audience, from pacific intimacy to the most commanding cries of frustration.

The overriding message of death in the *Violin Concerto* casts a shadow over the entire piece. It is a profound and intense message that resonates with the listeners, urging them to reflect and envision the world differently. Perhaps this message is reflective of Britten's own personal life experiences, such as his immigration to the United States. Additionally, the backdrop of events like the end of the Spanish Civil War and the menacing threat of World War II may have influenced Britten's composition, adding another layer of depth to the work of the composer famous for his pacific ideology.

Strangely enough, I found similarities between the *Violin Concerto* and the works of other composers I had recently performed. Having already played Bartók's *2nd Violin Concerto* (composed in the same year as Britten's) and Prokofiev's *1st Violin Concerto* multiple times, I noticed uncanny resemblances in each work's second movement. The second movement of Prokofiev's concerto shared a level of sarcasm with Britten's second movement, characteristic of both Prokofiev and Shostakovich. One of the variations in the second movement of Bartók's *2nd Violin Concerto* is comprised of the same three-note

motive present in Britten's and Prokofiev's second movements as well. This – perhaps unconscious – compositional connection provided me with a personal link to Britten's *Concerto* when first learning it. I was appreciative of Britten's incorporation of elements in the *Concerto* that were shared with the musical languages of other composers whose language I knew better; I can compare this notion of similarity to the revelation of shared traditions between two cultures, or the resemblance of a word in a new foreign language to one in a language that I already know. For me, uncovering a previously unknown correlation stimulates both curiosity and creativity in my artistry.

The climax of the third movement of Britten's *Violin Concerto* is one of the most powerful endings I have experienced in any violin concerto. As a performer, it is a moment that allows me to showcase the full range of colors and emotions that the violin is capable of producing, a moment where the magic of a live concert and the energy from the audience expose the soloist's capabilities of illustration in a timeless way. The cadenza's extensive length is a true trial of the soloist's endurance, and instead of a less-demanding slow movement following the cadenza as in the case of many violin concertos, Britten chose the most tragic and heartrending movement to follow: the Passacaglia. Britten's mastery of instrumentation is evident, as he skillfully guides the listener through a complex and emotionally charged journey. The *Concerto* is undeniably one of the greatest masterpieces written in the 20th century.

Since my discovery of the *Violin Concerto*, I have been fortunate to have studied and performed two other works by Britten, the *String Quartet No. 3*, which I performed in London's Barbican Hall in 2020, and the *Suite for Violin and Piano*, which I performed in 2023 in Budapest at the 5th New Millennium International Chamber Music Festival and Academy. Both works had a profound impact on me and my musicianship and helped me understand the *Violin Concerto* on a deeper level.

Living in Hungary for over ten years, I have noticed a lack of programming and research on Britten's music. Despite his visit to Hungary and his dedication of a piece to the Jeney twins, his works are rarely showcased in the concert life of the country. This realization has fueled my desire to program Benjamin Britten's pieces as often as possible. His compositions are first-class works that deserve more attention internationally.

In conclusion, Benjamin Britten's *Violin Concerto* holds a special place in my heart as one of my favorite compositions. Its formidable and sensitive writing, combined with its virtuosic nature, make it a challenging yet incredibly rewarding piece to perform. The

underlying message of death throughout the *Concerto* adds an additional layer of profundity and emotion, reflecting Britten's personal experiences and the tumultuous events of his time. As a performing artist and artistic director, it is my goal to bring more attention to Britten's music in Hungary and beyond, ensuring that his works receive the recognition they deserve.

1. Britten's *Violin Concerto*: The First and Second Movements

Britten's *Violin Concerto* consists of three movements: *Moderato con moto*, *Vivace* and *Passacaglia (Andante lento)*. The composer marked *attacca* at the end of both the second and third movements, making the entire work have a timeless sense. The structure of the three movements breaks that of standard violin concertos due to the substantiality of the third movement as opposed to the first two, both from musical and emotional perspectives. The first movement assumes the role of an introduction and the middle movement the role of an Intermezzo (albeit undoubtedly the most virtuosic and technically difficult movement with its devilish cadenza). Therefore, in this chapter, I am including a short study of the first two movements as a prelude to the thorough analysis of the third movement and Britten's use of the Passacaglia in general.

1.1. The First Movement: *Moderato con moto*

In contrast to Arme Hong, who maintains that the first movement has a classical three-part sonata form of Exposition, Development, and Recapitulation¹, I do not find that the first movement would contain the substance necessary to be able to analyze it in that way, partially because deeming the first movement as sonata form lessens the emphasis on the third movement. From my perspective, the entire opening movement consists of the combination and development of four motives, some of which can be perceived in the second and third movements as well.

The first motive is rhythmic and is introduced by the percussion section, namely, the timpani and cymbal (the use of the solo timpani at the very beginning is imaginably a reminiscence of Beethoven's *Violin Concerto*). It consists of five notes marked *pianissimo*, *marcato* that alternate between the two notes of a perfect fourth, and, after an eighth rest, the cymbal plays an accented quarter note with a fermata, giving the bar a syncopated ambiance (see Example No. 1).

¹ Arme Hong, *Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto, Op. 15: A Critical Approach to Composition* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2020), 26.

Moderato con moto

Solo

Timpani *pp marc.* *p*

Percussion Cym. (naturale) *pp* *più f* *mf*

Moderato con moto

Violin I *mf espr.* *mf*

Violin II *mf espr.* *mf*

Viola *mf espr.* *mf*

Violoncello *mf espr.* *mf*

poco rit. a tempo

1,2 Fl. *pp sost.*

3 Fl. *pp sost.*

Solo Bsn. 1 *pp leggiero*

Hn. *ppp*

Hp. *pp*

poco rit. a tempo

Vln. I *p* *pp*

Vln. II *p* *pp*

Vla. *p* *pp*

Vc. *p* *pp*

Example No. 1: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 1-8.

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According to Pieter van Nes, there are similarities between this rhythmical motive and the *palmas* of the flamenco tango rhythm, especially due to the important second beat.²



Example No. 2: Tango Palmas rhythm and the solo timpani's rhythm in the Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1.

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I consider the first bars of the piece a quest, a lone instrument playing a Spanish-like one-bar rhythmic figure three times with the accompaniment of the cymbal before reaching the *mezzo forte* of the string sections' entrance in the upbeat to the fourth measure. A few bars later, the bassoon I and harp play the same material, and this rhythmic motive fuels the atmosphere of the entire *Concerto*. When the solo violin enters with its lyrical melody (which I consider to be the second element of the movement – see Example No. 3), the timpani's motive persists, not as an accompaniment, but rather as a counterpoint, in different dynamics throughout the movement. The first bassoon takes over the timpani's opening motive and embarks on a dialogue with the solo violin. The solo violin makes its first appearance in the ninth bar. This is quite early, much unlike the extensive opening *Tutti* parts of traditional concertos by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms. In the concertos of the twentieth century from composers such as Shostakovich and Prokofiev, it is more common for the violin to enter after a brief introduction.³

The solo violin's first motive later has continuous reaching to higher and higher points, which Arna Alayne Morton interprets as rising of anxiety and turmoil that Britten experienced himself, as an analogy of an individual to distance themselves from the

² Pieter Van Nes, "Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative," Final Paper BA Musicology, University of Utrecht, 2013, 23.

³ Shr-Han Wu, "An Analytical Study of the Britten Violin Concerto, Op.15" (PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2017), accessed August 20, 2023, <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4131>, 3.

influence and conformity imposed by the masses.⁴ In this case, the solo violin symbolizes the individual and the orchestra the society. I consider Morton's elucidation valid and believe that, when viewed from a performer's perspective, this interpretation can be valuable, injecting a dramatic element into a performance. Contemplating conflict as profound as the struggle between one's identity and societal expectations can be a potent artistic force.

The image displays a musical score for the opening movement of Britten's Violin Concerto, Op. 15, measures 9-12. The score is arranged in a system with seven staves. From top to bottom, the staves are: Flute 1 and 2 (1,2), Flute 3 (3), Bassoon 1, Horn 2 in F, Harp, Violin Solo, and Violoncello. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The Violin Solo part begins with a dynamic marking of *p dolciss. ed espress.* and features a series of eighth-note chords. The Violoncello part is marked *pizz. pp* and plays a simple accompaniment. Other instruments like the Flutes, Bassoon, and Horns have *poco cresc.* markings. The Harp part consists of sustained chords.

Example No. 3: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 9-12.

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The third motive in the opening movement consists of a duo between the solo violin and the timpani and first appears in figure 3. This motive possesses an incredibly rhythmic energy. The solo violin plays a series of D major chords, all on an up bow with retakes, in *fortissimo, du talon*.

⁴ Arna Alayne Morton, "Britten Edit" (Thesis, The Faculty of Fine Arts & Music, The University of Melbourne, 2019), 80.

wooden sticks Solo

Timpani *p marc.*

Violin Solo *ff du talon*

Example No. 4: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, m. 42.

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Both the first and third motives can be found later, played by the solo violin in *arco* and *pizzicato* and the upper strings interpreting the second motive in *pianissimo* and glissandos in the harp (see Example No. 5).

8 Tempo primo

Percussion B.D. *poco cresc.*

Harp *poco cresc.*

Violin Solo *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.* *arco* *pizz.*
p leggiero *f marc.* *mf* *f marc.*

Violin I *con sord.* *pp espress.* *cresc.*

Violin II *con sord.* *pp espress.* *cresc.*

Viola *con sord.* *pp espress.* *cresc.*

Contrabass div. *pizz.* *pp* *poco cresc.* *poco cresc.*

Example No. 5: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 122-125.

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The rhythmic motive that follows consists of three notes. I find that there is a connection between this motive and the timpani's first motive.



Example No. 6: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 56-57.

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The same rhythmic motive appears again in figure 7, this time in *legato* and *piano*, in one of the few moments that a classical tonality – B minor – is reached in the *Concerto*, during a five-measure transitional phrase before the motive first played by the solo violin returns in a mirror inversion (see Example No. 7).

7

Flute 1,2,3

Oboe 1,2
pp

Clarinet 1,2
pp

Bassoon 1,2
pp *ppp*

Horn 1,2,3,4
1,2,3
pp^{8^{va}}

Trumpet 1,2
pp

Violin Solo
dim. *p* *8^{va}*

Violin I
pp senza espress

Violin II
pp senza espress

Viola
pp senza espress

Violoncello
pp senza espress

Contrabass
pp senza espress

The image displays two systems of a musical score. The first system includes staves for Violin (Vln.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabasso (Cb.). The Violin part features a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and a dynamic marking of *espress. div.*. The other string parts are marked with *div.*. The second system includes a Harp (Hp.) part with a dynamic marking of *mf marc.*, and the Violin, Viola, and Cello parts with a dynamic marking of *p espress. e sost.*. The Violin I and II parts are marked with *unis.*.

Example No. 7: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 97-105.

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1.1.1. Harmony/tonality

Even though the title of the work does not contain a key designation, the first movement's key signature contains one flat. Given that the tonality is ambiguous throughout the *Concerto*⁵, we can describe it as polychordal. Britten's use of the twelve-tone system is almost unnoticeable. In fact, Henry Boys, a former classmate of Britten and the dedicatee of the *Concerto*, criticized Britten's use of harmony, stating (prior to him writing the *Concerto*): "It keeps a semblance of tonality without the organic function of tonality, thereby becoming empty. Perhaps this use of harmony is Britten's least desirable device". He suggested Britten to transition away from his current approach to the twelve-tone system, arguing that "he is one of the few who are technically capable of making good use of this system, as it is to this system that those compelling his deepest admiration have turned. Should he himself turn to it, he would be able to integrate much in English music which badly needs integrating".⁶ According to Shr-Han Wu, English composers had the tendency to avoid using compositional techniques from the German and Viennese traditions.⁷ Britten had an overwhelming preference to hint at certain tonalities (for instance F major at the beginning), adding a note to make the dissonance. There are two major harmonic conflicts in the work, which Arna Alayne Morton refers to as a 'battle of the modes': on the one hand, the discrepancy of the work's tonal center being D major or D minor, and on the other, the presence of the minor dominants of A minor (V of I; especially present in the second movement) and E minor (V of V). This harmonic instability gives the work a feeling of disquiet, which Morton interprets as Britten's reflection of his own inner struggle and his dilemma of adhering to societal norms and remaining authentic to his own identity in a period where he was isolated from society due to his homosexuality and pacifist views.⁸

⁵ Wu, *Analytical Study*, 4.

⁶ Arnold Whittall, "The Study of Britten: Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 106 (1979 - 1980): 27-41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/765924> (last accessed on 15 August 2023).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Morton, "Britten Edit.", 53-54.

The following table maps out the main harmonies of each section.

Table 1
Map of main harmonies

Beginning	F major
Figure 1	F major for 9 bars, then B-flat major
Figure 2	F major
Figure 3	D major (with E-flat)
Figure 4	A major
Figure 5	E-flat minor (with D)
Figure 6	A-flat major
Figure 7	B minor
Figure 8	D major
Figure 9	G minor
Figure 10	D minor
Ending	D major

1.2. The Second Movement: *Vivace*

The first aspect to mention about the virtuosic second movement is the tonality – D major – that it begins in. For me, the D major chord which concludes the first movement of the *Violin Concerto* is a sign of light and hope. In addition, it operates as a Picardy third, an influence on Britten from the Baroque period. However, over the course of history, many composers decided to write violin concertos in D major, among them Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Beethoven, Paganini, Mozart and Prokofiev. As a violinist, I believe that it is one of the most virtuosic tonalities on the instrument, helped greatly by the open D and A strings. Britten’s intention with the second movement was clearly to show off the flamboyance of the soloist. The line-up of continuous ‘gymnastics’ highlights exceedingly strenuous double-stops, left hand pizzicato, glissandos, and virtuoso harmonics in double-stops in *Vivace* tempo. Following these passages, the middle movement ends with a substantial cadenza filled with many of the same challenging techniques, with motives from both the first and second movements. The composer simply wanted to put the violinist to the test.

The second movement's structure can be considered ternary form. Part I has a time signature of 3/8 and are based on a few rhythmic motives with a feeling of *moto perpetuo*.⁹ The first element (see Example No. 8) is comprised of eighth notes played in thirds with various hemiolas. The second motive (see Example No. 9), also comprised of three notes, has an uncanny resemblance of the first motive in the first movement first played by the timpani. This rhythm, played in semi-chromatic steps in the second movement, is reminiscent of the second movement of Prokofiev's *Violin Concerto No. 1* (see Example Nos. 9 and 10).

Violin Solo

f sempre con tutta forza

sim.

sempre *f*

cresc.

Example No. 8: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 3-28.

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f

Example No. 9: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 45-51.

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⁹ Wu, *Analytical Study*, 15.



Example No. 10: Prokofiev Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 19, movement 2, mm. 3-5.

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As a contrast to the main section of the movement, part II is comprised of a slower motive in 2/4 time signature. Due to the triplets and glissandos in the solo violin (see Example No. 11), the phrase has a Spanish ambiance, reminiscent of de Falla. At the end of the B section, a tarantella-like section appears at figure 23.



Example No. 11: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 112-118.

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The material of part II appears again as a sort of introduction to the cadenza. However, this time, triplets in the harp are added (see Example No. 12). The strings and flutes play the material, marked forte, in unison until the solo violin's entrance which overlaps with the orchestra's material for one bar.

30

Largamente

The musical score for page 30 is written in 2/4 time and marked *Largamente*. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Flute 1,2:** Plays a melodic line with triplets and slurs, marked *f legato*.
- Clarinet 1,2 in Bb:** Remains silent, marked *a2*.
- Bassoon 1,2:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *f sf* and *ff*.
- Horn 1,2 and 3,4 in F:** Remains silent, marked *Soli ff*.
- Tuba:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *sf*, *f*, *mf*, and *sempre sostenuto*.
- Timpani:** Plays a rhythmic pattern with slurs, marked *f sf* and *mf*.
- Percussion:** Includes Cym. nat. (marked *f*) and B.D. (marked *f dim.*).
- Harp:** Plays a complex arpeggiated pattern with triplets, marked *ff* and *8w*.
- Violin Solo:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *sf*.
- Violin I and II:** Play melodic lines with slurs and triplets, marked *f legato*.
- Viola:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *f legato*.
- Violoncello:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *f legato*.
- Contrabass:** Plays a melodic line with slurs and triplets, marked *f sf* and *sempre mf e sost.*

The musical score is arranged in a system with 14 staves. From top to bottom, the staves are:

- Fl. 1,2: Treble clef, showing triplet patterns with slurs and dynamic markings *sf*.
- Cl. 1,2: Treble clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sf*.
- Bsn. 1,2: Bass clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sf*.
- Hn. 1,2 and 3,4: Bass clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sf*.
- Tba.: Bass clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sf*.
- Timp.: Bass clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Hp.: Bass clef, showing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Vln. Solo: Treble clef, showing a sustained note.
- Vln. I: Treble clef, showing triplet patterns with slurs and dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Vln. II: Treble clef, showing triplet patterns with slurs and dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Vla.: Treble clef, showing triplet patterns with slurs and dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Vc.: Bass clef, showing triplet patterns with slurs and dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*
- Cb.: Bass clef, showing a sustained note with dynamic marking *sempre mf e sost.*

Example No. 12: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, figure 30.

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Throughout the movement, one can observe how Britten handled the orchestration with caution, never letting the orchestra cover the soloist.¹⁰ Despite this, the tension that is present between the soloist and the orchestra can be compared with the battle between the individual and society.¹¹

¹⁰ Wu, *Analytical Study*, 16.

¹¹ Morton, "Britten Edit", 108.

2. The Third Movement: Passacaglia, and Britten's Use of the Passacaglia

2.1. Passacaglia, a short history

From a historical perspective, the Passacaglia is a Baroque form that was first documented in Spain in the 17th century. The term's etymological roots come from the Spanish words *pasar* (to pass) and *calle* (street), and, at least according to Spanish literature, at the beginning, primarily referred to music performed while promenading, usually played by the guitar, in a ritornello sense. During the 1620s, the use of the Passacaglia in Italy transformed from a ritornello to more of an ostinato.¹² The German American musicologist Willi Apel describes the Passacaglia, based on Bach's Passacaglia in C minor for organ BWV 582, as an unremitting variation of a well-defined ostinato (usually in the bass).¹³ Furthermore, Richard Hudson describes the use of the Passacaglia in the 20th century as:

In the 20th century composers and musicologists, using Bach's passacaglia as a model, have defined the form as a set of continuous variations on a ground bass, with the ground occasionally appearing also in an upper voice. This has sometimes been extended to include a pitch ostinato, in which rhythm is not a constant factor.¹⁴

The use of the Passacaglia was widespread among composers in the 20th century. Many contribute Britten's frequent use of the Passacaglia to Baroque composers such as Henry Purcell.¹⁵ Other 20th-century composers that incorporated Passacaglias in their works were: Max Reger, Paul Hindemith, Samuel Barber, Dmitri Shostakovich, Igor Stravinsky, Anton Webern, Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg.¹⁶

2.2. Britten's Use of the Passacaglia

According to Bernadette de Villiers, Britten is "probably the most prolific composer of passacaglias in the twentieth century".¹⁷ In his lifespan, many of his works included Passacaglias, among them the Cello Symphony, the *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, the

¹² Thomas Walker, "Ciaccona and Passacaglia: Remarks on Their Origin and Early History," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 21, no. 3 (1968): 300–320, <https://doi.org/10.2307/830537> (accessed August 29, 2023).

¹³ Bernadette Villiers de, *Benjamin Britten's Use of the Passacaglia* (Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1985), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵ Morton, "Britten Edit", 108.

¹⁶ Villiers de, "Britten's Use of the Passacaglia," 1-11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

Second and Third Cello Suites, and his Third String Quartet, with the third movement of the *Violin Concerto* being his first. However, in his previous piece written for solo violin, *Reveille*, (dedicated to Antonio Brosa), it is also possible to find traces of a Passacaglia structure with its piano accompaniment serving as an *ostinato*. According to Darrell Handel, the composer used the genre of the Passacaglia as a tool to intensify the climax of a tragedy with an ‘animated’ pedal-point. For example, in *Peter Grimes*, it depicts Grimes’ menacing death, in *The Rape of Lucretia*, it takes place right after her suicide, and in the last variation of the *The Turn of the Screw*, the Passacaglia transmits an accumulation of intensity that concludes in Miles’ death.¹⁸ In general, Britten situated the Passacaglia movements to either be central or at the end of the works. When in the middle, it takes the role of being the center of attention, and when it concludes the work, it comprises a sense of a confirmation.¹⁹

In his non-vocal music, such as in the Passacaglia of his *Cello Symphony*, Britten tends to use the Passacaglia to support materials of equal importance. The counterpoint usually plays a more important role than the *ostinato* theme. This sets him apart from other composers, such as Hindemith – another composer that frequently wrote passacaglias – who generally composed counterpoints of less importance to be played simultaneously with the *ostinato* theme. In the case of Britten, the differences of the variations have a wider spectrum due to the many types of rhythmic activity, range, density, dynamics and texture.²⁰ This can be demonstrated in the Passacaglia of the *Violin Concerto* as well on numerous occasions; while the *ostinato* theme is always present, the other voices frequently take over the spotlight.

2.3. The Influence of Berg’s *Wozzeck* and Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth* in the Passacaglia of Britten’s *Violin Concerto*

Britten always viewed the Austrian composer Alban Berg with utmost respect and even desired to study with him in Vienna. However, regrettably the war inhibited the possibility for Britten to move to Vienna prior to Berg’s passing. In 1936, during Britten’s visit to Spain, he had the opportunity to hear the premiere of Berg’s *Violin Concerto* in Barcelona,

¹⁸ Darrel Handel, "Britten’s Use of the Passacaglia," *Tempo* 94 (Autumn, 1970): 2.

¹⁹ Villiers de, *Passacaglia*, iii.

²⁰ Handel, "Britten’s Use," 2.

and his impression of the piece was so irrefutable that it inspired him to acquire its score without delay.²¹

In addition to Berg's *Violin Concerto*, Berg's opera entitled *Wozzeck* also had a powerful influence on Britten. The influence of the Austrian composer (and *Wozzeck* in particular) is particularly apparent in Britten's *Violin Concerto* and in his first opera *Peter Grimes*, especially in the Passacaglia movements of both works. The Passacaglia of Britten's *Violin Concerto* is often compared to the Passacaglia in *Peter Grimes* by researchers, as its earnestness and metaphor of death is clearly expressed in its atmosphere, albeit in a less direct way than in the opera due to its lack of libretto. In Britten's own words:

Wozzeck had, for about ten years, played a great part in my life, not only, I may say musically, but also psychologically and emotionally. Particularly as war approached us, of course, the figure of the lonely, miserable soldier trapped in the great machine of war was something I thought about and felt for deeply; in many ways I am aware now that I was strongly influenced by 'Wozzeck' when I wrote 'Grimes'. I am not at all ashamed of this: on the contrary I think I should have been very silly if I hadn't made use of this great master.²²

The atmosphere of the Passacaglia movement of Britten's *Violin Concerto* seems to have been inspired both by the *Adagio* section in *Wozzeck* and the Passacaglia of his good friend Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*.²³ Both works are characterized by being tenebrous and infernal; they both represent death, and perhaps Britten considered this movement to be a metaphor of death on two levels, the first being a reflection of the destruction of the soldiers and the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War²⁴, and the second being, on a personal level, the death of the 'Christian soldier' he considered himself to be before arriving at the shores of the United States of America, where he was able to legally unite himself with Peter Pears in Grand Rapids in June of 1939.²⁵

²¹ Stephen Arthur Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense: The Passacaglia Finale of Britten's Violin Concerto," *The Musical Times* 158, no. 1938 (Spring 2017): 66.

²² Benjamin Britten, interview by Edmund Tracey, in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 292-293.

²³ Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 66.

²⁴ David Schneider, "Contrasts and Common Concerns in the Concerto 1900-1945", from Simon Keefe ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147.

²⁵ Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 70.

2.4. Structure and Instrumentation of the *Violin Concerto*'s Passacaglia

Immediately following the cadenza of the second movement, the final movement of the *Violin Concerto* is entitled "Passacaglia".²⁶ It is marked 'Andante lento (*un poco meno mosso*)', with a metronome marking of 52-54 per quarter note. It contains eight variations and a finale section.

2.4.1. Characteristics of the Ostinato Theme

The first traces of the Passacaglia's ostinato theme are already present during the previous movement's famous tuba solo, which is played simultaneously with the contrasting Tarantella-like material dominated by the piccolos and first violins (see Example No. 13).

The image displays a musical score for the beginning of the Passacaglia. The score is in 3/8 time and marked *Tempo primo*. It features five staves: Picc. 1, Picc. 2, Tuba, Violin Solo, and Violin I div. The Piccolo parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Tuba part has a *Solo* section starting with a *p* dynamic. The Violin Solo part is marked *con sord.* and *trem.* with a *pp* dynamic. The Violin I div. part is also marked *con sord.* and *trem.* with a *pp* dynamic. The score includes a double bar line and a repeat sign. The Picc. 1 and Picc. 2 parts are marked *pp*. The Violin Solo and Violin I div. parts are marked *pp* and *sempre pp e trem.* The Tuba part is marked *p*. The Picc. 1 and Picc. 2 parts are marked *sempre stacc.*

²⁶ "A Tale of Love & War: Britten's Violin Concerto," Houston Symphony, <https://houstonphilharmonic.org/britten-violin-concerto/> (accessed August 8, 2023).

Example No. 13: Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15, movement 2, figure 23.

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The ostinato theme is introduced by the trombones at the commencement of the third movement. The theme (see Example No. 14) lasts 5.5 measures and consists of 18 notes that move exclusively in minor and major second steps, giving the Passacaglia a half-chromatic impression. The climax of the theme is reached slightly after its midpoint.²⁷ In the ascent, intervals of an ascending whole tone are repeated three times, each reiteration taking place a minor third higher than the preceding one and outlines a diminished seventh chord. In the descent, the sequence of two whole tones is repeated in two measures. The range-span of the theme is an augmented octave. The descending aeolian steps in the ostinato theme have a closeness with the main theme of the 1st movement of the *Concerto* (see Example No. 15), which also starts off with half and whole steps.

²⁷ Villiers de, *Passacaglia*, 46.

Andante lento (un poco meno mosso) **aeolian scale**

Trombones 1,2,3

Violin Solo

Example No. 14: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, mm. 1-6.

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p dolciss. ed espress.

espress.

Example No. 15: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 9-17.

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The time signature of this movement changes multiple times and this slightly affects the structure of the ostinato. It begins in 4/4, then, when the Sarabande comes in at figure 36, it changes to 3/4. The 4/4 time signature returns for the March in figure 39; however, it only lasts for four bars until it changes again rapidly in a row of 3/2, 4/4, 5/4, and 4/4. I find this to be a clear example of Igor Stravinsky's influence on Britten. The brass section plays the ostinato theme in that section while the solo violin and winds play virtuosic passages. At figure 41, while the solo violin plays quick, sixteenth-triplet dancelike runs with the support of the flutes, the bassoon plays the ostinato, and the meter changes to 3/4 once more and Britten marks a fast tempo (*molto animato*, 108 = quarter note). At figure 43, Tempo I returns together with the 4/4 marking; one before figure 44 marks a change to

3/2 for one single bar. From figure 45 until the end of the concerto, the meter is 3/2 (*Lento e solenne*).

In the ostinato theme there is both rhythmic and melodic tension, giving the entire movement an elastic sense. The composer uses syncopation at the peak of the ostinato and many chromatic steps as tools to increase the tension.²⁸

2.4.2. The Application of the Ostinato Theme

The form of this movement is theme and variations.²⁹ During the last 5.5 bars of the solo violin's cadenza (which acts as a counterpoint to the ostinato theme), the ostinato theme is introduced by the three trombones, in a sort of funeral music. The last notes of both voices are synchronized. This instrumentation is unique. Throughout history, composers, especially in opera, frequently employed trombones to evoke an atmosphere of gloom, as a symbol of death, supernaturality or afterlife.³⁰

The structure of the movement is an amalgam of fugue and passacaglia. The length of the theme differs in length throughout the movement.³¹ The movement can be divided into ten sections.

2.4.3. The Theme

At the beginning (from the beginning to figure 34), the complete theme is introduced.³² The themes overlap each other with the entry points always appearing in different places. Britten's choice of instruments in this section (as well as in all of the consequent ones) is very diverse, thus creating a variegated texture. In the theme, the first notes of each entrance of the Ostinato Theme form a descending chromatic scale.

²⁸ Villiers de, *Passacaglia*, 46.

²⁹ Hong, *Britten's Violin Concerto*, 38.

³⁰ David M. Guion, *The Trombone: Its History and Music, 1697-1811* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 258.

³¹ Villiers de, *Passacaglia*, 48.

³² Hong, *Britten's Violin Concerto*, 39.

Table 2
Entrances of the Ostinato Theme

Entrance Number	Instrument	Beginning Note
1	Three Trombones	C
2	Violin I & II and Viola	B
3	Trumpet I	B-flat
4	Flute I, II & III, Oboe I & II, Clarinet I & II	A

2.4.3.1. Variation 1

Variation 1 (figure 34-35) has a new key signature of D minor. The string sections play the first variation of the Ostinato Theme in low dynamics and tremolo while the solo violin has its first entrance since the Cadenza, playing a monologue-like counterpoint over the theme with many hairpins, marked '*inquieto*' (see Example No. 16). The line is reminiscent of the descending seconds of both the beginning of the first movement and the second half of the ostinato theme.

34 **Con moto**

Vln. Solo

Vc.

p

trem. sul tasto

ppp un poco marcato

p

cresc.

poco

Vln. Solo

Vla.

Vc.

mf espress.

trem. sul tasto

ppp un poco marcato

Vln. Solo

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

f

trem. sul tasto

pp un poco marcato

pp

pp

The image displays three systems of a musical score for a violin concerto. Each system consists of five staves: Violin Solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. The first system shows a solo violin part with a seven-measure phrase marked with a '7' and an accent, followed by a crescendo. The second system features a solo violin part with a seven-measure phrase marked with a '7' and an accent, and a tremolo marking. The third system includes a solo violin part with a six-measure phrase marked with a '6' and an accent, followed by a seven-measure phrase marked with a '7' and an accent, and a 'ten.' marking. The score concludes with a 'pesante 3' marking and a forte dynamic.

Example No. 16: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, figure 34.

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Table 3
Entrances of the Ostinato Theme

Entrance Number	Instrument	Beginning Note
5	Cello	G-sharp
6	Viola	F
7	Violin II	E
8	Violin I	G-sharp

2.4.3.2. Variation 2

In Variation 2 (figures 35-36), the second variation possesses fewer similarities with the theme than the previous one. The variation commences with the four horns, playing a three-note motif in syncopated rhythm (see Example No. 17).³³ The tonality of this variation is C minor, and each group of instruments plays a motif characterized by a melancholic minor third. The first note of each entrance is a whole-step higher than the previous. The ‘answer’ of the solo violin always begins on the last note of the motive (the upper note of the minor third). The final harmony of this variation is an apprehensive chord of C-E-flat-F-sharp, out of which the tritone prevails. The final run of the solo violin is in the twelve-tone system, a compositional tool that Britten was not known for (see Example No. 18).

³³ According to Stephen Arthur Allen, this motif alludes to the three syllables of his partner’s name “Peter Pears”. In my perspective, as there has been no proof from Britten that he dedicated this motif to Pears and many composers included three-note motifs in their works, it is possible that Allen was simply searching for romantic love when there was none in the mind of the composer when writing this piece. (Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 71.).



Example No. 17: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, figure 35.

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Example No. 18: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, prior to figure 36.

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Table 4

Entrances of the Ostinato Theme

Entrance Number	Instrument	Beginning Note
9	Horns I, II, III & IV	C
10	Flute I & II, Oboe I & II, Clarinet I & II	D
11	Horns I, II, III & IV	E
12	Flute I & II, Oboe I & II, Clarinet I & II	F-sharp
13	Horns I, II, III & IV	A-flat
14	Trumpet I & II	E-flat

2.4.3.3. Variation 3

In the short Variation 3, there is a new tempo marked '*tranquillo*'. The Spanish influence on Britten is apparent due to the Sarabande rhythm of this section. There is a total of two appearances of the Ostinato Theme in this variation that do not overlap each other. In the first one, the cello and double bass sections execute the first half of the theme and the violin I the second half; in the second appearance, after an identical first half of the theme by the same instruments, the violin II and oboe I complete it.

2.4.3.4. Variation 4

At a slightly faster tempo, the solo violin plays the ostinato theme for the very first time in Variation 4 which Britten marked '*dolcissimo*'. The singing melody-like material is underlined by a memory of the solo violin's virtuoso octaves in the second movement (see Example No. 20) as well as a Spanish dance-like rhythm in '*ricochet*', both played by the upper strings (see Example No. 19). The Ostinato Theme's rising contour is played by the first bassoon and solo double bass a few bars later while the soloist accompanies them with the Spanish rhythm that the strings played before. The descending contour is performed by the soloist in a virtuosic passage that turns into a row of nimble scales. The tuba enters three bars before figure 38.

37

con moto

con sord.

Horn in F 1,2

p marc. < *poco* *pp*

Horn in F 3,4

p marc. < *poco* *pp*

Violin Solo

mf *dolciss.* < *espress.* 5

Violin I

pp < *pp saltando*

Violin II

pp < *pp saltando*

Viola

pizz. *pp* < *pp saltando*

Contrabass

pp

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a section of Britten's Violin Concerto. The first system includes staves for two Horns (Hn.), Violin Solo (Vln. Solo), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Cello (Cb.). The Horn parts feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a *poco cresc.* marking. The Violin Solo part has a melodic line with a *cresc.* marking. The Violin I, II, and Viola parts play a dense texture of sixteenth notes, marked *pp*. The Cello part has a simple rhythmic accompaniment. The second system continues the same instrumentation. The Horn parts are mostly silent, with a *p* marking. The Violin Solo part features a *legato* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The Violin I, II, and Viola parts continue their sixteenth-note texture, marked *pp*. The Cello part remains silent.

Example No. 19: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, figure 37.

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Example No. 20: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 99-115.

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2.4.3.5. Variation 5

The inverted form of the Ostinato Theme appears for the first time in this variation in the soloist's part, marked '*espressivo*'. This form of the theme is repeated six times by the solo violin, flutes and oboe, violin II, violin I, flutes and oboe again, and cellos and double basses, respectively. In the background of the theme, an elegant, dancelike material is played by the two flutes, and later by the solo violin.

2.4.3.6. Variation 6

The Variation 6 marked '*alla marcia*', has the significance of a hero, according to Stephen Arthur Allen.³⁴ There are two entrances of the Ostinato theme, each one split into two parts – the first half executed by the trumpets and timpani, and the second half the horns and the trombones, respectively. In figure 40, the trombones play the ostinato theme in its inversion (falling).

2.4.3.7. Variation 7

The Bassoon I takes its turn to play the ostinato theme while the solo violin plays the material that the piccolo debuted in the second movement (see Example No. 21). In turn,

³⁴ Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 71.

the horns play the theme, and finally, the solo violin reaches the culmination of this movement, executing the ostinato theme in the form of chords in *fortissimo*, with the orchestra playing tremolo in *pianissimo* and *piano*. Following two bars of down-bow chords ‘*non arpeggiando*’, a bar of thirds and sixths marked ‘*largamente*’ leads into the following variation and the key of D major, one of the most significant arrivals of the movement.

41 molto animato

124

Flute 1
pp stacatissimo

Flute 2
pp stacatissimo

Piccolo
pp stacatissimo

Bassoon 1
Solo
pp espress.

Horn in F 3,4
con sord. a2
pp

Violin Solo
p leggiero e spiccato 6

Violin I div.
pizz.
pp distinto

127

Fl. *pp*

Fl. *pp*

Picc.

Bsn. *pp*

Hn. *pp*

Vln. Solo (8) *f dim. p (gliss.)*

Vln. *pp*

130

Fl. *pp*

Fl.

Picc.

Bsn. *pp*

Hn. *pp*

Hn.

Vln. Solo (8) *cresc. (gliss.)*

Vln. *pp distinto*

pp

The image shows a musical score for Example No. 21, starting at measure 133. The score includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Piccolo (Picc.), Oboe (Ob.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horn (Hn.), Violin Solo (Vln. Solo), and Violin (Vln.). The Bassoon staff is highlighted in green. Dynamics include *pp*, *pp cresc.*, and *pp leggiero*. The Violin Solo part features a *gliss.* and *dim.* marking. The score is in 3/4 time and features a complex melodic line in the upper woodwinds and a more rhythmic, ostinato-like line in the lower woodwinds and strings.

Example No. 21: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, figure 31.

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2.4.3.8. Variation 8 (*Largamente – lento*)

The most significant aspect of the eighth variation is its arrival to D major which indicates the settling of conflicts.³⁵ The relationship between D major and D minor has been significant in Britten's other works as well since his childhood.³⁶ The powerful lower winds and strings – three trombones, double basses, two bassoons and tuba – enter with the ostinato theme (the only time it appears in its original rhythmic scheme³⁷), the F-sharp in

³⁵ Morton, "Britten Edit," 111.

³⁶ Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 73.

³⁷ Villiers de, *Passacaglia*, 51.

the second bar emphasizing light. The composer decided to orchestrate this heroic climax in a contrapuntual way, with the strings rushing in with a ‘triumphant melody’³⁸ in the form of a straight D major scale in the first bar. However, despite the harmonic and dynamic climaxes of this variation, the absence of the soloist is brought to our attention. Following the climax, in figure 44, the solo violin enters with some Lydian and Mixolydian colors while the horns take over the ostinato theme.

2.4.3.9 Variation 9 (*Lento e solenne*)

The ninth variation, which can be regarded as the Coda, is one of the most emotionally demanding finales for the musicians. It is much more than a mere ‘*denouement*’. Marked ‘*Lento e solenne*’ (the first tempo change in the movement), the epilogue consists of a chorale in the orchestra and a chant for the violin solo.³⁹ The melody of the soloist climbs to a very high range, as if the violinist were ‘flying’, and these climax-like passages are always followed by a sudden jump to a lower register on the G string, symbolizing either a dramatic dialogue or ‘*skizzofrenia*’. The general tonality of the movement is D minor; however, in the coda, the mixture of D major (representing light) and F major may be a sign of hope.

In the chant, the tones in the solo part consist of three half-steps at a time; from figure 47, the soloist must play unisons, a technique few composers use on the violin (see Example No. 22). According to Lawrence Franko, the chant is based on suffering, and is a lament inspired by the Arab and Jewish traditions of Andalusia.⁴⁰ This is yet another connection that the work has with Spain.

³⁸ Morton, "Britten Edit," 111.

³⁹ Allen, "Death of Inner-Sense," 74.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Franko, "Janine Jansen on the Britten Violin Concerto," *Violinist.com*, <https://www.violinist.com/blog/laurie/20103/11103/> (accessed June 13, 2023).

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melodic line with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' over a bracket) and dynamic markings: *f*, *sf*, *sf*, and *più f*. The middle staff also has a treble clef and contains a melodic line with a tremolo marking (*trem.*) and a *sf* dynamic marking. The bottom staff has a treble clef and is marked *sul G* and *ff*. It features a melodic line with several triplet markings. The score is written in a style typical of 20th-century classical music.

Example No. 22: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, from figure 47, mm. 3-8.

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3. The *Violin Concerto* from the View of a Violinist

The *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15, is one of Benjamin Britten's early works. Written in 1939, it is his second concerto after writing the *Piano Concerto*.⁴¹ It exemplifies his youthful enthusiasm to use a large number of various techniques to stretch the musical skills of the musicians and challenge the soloist. The instrumentation, sometimes very simple, and at times very complex, is always brilliantly composed to perfectly serve the soloist without overpowering the primary part. The technical difficulty of this concerto may be one of the reasons why at that time few violinists tackled the piece straight away after it was written, even though it was well received by the public. However, in the past 20 years, the work has established itself as one of the most important violin concertos of the 20th century.

As is common since the beginning of the genre, a composer-violin virtuoso friendship lasted behind Britten's *Violin Concerto*. He consulted with the Spanish violin virtuoso, Antonio Brosa, who also premiered the work with the New York Philharmonic led by Sir John Barbirolli in Carnegie Hall on 29 March 1940. Together, a violin concerto filled with virtuosic passages, left-hand stretches, double-stops, double-stop harmonics, glissandos, and left hand pizzicato was crafted. Britten does not hold back at all from assigning the soloist a multitude of technical challenges in this work. Virtuosic brilliance is shared with a deep vein of melancholy lyricism.⁴² Interestingly, Brosa's suggestions sometimes made the concerto even more difficult than what Britten originally intended. In the violin part, one can find Brosa's fingerings and bowings, which are valuable tools into studying and better understanding Britten's original musical intentions. In my experience, a good practice approach is to try out different fingerings and bowings in order to get to know the passage better; this often improves the performance of the original fingerings and bowings (in this case from Brosa or the composer himself).

Performing the *Violin Concerto* myself with orchestra in 2017 offered me an intense experience to examine this outstanding piece. In this chapter, I would like to address the unique technical difficulties of this work, my personal solutions to the challenges, as well as other performance-related challenges.

⁴¹ Joan Chissell, "The Concertos," in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Works from a Group of Specialists*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (London: Rockliff, 1972), 257-265.

⁴² Michael Kennedy, "Britten," in *Master Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 140-143.

3.1. Left-hand techniques

The following left-hand techniques contribute to the virtuosity of the *Violin Concerto*. I would like to focus on the technical challenges of the special left-hand techniques that appear in this work, and why they differ from similar techniques in other concertos. I will also share my personal solutions to making these passages seem effortless on the stage, based on my experiences with this work as a performing musician. Interestingly, little research has been done in this area, as most of the sources I have used included little or no mention of the technical difficulties that appear in the work.

3.1.1. Double-stop runs

In the 19th century, it was not uncommon for composers such as Paganini, Wieniawski, Vieuxtemps, and Karłowicz to write extensive double-stop passages into their violin concertos. The goal of writing such passages was to show off the violinist's virtuosity. Chamber music works rarely include such passages and in orchestra playing, printed double-stops are often executed in divisi. Double-stops keep a violinist in top form and the left-hand technique sharp.

In his *Violin Concerto*, Britten composed for a virtuoso like Antonio Brosa, and takes every opportunity to show off the violinist. There are highly challenging double-stop passages in the concerto that violinists can associate with Paganini.

3.1.2. Octaves

Good intonation is paramount when executing octaves. Therefore, the most important factor when practicing this passage is the hand position of the left hand. The first finger must always lead. When passing the fourth and third positions, it is crucial for the wrist to stay as close to the neck as possible, since a prevailing mistake is a protruded wrist, which causes a decrease in sound quality. Also, as the composer wrote tenuto marks on every note, every octave on the way down must be well pronounced. The choreography of the motion required is a mixture of the movement used for the octave glissando (arm), and vibrato (hand). If the combination of these two movements is suitable, the result will consist of legato octaves under tenuto marks. When reaching a string crossing, it is necessary to make sure it is inaudible, as a common mistake is an unwanted space and color change during string crossings (see Example No. 23).



Example No. 23: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 85-87.

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3.1.3. Thirds and Sixths

When working on this passage, the hardest part is the precise coordination between the left hand and the bow arm. Ironically, even though it may seem that the task of the left hand is by far more strenuous, the success of the passage ultimately depends on the timing of the bow. The bow stroke needed for this section is a very strong *spiccato*, with a *sonore* sound. The left hand must change positions at precisely the right time in between the bow strokes. I found it useful to practice it in legato many times, giving the left hand a legato feeling, as this keeps the hand position relaxed, therefore improving intonation and precision. It is also important to always check double-stops with an open string if possible, in order to check the intonation. Not only must the two notes of each third be checked, but also the intonation of both the upper scale and lower scale (i.e. the tuning of leading notes). The violin is capable of using intonation as an expressive tool, unlike instruments such as the piano. To achieve this, it helps to tune the fourth between the two thirds (C-F, D-G, etc.).



Example No. 24: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 165-168.

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3.1.4. Tenths

Tenths are the most difficult to play as coordination between the speed of the upwards shifting and the bow's strokes must be perfect. If either hand is even a small amount faster, the shift will be audible instead of the note. Lots of practice, including practicing in different rhythmic sequences, is necessary to master this passage. It also helps to train the muscle memory to know in advance which finger shifts a major second, and which one just a minor second. A relaxed hand position is crucial to producing a good sound quality.



Example No. 25: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 174-175.

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When confronted with technically challenging passages such as the one in Example No. 25, a comprehensive approach becomes paramount. It begins with a rigorous and detailed practice regimen, where each detail is meticulously honed. However, this is only the first step of technical mastery. Keeping the musical phrasing and character in mind should also be a priority, and finally, I would like to emphasize the importance of the mental dimension of the performance. Stepping onto the stage to confront technically demanding sections can be an emotionally charged experience, and a common mistake is to worry about precise technical fulfillment, even if a negative mindset hinders technical performance. *Ergo*, in the practice room, cultivating a resilient mindset is paramount. Confidence in one's abilities and a positive outlook can serve as powerful allies, as the fear of making a mistake only serves to make your navigation less secure and heightens the chances of intonation errors or compromised sound quality. On the stage, we have to have a change of attitude, and confront every hurdle daringly. This mental resilience not only fortifies your performance but also fosters a secure foundation from which to express the music with artistry.

3.1.5. Harmonics

Harmonics are generally not the hardest technique on the violin, and a large number of pieces require the use of them. Many composers use harmonics for their flute-like color, and virtuoso composers such as Wieniawski wrote natural harmonics at the end of upward glissandos in the hope of elegant flamboyance. However, the use of harmonics in the context of Britten's *Violin Concerto* is very rare. Double-stop harmonics can consist of two natural harmonics, two artificial harmonics, or one natural and one artificial harmonic. In this short passage, all three possibilities are used. Double-stop harmonics were first written by Paganini. Pressing one finger firmly on the string and touching with another finger the same string lightly execute an artificial harmonic. The harder the lower finger presses, the better the harmonic sounds. The bow stroke can also help the sound quality.

Despite the difficulty and technical problems of this passage, it is manageable for performers to play it. However, the lower harmonic might be difficult to hear at the *Vivace* tempo Britten wrote. He wrote an optional version with single harmonics for performers to choose from.

In Example No. 26, two strings must be used to execute double-stop harmonics. This puts the left hand in a less ideal position, as in this case, the fingers often have to finger fifths. For good intonation, the position of the fingers fingering the fifths must be exact, and the strings must be well tuned. Here again the bow plays a crucial role. The stroke used for this passage before the harmonics come in has to be modified a bit, as if too much pressure is applied, the sound will become scratchy.



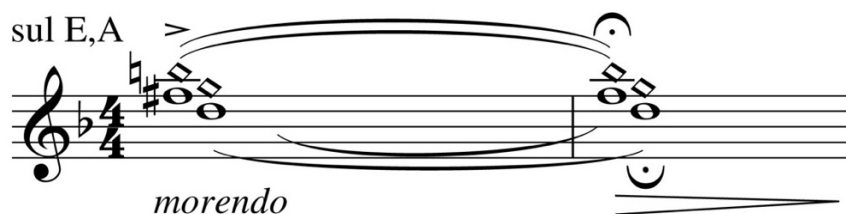
Example No. 26: Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 367-370.

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Britten ends the first movement with eight bars of natural and artificial harmonics. In the last two bars, the following harmonics must be executed (see Example No. 27). Britten's intention was probably to have the music completely calm down, and the color of the harmonics gives the music a dreamy, surreal atmosphere. However, since the sound quality of artificial harmonics is difficult to control, the end of this movement can be very uncomfortable for the soloist. The harmonics are completely exposed with only strings in *pianissimo* and harp in the accompaniment. Britten wrote an accent onto each harmonic; and each one is to be played together with a chord in the harp. The execution of these harmonics is mostly in the first, second or third position, where the strings are short. Therefore, a glowing sound is not possible.



Example No. 27: Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15, movement 1, last two measures.

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In his *Suite for Violin and Piano*, Britten also pushes the limits of harmonics in figure 14 of the *Moto Perpetuo*, where artificial harmonics must be played *marcato*, in a rapid tempo, and in *pianissimo*.

Example No. 28: Britten Suite for Violin and Piano, Op. 6, movement 2, figure 14.

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3.1.6. Left-hand Pizzicato

Left-hand pizzicato for chords is a relatively modern technique. In this example, Britten alternates the pizzicato between the two hands. The dynamic marking is fortississimo, and as the first and second fingers are busy fingering the chords, the performer must pluck with the third or fourth finger, which are the weakest fingers. Consequently, it is hard for the performer to match the dynamic of the left-hand pizzicato with that of the right hand. The hand position of the left hand must be adjusted slightly, and the strings must be plucked with enormous speed. Due to the inequality of the alternating pizzicatos, some performers decide to execute this passage with only right hand pizzicato. I do not agree with this, because even though the goal is to equalize the chords, the minute difference of color between the left and right-hand pizzicatos was intentional on Britten's part, and it is important to respect that.



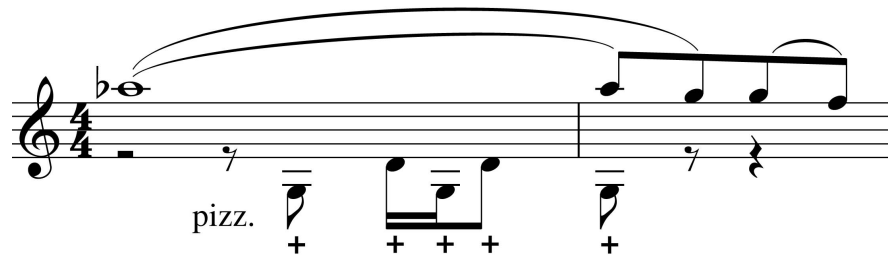
Example No. 29: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 502-503.

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Example No. 30 takes place at the end of the cadenza, when left-hand pizzicato is a secondary voice below the melody. The rhythmic material plucked by the left hand is the same material as the timpani solo in the very first bar of the first movement.



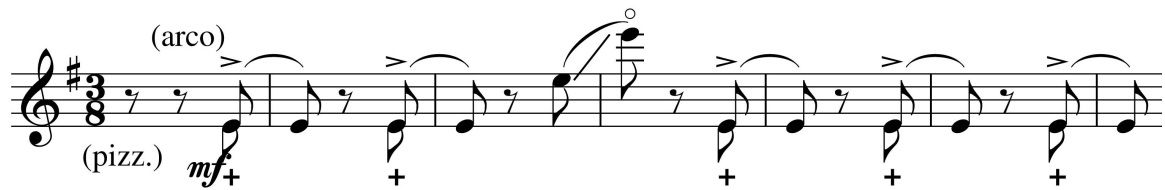
Example No. 30: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 520-521.

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In Example No. 31, Britten uses left-hand pizzicato simultaneously with the arco stroke, and on the same note fingered by a different finger on a different string. The bow plays the E on the G string (fingered by the fourth finger), and in the meantime, the left hand's first finger presses E on the D string, which is then plucked by the left hand's 3rd finger. This creates a special effect. Due to the shortness of the string that is plucked, the pizzicato does not have much resonance. However, Britten probably just wished for a certain timbre to be added to the bow's accent, similar to a soft percussion instrument's roll.



Example No. 31: Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15, movement 2, mm. 388-393.

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Britten did not only use this technique in his *Violin Concerto*. In the opening of his *Third Suite for Cello*, the resonance of the open C String serves a kind of counterpoint to the melody played in *arco*. Although left-hand pizzicato is a relatively modern technique (first used by Paganini in the first half of the 19th century), if we look at Britten's contemporaries, Bartók also included this technique in his *Contrasts*, in the 2nd movement's violin part (see Example No. 33).

I Lento (*introduzione*)

Example No. 32: Britten *Suite for Solo Cello No. 3*, movement 1, mm 1-8.

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Example No. 33: Bartók *Contrasts*, movement 2, mm. 35-39.

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3.1.7. Brosa's Fingerings

As Brosa played an important role in Britten's writing of the *Violin Concerto*, we can assume that Brosa wrote the fingerings and bowings that are printed in the part of the Boosey & Hawkes edition, upon Britten's suggestions. Often higher positions are used even when it is not necessary, in order to produce a certain timber. This gives us useful insights to what Britten might have wished for in terms of sound color; however it also increases the difficulty of the passage, as the player must shift from the first to the seventh position between sixteenth notes. In the following example, the instruction to stay on the G string adds many shifts, and the violinist needs to be very skillful with shifting inaudibly at the given tempo. This piece is not the first example of the '*sul G sempre*' instruction. Ravel used it in *Tzigane* and his *Sonata No. 2*, Bartók used it in the second movement of his *Violin Concerto No. 2*, Schumann used it in the first line of his *Sonata No. 1*, and there are many more examples.

In Example No. 34, good intonation is more difficult with this fingering, as the passage could have easily been executed on two different strings to avoid intonation challenges. Another challenge for some people may be that the 'wolf tones' on certain violins are at the top of the G string, thus making the sound less clear and the intonation even more difficult. The fingering however gives the sound a rougher, wilder quality that is more exciting. Brosa's fingerings consistently suggest that the performers avoid string crossings and use extended fingerings.



Example No. 34: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 1, mm. 57-59.

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There are also some passages where *restez* is marked, indicating which strings to play on. This sometimes requires the violinist to use a higher position than necessary to avoid the bright sound of the E string and can cause challenges for the intonation and sound quality.

3.1.8. Use of Vibrato

Vibrato falls into the category of left-hand technique; however, Britten did not specifically write instructions into the score indicating what kind of vibrato he had in mind. It is still important to analyze, as it is a crucial tool that is solely up to the performer to find a vibrato that suits the given passage. Britten's music portrays simplicity and intense expression at the same time. Baroque forms influenced his music greatly. For example, the third movement of this piece was his first passacaglia, and it opens with a fugato exposition of a tonally unstable subject.⁴³ The passacaglia later became one of his favorite compositional forms.

In the pursuit of achieving a simple, uncluttered sound, it is incumbent upon the performer to exercise caution when deciding what kind of vibrato to use, particularly in passages like the opening of the Passacaglia. Here, opting for a thick, romantic vibrato may inadvertently detract from the desired simplicity. Instead, a smaller, quicker, and more focused vibrato often imparts a more fitting impression of simplicity while retaining expressiveness. In the melodic sections of this composition, the goal is to evoke a pure, mildly sweet, and straightforward yet emotionally resonant sound. Employing a vibrato that complements these characteristics adds an extra layer of flexibility in the sound.

Vibrato, as a technique, can also be employed to alter the trajectory within a single note. For instance, a note may commence *sanza vibrato* and, as it progresses, the performer can introduce vibrato to gradually warm up the note, allowing it to open up in response to the harmonies beneath it. Conversely, this process can be reversed to bring about a different effect.

It's important to recognize that vibrato is a nuanced and intricate aspect of violin playing that demands careful attention and consideration. A violinist's artistry and sensibility can be evaluated in no small measure by their command of vibrato. Moreover, it is imperative to constantly adapt the vibrato technique in accordance with the specific style of the musical work at hand and the underlying tension in the harmonies. In this sense, vibrato serves as a versatile tool for shaping and enhancing the musical interpretation, making it an indispensable facet of a performer's craft.

⁴³ Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 47-52.

4. The Influence of Britten's Contemporaries on his *Violin Concerto* and Other Works

Britten deemed many of his contemporaries as worthy of praise and, similar to other composers, learned a great deal from them. Based on his collection of scores, one can see how his taste changed over time. In his youth, he acquired a great amount of Beethoven scores and looked up to Bach, Beethoven and Brahms⁴⁴, and later, more of his contemporaries' works occupied his shelves, with special emphasis on the pieces of Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky.⁴⁵

Britten was often considered a nationalist due to his folksong arrangements for voice and piano that he composed upon his return to England in 1942. However, he rarely found inspiration from English composers (the only exceptions being his respect for Purcell and Dowland⁴⁶). During his studies at the Royal College of Music, the English composer found it challenging to fully embrace either of the two prevailing compositional approaches that were prominent during the time in his country. According to Anna Grace Perkins, the two schools in England consisted of Elgar and the 'Brahms imitators' and the 'Pastoral School' led by Vaughan Williams and Holst.⁴⁷ Britten was disappointed with both of these styles, as in his opinion, Elgar's compositions were mediocre, and Vaughan Williams' and his followers' pieces demonstrated a deficiency in refined technique. In fact, he constantly tried to disassociate himself from Vaughan Williams.⁴⁸

Britten surely was influenced greatly by many composers of the 20th century such as Stravinsky, Shostakovich and especially Mahler. Among the Second Viennese school of composers, it was Alban Berg who he desired to study with; the influence of Berg's *Wozzeck* on Britten's *Violin Concerto* is apparent.

In a letter from 1935 written to Marjorie Fass, Britten mentions Stravinsky, Schönberg, Bridge (his composition teacher), and also Markievitch and Shostakovich as

⁴⁴ Hong, *Britten's Violin Concerto*, 35.

⁴⁵ Rustem Kudoyarov, "Benjamin Britten's Piano Concerto in the Context of the Composer's Creative Connections with Russian (Soviet) Culture," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 368 (2019), 816.

⁴⁶ Anna Grace Perkins, "Expanded Perceptions of Identity in Benjamin Britten's Nocturne, Op. 60," Thesis for Master of Music, University of North Texas, 2008, 15-16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

possible successors after Berg's upsetting death.⁴⁹ Britten had a great interest in Russian music and culture, especially the works of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Shostakovich.⁵⁰ Tchaikovsky's ballets were a great treasure for Britten between 1935 and 1941.⁵¹

In addition to the influences of other composers of his generation, Britten was also inspired by performers such as Antonio Brosa, Mstislav Rostropovich, Sviatoslav Richter and was known to attend concerts every day while he was living in London, witnessing some of the greatest interpretations, as well as contemporary pieces. He stated his appreciation of Russian literature in an interview with the magazine *Soviet Music*, saying: "My cherished dream is to create an Opera form that would be equivalent to Chekhov's drama."⁵² He also composed six romances based on poems by Pushkin.

Cameron Pyke made a table of the composer's miniature scores in the Britten-Pears Library, according to year and acquisition, a vital source of knowing which composers Britten admired during that period.⁵³ Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that the chart provided only encompasses the early years of the composer's life and does not encompass the profound influences that many of his contemporaries had on him as his career progressed.

⁴⁹ Pieter Van Nes, "*Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative*," Final Paper BA Musicology, University of Utrecht, 2013, 24.

⁵⁰ Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2011, 11.

⁵¹ Arnold McMillin, Review of *Benjamin Britten and Russia* by Cameron Pyke, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 97, no. 4 (2019): 783–85.

⁵² Kudoyarov, "Benjamin Britten's Piano Concerto," 814.

⁵³ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 24.

Table 5:

Number of Britten's miniatures scores in the Britten-Pears Library by composer and year of acquisition, 1925 to December 1932

Year	Bach	Beethoven	Brahms	Haydn	Mozart	Schubert	Stravinsky	Tchaikovsky	Wagner
1925	0	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
1926	1	3	0	1	2	0	0	0	7
1927	0	11	2	11	1	0	0	0	3
1928	0	9	1	0	1	0	0	1	2
1929	0	2	4	1	0	0	0	1	1
1930	5	2	6	0	0	1	1	0	0
1931	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
1932	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Total	7	31	13	5	5	2	4	4	14

4.1. Frank Bridge

Britten began studying with Frank Bridge as his only composition student⁵⁴ in November 1927 and the older composer had a significant impact on Britten's compositional skills and awareness of contemporary European music alike.⁵⁵ Britten looked up to him as a 'musical father'. It is said that Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings* had an influence on Bridge's *Suite for String Orchestra* (1910) and that Tchaikovsky's influence on Britten may be partially due to Bridge's regard for Tchaikovsky.⁵⁶ In 1932, Bridge gave Britten a score of *Francesca da Rimini* as a Christmas present.⁵⁷

4.2. Tchaikovsky

Britten's admiration for Tchaikovsky was more apparent in the early years, although his influence on him was less considerable than that of Beethoven, Wagner and Brahms. Britten makes reference to Tchaikovsky in three works in particular: in his *Second String*

⁵⁴ Hong, *Britten's Violin Concerto*, 26.

⁵⁵ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

Quartet (1945), *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1956), and the *Third Suite for Cello* (1971).⁵⁸ Britten was fond of Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* and even played it as a piano duet and in his own arrangement of the first movement for piano and organ.⁵⁹ He also arranged *Romeo and Juliet* for the same instruments in 1934.⁶⁰ On another note, researchers debate on whether Tchaikovsky's homosexuality also heightened Britten's ongoing appreciation of the former's music.⁶¹

As for Britten's conscious or unconscious inspiration of Tchaikovsky in his *Violin Concerto*, the choral-like coda marked *Lento e solenne* has an uncanny resemblance of the chorale-like coda of *Romeo and Juliet* (see Example Nos. 35 and 36). This may be due to Frank Bridge's affection to *Romeo and Juliet*.⁶²

⁵⁸ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37.

47

The musical score is arranged in systems. The top system includes Flute (1, 2), Oboe (1, 2), Clarinet (1, 2 in Bb), and Bassoon (1, 2). The second system includes Horn in F (1, 2 and 3, 4), Trumpet in C (1, 2 and 3), and Trombone (1, 2 and 3). The third system includes Tuba, Timpani, and Percussion. The fourth system includes Harp. The bottom system includes Violin Solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (D major). Measure 47 is marked with a box containing the number 47. The score includes various dynamics such as *pp marc.*, *con sord.*, *pp*, *f*, and *dolce*. The Violin Solo part features a triplet of eighth notes in measure 49.

Example No. 35: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 3, figure 47.

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Musical score for Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Harp. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The key signature is G major (one sharp). The tempo is marked *pp* (pianissimo). The score consists of 8 measures. The Flute part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Oboe part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Cor Anglais part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Clarinet part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Bassoon part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Horn part starts with a *pp* dynamic. The Harp part starts with a *p* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Picc.
 Fl.
 Ob.
 C. A.
 Cl.
 Bsn.
 1, 2
 Hn.
 3, 4
 Tpt.
 bn. 1, 2
 3, Tba.
 Timp.
 Perc.
 Hp.
 Vln. I
 Vln. II
 Vla.
 Vc.
 Cb.

pp
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff
pp
ff

Example No. 36: Tchaikovsky *Romeo and Juliet* (first version), mm. 433-448.

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In addition, there is evidence that Bridge and Britten discussed Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* as well, and Britten accompanied this piece in his teacher's presence in 1932.⁶³ According to Cameron Pyke, an influence of the Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto* in Britten's was not plain; however, in the violin solo of Act II in the *Prince of the Pagodas*, the influence of the 2nd movement of Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* is apparent (see Example Nos. 37 and 38).

The image displays a musical score for Example No. 37, consisting of four systems of staves. The first system shows the Violin I Solo part with a melodic line starting on a half note, followed by eighth notes, and then a sixteenth-note triplet. The other instruments (Violin I the rest, Violin II, and Viola) are marked with *pp* and *pizz.* (pizzicato). The second system features a *cresc. and accel.* (crescendo and acceleration) marking over the Violin I Solo part, which then transitions to a *f* (forte) dynamic before ending with a *p* (piano) dynamic. The other instruments remain at *pp*. The third system shows the Violin I Solo part with a *pp* dynamic, followed by an *espress.* (espressivo) marking, and then another *pp* dynamic. The other instruments continue with *pp*. The fourth system shows the Violin I Solo part with a *pp cresc.* (pianissimo crescendo) marking, followed by a *f* dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes. The other instruments remain at *pp*.

Example No. 37: Britten *The Prince of the Pagodas*, Act II, figure 68, bars 1-7.

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⁶³ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 37.

The image displays a page of a musical score for Example No. 38, Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Op. 35, movement 2, measures 13-29. The score is written in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It features a Horn in F, Violin Solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Clarinet in C, Horn, Violin Solo, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *pp*, *con sord.*, and *tr*, as well as performance instructions like "I. Solo" and "cresc. f".

Example No. 38: Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Op. 35, movement 2, mm. 13-29.

Britten wrote a total of three ballets and it is believed that his attendance of a Tchaikovsky ballet performance in 1930 inspired him to write *Plymouth Town*. Additionally, the suite of *The Prince of Pagodas* shares the lightheartedness of Tchaikovsky's Suite from *The Nutcracker*.

In the later part of his career, it is significant that Britten never conducted a symphony by Tchaikovsky and never mentioned his operas, songs, and orchestral suites in his diary.⁶⁴ His opinions about the Russian composer's *Fourth*, *Fifth*, and *Sixth Symphonies* were reticent, and he criticized his *Piano Trio* for being too orchestral.

Britten himself admits having been influenced by Tchaikovsky in his interview with Charles Osborne in 1963, stating: "I wouldn't have thought my sound sensuous, although I love the clear and the resonant. This, I suppose I've learned from Mozart, Schubert, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Stravinsky and others."⁶⁵ A significant impact of Tchaikovsky can be found in Britten's *Third Suite for Solo Cello*, dedicated to Rostropovich upon hearing him play Bach's solo cello suites. The work includes four Russian melodies, three of which are arrangements of Tchaikovsky. Britten included these folk songs as a gesture of friendship to Rostropovich, who was at the time suffering the repercussions of publicly voicing his political opinion in Russia and who Britten thought of as an ambassador for Russian music.⁶⁶ Britten was not the first composer to consciously use Russian themes in his works; Beethoven did the same in his Razumovsky Quartets. Britten considered a total of twenty tunes from Tchaikovsky's collections to apply to this work and chose the simplest ones for voice and single piano to write variations on.⁶⁷

According to Cameron Pyke, Britten's clarity of texture, orchestral color and melodic invention may be influences from Tchaikovsky.⁶⁸ Britten himself considered Tchaikovsky as one of the best melodists of the 1800s. In the later part of his life, his regard for Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich became corresponding; at the Aldeburgh Festival which ran under his direction, for instance, he paired Tchaikovsky's and Shostakovich's works together more than once.⁶⁹

4.3. Prokofiev

Britten's regard for Prokofiev, twenty-two years his senior, varied greatly over the course of his career. In his thirties, Britten was skeptic about Prokofiev's work and claimed that his *First Violin Concerto* "didn't contain much music, but was rather like a compendium

⁶⁴ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 56.

⁶⁵ Britten, Interview by Tracey, 244.

⁶⁶ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 115.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

of School of Virtuosity violin exercises".⁷⁰ However, when Prokofiev passed away on 5 March 1953, Britten wrote the following: "The death of this composer who possessed such wonderful vitality, such daring, such optimism, is a great loss to the entire world."⁷¹

Despite Britten's statement, the two works (Prokofiev's *First Violin Concerto* and Britten's *Violin Concerto*) have much in common. Is it merely a coincidence? The construction of the latter seems to be based greatly on the former with the movements' structure of slow-fast-slow.⁷² For example, both second movements are entitled *Scherzo* and are comprised of three-note motifs of two sixteenth notes and one eighth note (See Example Nos. 39 and 40). Both concertos end in a dreamlike manner, without any hint of virtuosity as is standard in many violin concertos. However, Prokofiev's influence on Britten's *Violin Concerto* may not have been direct. William Walton's *Viola Concerto* (1929) was modeled on Prokofiev's above-mentioned work and it is known that Britten was familiar with this piece; he even played it through with Henry Boys.⁷³

⁷⁰ Van Nes, "Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto," 24.

⁷¹ Lyn Henderson, "His Influence on Britten: The Vital Prokofiev," *The Musical Times* 144, no. 1882 (2003): <https://doi.org/10.2307/1004703>, 16, last accessed on 3 August 2023.

⁷² Van Nes, "Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto," 25.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 25.

12 *Soli*

Bassoon 1,2 *pp molto ritmico*

Violin Solo *f*

Viola *col legno pp*

Soli

Ob. 1,2 *pp espress.*

Bsn. *p*

Vln. Solo *f*

Vln. II *unis. col legno*

Vla. *div. pizz. pp pesante*

Vc. *div. (pizz.) pp*

Fl. 1,2 *mf cresc.* *a2* *f* *sf*

Picc. *f* *sf*

Ob. 1,2 *p* *mf* *a2* *f* *sf*

Cl. 1 *p cresc.* *mf* *f* *sf*

Cl. 2 *p cresc.* *mf* *f* *sf*

Bsn. *p cresc.* *mf* *f* *sf*

Hn. 1,2 *pesante* *pp cresc.* *f* *sf*

C Tpt. 1,2 *con sord.* *p cresc.* *p cresc.* *f* *sf*

Vln. Solo

Vln. I *pizz.* *mf* *f* *sf*

Vln. II *mf* *(col legno)* *f* *sf*

Vla. *div. arco* *mf cresc.* *f* *sf*

Vc. *unis. col legno* *pp* *p cresc.* *f* *sf*

Cb. *p cresc.* *f* *sf*

Example No. 39: Britten Violin Concerto, Op. 15, movement 2, figure 12-13.

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Vivacissimo

Flute 1 *pp*

Harp *p*

Violin Solo **Vivacissimo**

Violin I *p* pizz.

Violin II *p* senza sord.

Viola *pp* senza sord.

Fl. 1 *pp* *p con brio* 7

Fl. 2

Harp *pp*

Vln. Solo *8va* *pizz.*

Vln. I *mp*

Vln. II

Vla.

2

Fl. 1

Fl. 2

Hp.

Vln. Solo

Vln. II

Vla.

arco

3

7

8^{va}

8^{va}

3

7

Example No. 40: Prokofiev Violin Concerto No. 1, Op. 19, movement 2, mm. 1-13.

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Britten's library in Aldeburgh contains many scores by Prokofiev, such as the two Violin Concertos, the *Cello Concerto* (with the revised version under the name *Sinfonia Concertante*), the two String Quartets, the *Cello Sonata* Op. 119, the *Sonata for Two Violins*, Op. 56, many piano works and stage works, as well as his *Classical* and *Fifth Symphonies*.⁷⁴

During Britten's lifespan, at the Snape Maltings Concert Hall under the artistic direction of Britten and his partner Pears, many works of Prokofiev were performed,

⁷⁴ Henderson, "His Influence on Britten," 16.

including the *Prelude for Piano in C Major*, Op. 12 No. 7 performed on the harp, *The Ugly Duckling*, his *Fourth Piano Sonata*, *Classical Symphony*, Scene No. 10 from *War and Peace* and the *Sinfonia Concertante*.⁷⁵

In London, he heard Prokofiev play his *Fifth Piano Concerto* live.

Britten, being the child prodigy he was, was exposed to Russian composers at an early age (some claim to recognize a cynical flair in his early works); consequently, a handful of his works from the 1930s and early 1940s contain the most influence from Sergey Prokofiev, including the *Violin Concerto*. For instance, according to Lyn Henderson, Prokofiev's *First* and *Third Piano Concertos* also influenced Britten greatly in his *Piano Concerto*, where the opening movement's unyielding rhythms remind us of the hammering in Prokofiev's *First* and *Third Piano Concertos*.⁷⁶

Both Britten and Prokofiev wrote piano works for the left hand (*Diversions for Piano and Orchestra* and *Piano Concerto No. 4*, respectively) requested by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein even though the latter piece was refused by the commissioner.⁷⁷

Prokofiev's influence was probably most apparent in Britten's *The Prince of the Pagodas*. The parody, the neat counterpoints and memorable tunes seem to be the technical influence of Prokofiev in Britten.

4.4. Stravinsky

The ballets of Igor Stravinsky may have influenced Britten even more than those of Tchaikovsky. Starting in 1925 for the following seven years, Britten bought at least four miniature scores of Stravinsky's ballets.⁷⁸ He described *Petrushka* as "an inspiration from beginning to end".⁷⁹ Moreover, Britten attended performances of *Pulcinella* and *Firebird* with Stravinsky himself on the podium. In the early part of his career, Britten praised Stravinsky in his diaries; however, when the two composers met for the second time in November 1949, things did not go well. Stravinsky apparently misunderstood *The Rape of Lucretia*, and Britten was tentative towards *The Rake's Progress*.⁸⁰ The two composers eventually lost contact and Britten's style remained more traditional while Stravinsky's became more modern (Britten described it as not having national roots). Britten's partner

⁷⁵ Henderson, "His Influence on Britten," 16.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁸ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

Peter Pears, however, was fascinated by Stravinsky's vocal music and even made a recording with Stravinsky himself conducting.⁸¹

Both Stravinsky and Britten based works on Wystan Hugh Auden's texts.

There are similarities in Britten's and Stravinsky's *Violin Concertos*. On one hand, the constant time signature changes of the Passacaglia movement at figure 39 are a clear influence of the Russian composer (see Example No. 41). On the other, both use percussive effects of the violin, such as rows of only up-bows and/or only down-bows (see Example Nos. 42 and 43), as well as the simultaneous use of arco and left-hand pizzicato (see Example Nos. 44 and 45).

39 *alla marcia* a2

The musical score for Figure 39, titled "39 alla marcia", is presented in a multi-staff format. The instruments included are Bassoon, two Horns in F, Trumpets 1 and 2 in C, Timpani, Violin Solo, Violin 1, and Violin 2. The music is in 4/4 time. The score is divided into three measures. In the first measure, the Bassoon and Horns are silent. The Trumpets play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Timpani play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Violin Solo part begins with a dynamic marking of *ff*. In the second measure, the Bassoon and Horns remain silent. The Trumpets continue their rhythmic pattern with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Timpani play a trill with a dynamic marking of *p cresc.*. The Violin Solo part continues with a dynamic marking of *sf*. In the third measure, the Bassoon plays a single note with a dynamic marking of *p*. The Horns play a sustained note with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Trumpets play a sustained note with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The Timpani play a sustained note with a dynamic marking of *p cresc.*. The Violin Solo part continues with a dynamic marking of *sf*. The Violin 1 and Violin 2 parts begin in the third measure with a dynamic marking of *p cresc.* and *mf cresc.* respectively.

⁸¹ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 44.

Fl. 1,2
Picc.
Ob. 1
Cl. 1,2 in B
Bsn. 1,2
Hn. in F 1,2
Hn. in F 3,4
C Tpt. 1,2
Timp.
Hp.
Vln. Solo
Vln. 1
Vln. 2

ff 6 6
ff 6
f 6
mf 6
f
cresc.
cresc.
mf Soli
f
ff
p
ff
f

Fl. 1,2

Picc.

Ob. 1

Cl. 1,2
in B

Bsn. 1,2

Hn. in F
1,2
3,4

C Tpt. 1,2

Timp.

Hp.

Vln. Solo

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

3

ff 5 6

ff 5 6

f 6 a2 6

a2 *mf* 6

p cresc.

mf cresc.

mf cresc.

p cresc.

tr

ff

p

sf

p cresc.

f

p cresc.

f <

Example No. 41: Britten Violin Concerto, movement 3, figure 39-40.

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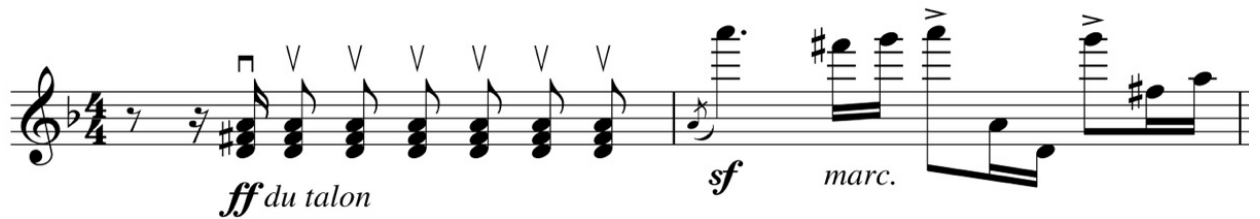
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Example No. 42: Stravinsky Violin Concerto, movement 1, figure 11, mm. 1-4.

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Example No. 43: Britten Violin Concerto, movement 1, figure 3, mm. 1-2.

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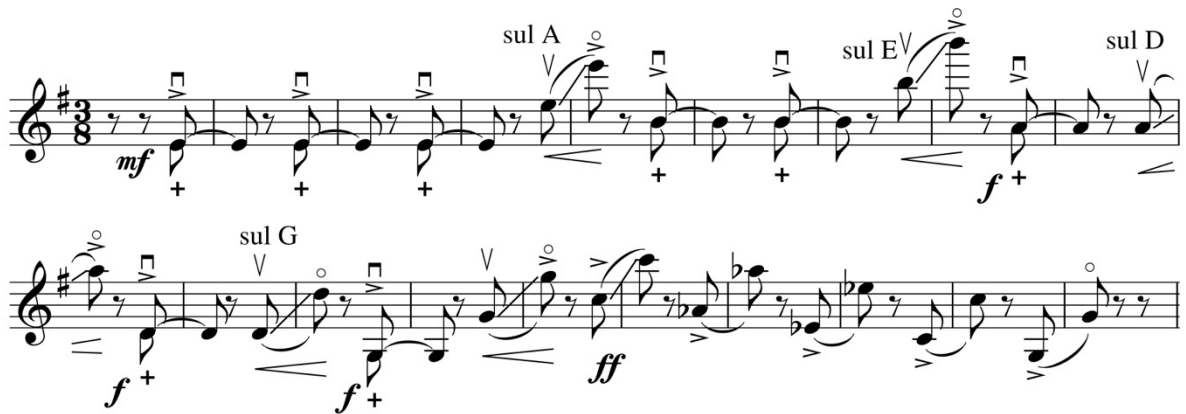
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Example No. 44: Stravinsky Violin Concerto, movement 4, figure 124, mm. 5-10.

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Example No. 45: Britten *Violin Concerto*, movement 2, figure 27, mm. 9-27.

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4.5. Shostakovich

Benjamin Britten enjoyed a profound friendship with Dmitri Shostakovich, as they were almost the same age and both bore witness to the devastating impacts of the two world wars, albeit from very different perspectives. Furthermore, their shared philosophical outlook on various social matters deepened their connection. Both showed their creativity by composing a wide range of works in a number of genres.⁸² Towards the ends of their lives, both Britten and Shostakovich were consumed by thoughts of mortality.⁸³

The strong link between the two composers was only brought to light by researchers such as Mitchell, Roseberry and Kovnatskaia after Britten's death.⁸⁴ Both composers often used forms such as the Passacaglia and the Waltz in their works and both greatly respected Mahler and Tchaikovsky. They both included the 'Dance of the Death' in a number of works (one of Britten's being the second movement of the *Violin Concerto* – (see Example No. 46), and Britten often used percussion to depict it. In a tribute to Shostakovich in 1966, Britten compared himself to Shostakovich, stating: "...very different from his own perhaps,

⁸² James Conlon, "Message, Meaning and Code in the Operas of Benjamin Britten," *The Hudson Review* 66, no. 3 (2013): 447–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43488573>, accessed July 2, 2023.

⁸³ McMillin, review, 783-785.

⁸⁴ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 120.

but conceived in the same period, children of similar fathers, and with many of the same aims.”⁸⁵

The image displays a musical score for Example No. 46, which is a section from Britten's Violin Concerto, movement 2, measures 1-16. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Bassoon 1.2, Violin Solo, and Viola. The second system includes staves for Oboe 1.2, Bassoon, Violin Solo, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The music is in 3/8 time and features a variety of dynamics and performance techniques. Key markings include 'Solo', 'pp molto ritmico', 'pp espess.', 'sf', 'col legno', 'p', 'pizz.', 'div.', and 'pp pesante'. The score is marked with a double bar line between the two systems.

Example No. 46: Britten Violin Concerto, movement 2, figure 12, mm. 1-16.

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The two composers shared an intriguing and largely undisclosed similarity in a realm that has remained concealed throughout history: their use of composition as a form of coding.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 116.

⁸⁶ Conlon, "Message, Meaning and Code," 447-65.

Shostakovich faced severe oppression under the Soviet regime, compelling him to resort to coded elements in his works to express himself and his unwavering defiance against the Stalinist regime and the backdrop of fear that permeated his life. The descriptions of his works in the introductions of their scores included many phrases added to avoid unwanted scrutiny from the Communist Party, as he was not able to openly express his stance.⁸⁷

Britten, residing in the Western world, appeared to have more freedom, both in expression and otherwise. While not forced to hide his opinions (in fact, he openly voiced them), he still employed code in his works for various reasons. The English composer was a pioneer in exploring themes of homosexuality and homoerotic relationships (primarily in his operas), even though these subjects were considered a taboo during his time. The mere mention of the word 'homosexual' in theaters remained prohibited until 1958, and homosexual acts were illegal until 1967.⁸⁸ Despite being clear about his orientation, Britten remained cautious about making public declarations. His reserved approach extended to other facets of his life as well. He was averse to discussing his own compositions and avoided theoretical debates and conforming to schools or stiff systems of composition. In contrast, he was very outspoken on social issues, declaring his support for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and his objection to World War II, maintaining his staunch pacifism throughout his life.⁸⁹ Perhaps due to Britten's timidity to speaking about his sexual orientation publicly, in his operas, he delved into the subject that had been previously avoided until he decided to address it. In *Peter Grimes*, through the emotive power of his music, the listener definitely feel sympathy for the protagonist despite his gruffness.⁹⁰ Britten states the following about *Peter Grimes*: "[A] central feeling for us was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones for our own [Pears and Britten's] situation."⁹¹ Similarly, Britten often presented women as victims in his operas (such as in *The Rape of Lucretia*) to show his solidarity with their hardships.

In my opinion, there are definitely limits to how much we can attribute codes in the works to being intentional or not. I believe that many researchers exaggerate the need to find words and symbols in the music of great composers when in reality, the composers

⁸⁷ Conlon, "Message, Meaning and Code," 447-65.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 447-65.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 447-65.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 447-65.

⁹¹ Ibid., 447-65.

had no such objectives. Nevertheless, in the context of Shostakovich and Britten, I find the arguments presented in Conlon’s study credible and convincing.

Britten and Shostakovich regarded each other’s works with great respect. In 1963, Shostakovich described Britten’s *War Requiem* as: “The most outstanding phenomenon of the twentieth century.”

In the 1930s, Britten was greatly drawn to Shostakovich and his works, both for musical and non-musical reasons (such as Shostakovich’s social engagement and involvement in the film sector).⁹² Prior to 1960, there is evidence that Britten studied the Suite from *The Nose*, *Lady Macbeth*, the *First Symphony* and the *First Piano Concerto*. He considered Shostakovich to be more of a composer of large-scale symphonies.⁹³

The enduring bond between these two composers was notably nurtured through their correspondence, which persisted until their first in-person encounter in September of 1960. It is evident that Britten held a deep respect for Shostakovich, evident in the fact that he had amassed a substantial collection of Shostakovich’s scores long before their initial face-to-face meeting. Their friendship spanned many years and left an indelible mark on both of their lives.

Within this remarkable friendship, it is intriguing to note that certain compositions by Shostakovich are thought to have had a direct influence on Britten’s work, though these resemblances may have been entirely unconscious. Such are the first two bars of Shostakovich’s *First Symphony* (clarinet solo) in bars 10-11 of the first piano part of Britten’s *Lullaby for a Retired Colonel* (see Example Nos. 47 and 48) and the beginning of Shostakovich’s *Fifth Symphony* in Britten’s *Suite for Solo Cello No. 2* (see Example No. 49 and 50).

Allegro ma non troppo ♩ = 160

Solo

Clarinet 1

Example No. 47: Shostakovich Symphony No. 1, movement 1, figure 8, mm. 1-2.

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⁹² Pyke, *Benjamin Britten’s Creative Relationship with Russia*, 120.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 162.

Alla marcia ♩ = 112



Example No. 48: Britten Lullaby for a Retired Coronel, mm. 10-11.

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Largo



Example No. 49: Britten Suite No. 2 for Solo Cello, movement 1, mm. 1-3

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Moderato ♩ = 76

Example No. 50: Shostakovich Symphony No. 5, movement 1, mm. 1-3.

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The similarity between Britten's *Violin Concerto* and Shostakovich's *First Violin Concerto* is also remarkable. Some of Britten's works have a degree of parody or sarcastic musical language which may have been an influence of Prokofiev and Shostakovich combined. Such is the sarcasm of the 'Burlesque' movement of the *String Quartet No. 3*. In the same movement, Britten's instructions to the viola player to play behind the bridge

have similarities to Shostakovich's instructions to play with the wood of the bow on the body of the instrument in his *String Quartet No. 13*.

Regarding the instrumentation practices of the two composers, both composers stand out thanks to their innovative use of percussion instruments. Although a direct influence between the two composers in this regard is improbable, it is beyond question that their writing for percussion was unique and that their following of each other's use of the percussion may have led to conscious or unconscious influences. Britten possessed a superior comprehension of percussion instruments due to his deep interest; in his *Symphony in D minor* (1927), he included a timpani, a triangle, castanets, cymbals and a bass drum. In his work *Our Hunting Fathers*, his use of the xylophone and its solo in the 'Epilogue and Funeral March' might owe its presence to Shostakovich (see Example No. 51).



Example No. 51: Britten 'Our Hunting Fathers', Epilogue and Funeral March xylophone solo, mm. 1-2.

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Britten wrote for xylophone in works such as *Love from a Stranger*, *Billy Budd*, and *Sinfonia da Requiem*. The instrument, however, usually was used to add a certain timbre to the instrumentation. Later in Britten's career, he used it as a means to create an oriental sound and wrote for xylophone in the whole range of dynamics, including pianissimo. Nevertheless, Shostakovich's repeated use of the xylophone differs greatly. He usually only wrote xylophone parts in the loudest sections of his pieces in an effort to make them more powerful. Such is the case in his *Cello Concerto No. 2* (see Example No. 52).

Xylophone

Example No. 52: Shostakovich Cello Concerto No. 2, movement 2, figure 100, mm. 1-8.

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If we take another percussion instrument, the vibraphone, as an example, the influence is reversed. Britten employed the vibraphone on various occasions throughout his career, such as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *War Requiem* and the *Cello Symphony*, which was at the time unusual to find in the traditional symphony orchestra. Shortly thereafter, Shostakovich included the vibraphone in his instrumentation in his last two symphonies.

Finally, it is controversial to claim that the use of percussion in Shostakovich's and Britten's works contained a direct influence. Britten was keen on the percussion instruments and may have used them to make his works sound more modern. While Britten steadily used percussion throughout the works of his whole life, Shostakovich used it more sporadically. Pyke refers to Liudmila Kovnatskaia who maintains that the celesta plays 'an exceptionally important role' in Britten's works' atmosphere. She is convinced that both Britten and Shostakovich employed the celesta upon hearing the *Abschied* in Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.⁹⁴ Shostakovich used the celesta in numerous works, whereas Britten used it more sparingly.

The connection of Britten and Shostakovich can also be analyzed through a non-musical view. Throughout his life, Britten was passionate about politics and showed interest in the current events of the Soviet Union. However, his regard for Russia began for musical reasons and it was not until 1935-36 that he started to view Russia in a more

⁹⁴ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 203.

political way, due to the political restlessness on a global level, and he regarded Shostakovich as the top composer of the Communist regime.⁹⁵ Until this point, he had paid more attention to Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky. During his numerous visits to the Soviet Union, he fostered a relationship with Ekaterina Furtseva, who at the time held the position of Soviet Minister of Culture. This proved to be beneficial to him on a professional level. Furtseva had great respect for Britten, and he turned to her for support when organizing Rostropovich's and Vishnevskaya's recording of *The Poet's Echo* for Decca and when trying to appeal the cancellation of Rostropovich's appearance at the Aldeburgh Festival.⁹⁶ He also expressed his disapproval of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, begging her to help bring back cultural liberty to the region. Furtseva, however, ended up committing suicide shortly thereafter.

One of the reasons for Britten's frequent visits to Russia before the 60's might have been to connect with the likewise liberal artistic community. He also expressed his approval of Russia's education system for music that provided high-level education for gifted students at an early age, and how, on a general level, musicians were treated much better in Russia than in England.⁹⁷

Despite Britten's enthusiasm and eagerness to travel to the Soviet Union, it is said that his attitude changed and became more critical in 1968, partially due to the ruining of Rostropovich's position for political reasons. This glumness can be felt in many of his compositions between January 1969 and March 1971.⁹⁸

Some claim that the reasons for his visits from 1970 onwards were entirely musical, emphasizing his friendship with Rostropovich and his wife, as well as with Richter and Shostakovich. Britten regarded Shostakovich's music as much higher than any of the latter's contemporaries from the Soviet Union.

Britten, perhaps due to his age, was more eager to make a living from composition than Shostakovich, and more readily accepted work in the context of theaters. He considered it a way for him to use music to reach more listeners and believed that the lack of consumers of contemporary music was due to the narrowing of classical music in general.⁹⁹ Donald Mitchell describes the composer as "an artist with a social conscience

⁹⁵ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten's Creative Relationship with Russia*, 122.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

and a sense of public responsibility”.¹⁰⁰ Britten himself refers to his direction of the Aldeburgh Festival as a way to share high culture with a part of England that was hardly exposed to classical music. In his opinion (that he shared with none other than Shostakovich), the link was clear: the music of a nation influences the cultural scene of the nation, which includes its politics. He stated the following in his first interview in the Soviet Union:

Music is a means of communication, and I firmly believe that the composer ought to convey something to people through his work. And as a member of society, the composer must try to create works which would be useful and relevant to his people. A true artist cannot remain indifferent to the reception of the audience. It can happen sometimes that a composer creates music that is ahead of its time, but this does not mean that the artist can work for the chosen few, as is the case with some young composers in the West. This is detrimental for the composer in the first place, as he becomes detached from the true source of inspiration.¹⁰¹

To a certain extent, Britten considered his status in England ‘equivalent’ to Shostakovich’s in Russia. Both were somewhat overshadowed by the work of Vaughan Williams and Prokofiev, respectively, and by 1960, when both had passed away, they became without doubt the leading living composers of their countries.¹⁰² However, according to Hans Keller, Britten achieved higher levels of popularity abroad than in Britain due to lasting intolerance towards his homosexuality and pacifism in England, which was part of the reason why the promotion of Britten’s works in the Soviet Union by artists such as Rozhdestvensky, Dalgat and Kondrashin was crucial.¹⁰³ Soon after, also thanks to the success of his *War Requiem*, Britten became honored by the British government, and the Aldeburgh Festival received additional financial support from the royalty. Britten’s first meeting with Shostakovich in 1960 was indeed possible thanks to the encouragement of the Foreign Office and the British Council, and thanks to this diplomacy, the two were able to maintain contact after, and England used Britten as proof to Russia that British living composers were on a par with the Russian ones.¹⁰⁴ For a short

¹⁰⁰ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten’s Creative Relationship with Russia*, 145.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

period of time, Britten was a member of the Anglo-Soviet Consultative Committee. His arrangement of the *National Anthem* and *God Save the Queen* are examples of his ‘civic’ commissions. However, as he got older, he accepted fewer commissions of this sort.

The influence was reciprocated, and it is said that later, Britten inspired Shostakovich to return to writing for voice post-war.¹⁰⁵ He wrote his work *Russian Funeral* for brass ensemble in 1936 while learning Shostakovich’s *Piano Concerto No. 1*, and includes a funeral melody that Shostakovich used in his *11th Symphony*. The work represents his pacifist views.¹⁰⁶ Both Britten’s *Piano Concerto* and Shostakovich’s *1st Piano Concerto* consist of four movements.

4.6. Witold Lutosławski

Born in the same year (1913), Britten and Lutosławski can be considered as close contemporaries; although they had a lot in common on the music scene, they did not form an intimate friendship. Lutosławski’s works were programmed multiple times at the Aldeburgh Festival directed by Britten. In 1965, the festival was heralded by William Mann for featuring artists such as Fischer-Dieskau, Richter and Rostropovich, besides Britten, and in the same year, Lutosławski’s *Paroles tissées*, a piece dedicated to Peter Pears, was premiered alongside Britten’s *Gemini variations* dedicated to the Hungarian Jeney twins.¹⁰⁷ Previously at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1963, Britten conducted Lutosławski’s piece entitled *Dance preludes* in its version for clarinet and orchestra with the English Chamber Orchestra and soloist Gervase de Peyer. Due to its difficulty and to Britten’s fear on the stage while conducting it at the concert, the piece had a negative impression on Britten as regards to his colleague’s work.

In the 1960s, the Polish composer made many trips to the West, including the United Kingdom and the United States, while the British composer frequented the Soviet Union, and paid a visit to Poland 1961.¹⁰⁸ Lutosławski was supported by Sir William Glock (the director in Dartington) because he was considered a progressive composer associated with the avant-garde; and the ‘traditionalism’ in Britten’s music was the reason for Glock’s

¹⁰⁵ Pyke, *Benjamin Britten’s Creative Relationship with Russia*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁶ "Listening to Britten – Russian Funeral," *Good Morning Britten*, July 15, 2013, <http://goodmorningbritten.wordpress.com/2013/07/15/listening-to-britten-russian-funeral>. Accessed on 19 July 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Arnold Whittall, "Britten and Lutosławski: Taming the 20th-Century Avant-Garde," *The Musical Times* 154, no. 1923 (2013), 3.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

lack of support in his whole circle, including the BBC. Lutosławski's reputation of belonging to the avant-garde can be attributed to Pierre Boulez conducting his *Symphony No. 2* with the NDR Symphony Orchestra. After 1976, however, Lutosławski's works were no longer characterized as avant-garde; rather, his style became more similar to Britten's modern classicism than to the late modernism of Tippett, Carter or Messiaen.¹⁰⁹ His *Piano Concerto* (1987-88) is a good example of this, of which the fourth movement takes the form of the Baroque chaconne¹¹⁰, similarly to Britten's frequent and conservative use of the Passacaglia form in his works, such as in the *Violin Concerto*.

Lutosławski was not at all keen on opera as a genre, in contrast to Britten. While Britten was influenced by the Soviet Union and the Far East (due to his trips to Asia in 1956), Lutosławski received his inspiration from the Western avant-garde with his post-tonal and post-serial sound.¹¹¹ Lutosławski outlived Britten and some of his most outstanding and most progressive works were composed during those late years.

Britten and Lutosławski met in person in Warsaw, Geneva and Aldeburgh. The former encounter took place when Britten and Pears performed at the Warsaw Autumn Festival on 19 September 1961, a concert that Lutosławski praised.¹¹² Shortly thereafter, the Aldeburgh Festival commissioned a work that was to be dedicated to Peter Pears and the festival's 1963 edition, and in September of 1963, the two composers met again in Geneva, Switzerland, in a concert where commissions from both of them were presented. Britten commented the following on Lutosławski's *Per humanitatem ad pacem*: "The Lutosławski was a very good piece – but not, I thought, so suitable!"¹¹³

Even after the passing of both composers, scholars and musicians rarely celebrate their anniversaries together.

4.7. Sviatoslav Richter

Britten not only received inspiration from the great composers. He also worked with world-renowned performing artists. Richter was a devoted admirer of Britten's compositions since hearing *Peter Grimes* for the first time and the two artists established a friendship and professional relationship over the years. Britten visited the USSR a total of

¹⁰⁹ Whittall, "Britten and Lutosławski," 16.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹¹² Ibid., 3.

¹¹³ Ibid., 3.

five times.¹¹⁴ Although his *Piano Concerto* was not premiered by Richter, the latter interpreted it many times, and in 1970, Richter and Britten recorded the work with the English Chamber Orchestra for Decca. Richter's and Britten's collaboration was much more than the typical composer-performer relationship, as Britten worked together with Richter as a conductor and pianist as well. He conducted Mozart's *Piano Concertos No. 22* and *27* with Richter as the soloist, and even wrote a cadenza for No. 22 which Richter esteemed and performed many times later in his career as well. At the Aldeburgh Festival lead by Britten, Richter and Britten performed works by Schubert, Mozart, Schumann and Britten's *Rondo Alla Burlesque* as a piano duo.¹¹⁵ There is no information, however, about how Richter's playing might have influenced the compositional techniques of Britten.

¹¹⁴ Kudoyarov, "Benjamin Britten's Piano Concerto," 818.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 818.

5. How Britten's Works Have Been Regarded in the Past and Present and the International Success of his *Violin Concerto*

5.1. Britten's Reputation During His Lifetime

It is well known that Benjamin Britten's musical language was considered rather conservative and intensely connected with tradition compared to the works of his contemporaries such as Boulez, Cage, Stockhausen and Barraqué.¹¹⁶ It is therefore challenging for music historians to classify his style, even though his lifetime spans the period of modernism specified by many writers.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, although Britten was skeptical towards the 20th century avant-garde and believing that composers should keep their audiences in mind when creating, advocates of atonal modern music such as Hans Keller and Hermann Scherchen still programmed his works.

Unlike many composers, after Britten's death in 1976, there was never an absence of his works in the international cultural scene¹¹⁸. Britten established a solid international reputation during his lifetime, and his works continue to be enthusiastically received by musicians and audiences today. During his lifetime, Britten was unique and fortunate as a composer to have access to the media and have all of his works published and recorded, which augmented his success globally. Boosey & Hawkes was his lifelong publisher. Following Ralph Vaughan Williams's unofficial position of being Britain's "national composer" in the field for multiple years, Britten's fierce determination to be his successor drove him to write an opera, the reason simply being that this was the one genre in which Vaughan Williams had not managed to successfully attain international recognition. Britten was the first composer in Great Britain, in his century, to write an opera in English which not only garnered musical praise, but also introduced creative and thought-provoking materials for his enthusiastic audience to engage in. Alongside Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and Walton, Britten firmly established himself as a leading English composer of the 20th century and today, his music is regularly programmed at important events in numerous countries. Perhaps because it is authentically Britten and listeners can relate easily to his

¹¹⁶ Britten, Interview by Tracey, 244-249.

¹¹⁷ Petra Philipsen, "New Music in Britain – with or without Britten? The historical positioning of Benjamin Britten," *Revue belge de Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 68 (2014): 209-221.

¹¹⁸ "Benjamin Britten at 100: An Anniversary of His Birth," *The Guardian*, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/nov/21/benjamin-britten-music-hundredth-anniversary-birth>.

profound writing style, but perhaps also because his music is so skillfully written and brings the listener to discover previously unexplored territories.

Many composers have paid tributes to Britten during his life as well as posthumously by either dedicating their works to him or including his name to the title of their works. For example, Shostakovich's Symphony No. 14, a grandiose song cycle for soprano, bass, string orchestra and percussion composed in 1969, was dedicated to Britten. Walton titled his orchestral composition *Improvisations on an Impromptu of Benjamin Britten*, in 1969. Moreover, one of Arvo Pärt's best works, *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, is popular and beloved by audiences far and wide.

5.2. Britten's Works in Hungarian Cultural Scenes and in Other European Capitals

The Hungarian music scene often overlooks the works of English composers with the exception of Purcell. Consequently, Britten's works have unfortunately been inadequately represented. In the Hungarian State Opera House, to my understanding, *Peter Grimes* (performed in 1999) and *The Rape of Lucrecia* (performed in 2013) have been programmed. The National Philharmonic Orchestra performed his *War Requiem* in 2013¹¹⁹ and the Danubia Orchestra performed his *Violin Concerto* this year on 19 February 2022,¹²⁰ which the Budapest Festival Orchestra also presented in 2004. Interestingly, apart from the works of Henry Purcell, the Hungarian music community has never fully embraced English music, despite the fact that even Béla Bartók mentioned their importance.

Similarly, in the European capitals, especially in the German speaking regions, his works have not yet received as much recognition as they deserve. Janine Jansen performed the *Violin Concerto* with the Berlin Philharmonic in 2009, which the orchestra had performed previously half a century ago¹²¹. His chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw* was performed in the Paris Philharmonic in 2021¹²², and as David Vernier remarks in his review of the performance of the RIAS Kammerchor¹²³: "it's a treat to hear a fine German choir

¹¹⁹ "Háborús Requiem," Magyar Virtuózok, accessed August 11, 2022,

<https://www.filharmonikusok.hu/muvek/haborus-requiem/>.

¹²⁰ "ZAK bérlet – 03. Kunst der Fuge," Utazenehez.hu, accessed August 11, 2022,

<https://utazenehez.hu/koncertek/zak-berlet-03-kunstderfuge-2022-02-19-193000>.

¹²¹ Michael Cookson: [http://www.musicweb-](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2014/May14/Britten_Weinberg_VC_CC7627.htm)

[international.com/classrev/2014/May14/Britten_Weinberg_VC_CC7627.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2014/May14/Britten_Weinberg_VC_CC7627.htm) (last viewed on 12 August 2022).

¹²² "Britten, Le Tour d'Écrou," Philharmonie de Paris, accessed August 15, 2022,

<https://philharmoniedeparis.fr/en/activity/opera/21756-britten-le-tour-decrou>.

¹²³ <https://www.classicstoday.com/review/britten-from-berlin/> (last read on 15 August 2022).

sing such thoroughly English music, which for some reason is not so common, not only for German but for French and Italian choirs as well.”

5.3. Performances of Britten’s Works in the United States

On the contrary, in the United States, Britten’s compositions have experienced significant successes since his emigration in 1939. He was a good friend of the composer Aaron Copland, whom he considered to be his mentor. His works from that period indeed exhibit an American influence.¹²⁴ The Koussevitzky Foundation, led by the renowned conductor Serge Koussevitzky, commissioned one of his most famous works, *Peter Grimes*, and the American premiere took place at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts, in 1946.¹²⁵ Even today, Britten’s works are featured constantly in the American classical music world. The *Violin Concerto* is unquestionably one of the most frequently programmed works. In the past ten years alone, the New York Philharmonic programmed his *Violin Concerto* in 2018¹²⁶ and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2014.¹²⁷ The Boston Symphony programmed his *War Requiem* in 2022¹²⁸ and is planning a performance of his *Violin Concerto* in 2023¹²⁹. The Philadelphia Orchestra recorded his *War Requiem* in 2017. In 2014, the San Francisco Symphony organized a three-week Britten Centennial Celebration where pieces such as *Peter Grimes*, *Four Sea Interludes* and *Pagodas* were interpreted with outstanding success¹³⁰. His work *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra* has been a useful educational tool and is programmed in many children’s concerts, such as at the New York Philharmonic’s *Young People’s Concert* in 2014¹³¹.

¹²⁴ Suzanne Robinson: “You absolutely owe it to England to stay here”: Copland as mentor to Britten, 1939-1942, p. 1.

¹²⁵ "An Opera Debut for Britten and Bernstein," YourClassical.org, accessed August 13, 2022, <https://www.yourclassical.org/episode/2022/08/06/an-opera-debut-for-britten-and-bernstein>.

¹²⁶ "Review: Lamsma, Zweden and the New York Philharmonic," Bachtrack, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://bachtrack.com/review-lamsma-zweden-britten-shostakovich-new-york-philharmonic-november-2018>.

¹²⁷ "The Philadelphia Orchestra Plays Benjamin Britten," Broad Street Review, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.broadstreetreview.com/articles/the-philadelphia-orchestra-plays-benjamin-britten>.

¹²⁸ "Britten: War Requiem," Boston Symphony Orchestra, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.bso.org/events/britten-war-requiem>.

¹²⁹ "Britten & Shostakovich," Boston Symphony Orchestra, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.bso.org/events/britten-shostakovich>.

¹³⁰ Mark Swed, "Review: Britten with SF Symphony," Los Angeles Times, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/classical/la-et-cm-britten-sf-symphony-review-20140701-column.html>.

¹³¹ "Britten," New York Philharmonic, accessed August 13, 2022, <https://nyphil.org/ypcplay/britten.html#jump-menu>.

5.4. Britten's Influence on Thomas Adès

The modern English composer Thomas Adès has often found himself in the company of comparisons to Britten, and it is not without reason. Born in the vibrant cultural hub of London in 1971, Adès shares several striking similarities with Britten. Much like his predecessor, he is not just a composer but also an active performing pianist and conductor showcasing a multifaceted musical talent.

In their artistic journeys, both Adès and Britten display a certain conservatism in their approach to composition. They have a deep reverence for tradition while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of their craft. A notable parallel in their oeuvres is the adaptation of Shakespearean works into operas. Just as Britten crafted *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a musical masterpiece, Adès took on *The Tempest*, demonstrating his profound connection to the Bard's timeless narratives.¹³²

Adès' rise to prominence was marked by his opera entitled *Powder Her Face*, which captivated audiences and critics alike, much like Britten's early successes. Indeed, the two composers share the distinction of achieving remarkable acclaim at a relatively young age. It is not a stretch to say that Adès has assumed the mantle as one of the most renowned English composers since the era of Benjamin Britten. His music, like Britten's, retains a sense of musical conservatism that pays homage to their British musical heritage. In fact, Adès openly cites Britten as one of his principal influences and role models, emphasizing the lasting impact of Britten's legacy on contemporary English classical music.¹³³

In a symbolic passing of the torch, Adès was chosen to take the helm as the director of the Aldeburgh Festival¹³⁴, a prestigious musical event co-founded by Benjamin Britten, along with Peter Pears and writer Eric Crozier, back in 1948.¹³⁵ This appointment reflects not only Adès' musical stature but also the profound resonance of Britten's legacy in the world of music.

Today, Adès enjoys a reputation that stands shoulder to shoulder with the indelible mark left by Britten. As a torchbearer of British classical music traditions, he continues to captivate audiences.

¹³² "Music & Letters", Oxford University Press Vol. 74, No. 2 (May, 1993), pp. 246-268.

¹³³ "Berliner Philharmoniker," ClassicCard.de, accessed August 10, 2022,

<https://www.classiccard.de/en/event/berliner-philharmoniker-2/>.

¹³⁴ "Thomas Adès Dazzles at the BSO: Audacity and Confidence," Art and Culture Today, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://artandculturetoday.wordpress.com/opera/thomas-ades-dazzles-at-the-bso-audacity-and-confidence/>.

¹³⁵ "Archives Hub: Material from the Archive of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears," Jisc, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/afb9d93b-65e3-3b9c-9d19-06ac6051be61>.

6. The *Violin Concerto* Through the Eyes of the Critics

Violinists such as: Janine Jansen, Tasmin Little, Augustin Hadelich, Arabella Steinbacher, Gil Shaham, Vilde Frang, James Ehnes, Anthony Marwood and Simone Landsma have performed the *Violin Concerto* in concerts and recordings which have drawn the attention of critics from all over the world. The wealth of the work's discography reflects its success both during Britten's life and in the present day.

On Anthony Marwood's recording with the BBC Scottish Symphony under Ilan Volkov, Richard Fairman writes the following¹³⁶:

A neat coupling brings together the three works that Britten wrote for violin and/or viola with orchestra. The most substantial is the *Violin Concerto*, which is at last starting to establish its place alongside other major 20th-century concertos. Anthony Marwood, most associated with the contemporary violin concertos of Thomas Adès and Sally Beamish, makes the Britten sound as modern here as anybody. This is a lithe, spiky, rhythmical performance, bristling with satire in the Shostakovich style, at speeds well ahead of Britten's own. There is some lack of aural beauty – Marwood's tone gets thin at the top and the orchestra's sound is rather utilitarian – but every phrase is highly charged [...] In the closing pages, where the music lingers uncertainly between major and minor, this performance takes on quite an air of anxiety. Could this be a more telling depiction of the 1930s than the bittersweet sentiment found on the composer's own recording decades later?

Brian Wigman wrote the following on James Ehnes's and the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's (conductor: Kirill Karabits) interpretation¹³⁷:

...The Britten sounds wonderful. Firstly, the Bournemouth Symphony plays like a world-class band under Kirill Karabits, an unknown to me to this point. The strings sing gorgeously throughout. I like the attention that Karabits gives to the harp, as well as the sturdy backdrop that helps make this music so effective. This isn't a concerto

¹³⁶ Richard Fairman, "Review: Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15; *Double Concerto*; *Lachrymae*, Op. 48a," Gramophone, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/britten-violin-concerto-op-15-double-concerto-lachrymae-op-48a>.

¹³⁷ Brian Wigman, "Review: Britten: *Violin Concerto*," Classical Net, accessed August 12, 2022, <http://www.classical.net/music/recs/reviews/o/ony04113a.php>.

where you leave the hall humming the tunes, but the conductor takes great care to point out the various beauties in the score. Meanwhile, Ehnes plays gloriously. He's not the least bit daunted by the numerous hurdles for his instrument and is technically assured throughout. He also works very well with Karabits and the orchestra, ensuring a fine artistic partnership that makes a lasting impression....

Michael Cookson's review of Linus Roth's and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin's (direction: Mihkel Kütson) disc states the following¹³⁸:

...My admiration for the Britten *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15 goes back to 1985. It was at a marvellous concert at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester with the great Ida Haendel performing the work with the BBC Philharmonic. Britten completed the score in 1939 largely in Canada during his trip with Peter Pears to North America. It was Sir John Barbirolli who conducted the première at Carnegie Hall, New York in 1940 with Spanish soloist Antonio Brosa and the New York Philharmonic. Dissatisfied with some technical aspects of the three movement work and with some editing by Brosa it seems that Britten undertook revisions in 1950, 1954 and 1965. The relative neglect of the score on concert programmes is surprising although there are a number of fine recordings in the catalogue. Britten's centenary in 2013 prompted an increasing interest in the score. When soloist Janine Jansen performed the concerto in 2009 in Berlin with the Berliner Philharmoniker I was surprised to discover that the orchestra hadn't played it for fifty years. When I interviewed renowned violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter in 2012 she expressed interest in playing the Britten concerto in the future. So fingers crossed that Mutter will be adding the Britten work to her repertoire. The powerfully brooding melodies of the opening movement *Moderato con moto* have an unsettlingly sinister feel. There's a dark undercurrent together with a particular sense of emotional struggle often found in Britten's music. Vigorous playing from Roth in the strong and dynamic second movement *Vivace* develops into a tension-filled stormy outburst and feels like a harbinger of impending danger. In the extended *cadenza* Roth conveys an icy chill that penetrates to the bone. Few players bring the remarkable intensity of emotion that Roth generates in this movement. Britten fills the Finale - a *Passacaglia* - with writing of dark passion like an anguished cry of both physical and emotional pain. Assured and highly alert, Roth plays with a searing passion and unyielding concentration and these combine to stunning effect....

¹³⁸ Cookson, "Review."

Finally, after Vilde Frang's and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra's performance of the work, Melinda Bargreen's impression included the following¹³⁹:

...The scene-stealer at Seattle Symphony Orchestra on Saturday night, however, was the young Norwegian violinist Vilde Frang and her dazzling, impassioned reading of the thorny Britten Violin Concerto No. 1. Looking as if she had just stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, the soloist gave an utterly committed, finely nuanced performance that made it clear she owns this difficult, often fierce concerto. Britten composed it while still in his 20s, and it is like no other: How often do you hear a violin concerto in which the initial motif is introduced by timpani, the trombones announce a new subject and the soloist is backed by a full brass section?

You'd think the pure, sweet voice of Frang's violin would have no chance, but guest conductor Jakub Hrusa made certain the soloist was beautifully supported and never overshadowed. Partnering the quicksilver violinist must have been a challenging task as she made every phrase distinctively her own, with long, expertly-shaped lines that sank down to a whisper and roared to life again in spiky utterances.

Frang's fingerwork and bowing were impressive throughout, most of all in the tricky extended harmonics in which the soloist teeters at the edge of control. On a technical level alone, her performance was jaw-dropping; what made it exceptional was the thought and the artistry that had obviously gone into shaping the nuances of every note....

Benjamin Britten, unquestionably, has etched his name into the annals of history as one of the preeminent English composers of the 20th century. His musical compositions possess a remarkable ability to resonate with people from all walks of life, primarily because they traverse a vast spectrum of emotions. His works have garnered admiration and appreciation on a global scale, standing as masterpieces that transcend cultural boundaries.

Britten's enduring impact extends far beyond his compositions alone. His founding of the Aldeburgh Festival, an event celebrating the arts, has served as a transformative force in the lives of countless individuals. Through this festival and his music, he became a

¹³⁹ Melinda Bargreen, "Concert Review: Norwegian Violinist Masters Fierce Britten Concerto," The Seattle Times, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/classical-music/concert-review-norwegian-violinist-masters-fierce-britten-concerto/>.

catalyst for change and a source of inspiration for generations. As a result, his legacy remains vivid and vital, destined to endure for many years to come, continuing to touch the hearts of those who encounter his artistry.

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