Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative

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Preface

In this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate my capability as a musicologist. Of course, this endeavour is primarily aimed at fulfilling the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, but as a product of the research I have undertaken the last year, it means more to me than just that. In these confusing times for an (aspiring) musicologist, in which the value of the work one does is regularly questioned, or in which one at least ceaselessly has to validate this work, it is sometimes difficult (or even impossible) to stay truthful to one's personal affiliations with the subject matter.

In the past three years of my bachelor education in musicology, I have encountered many different perspectives on musicology, of which I have enjoyed many, but disliked others. For me, it was therefore of the utmost importance to contribute to the kind of musicology I regard as indispensable, but which I often see dispensed with. It is the kind of musicology Joseph Kerman describes as "the musicologists' ideal:"

> Musicologists strive to view […] music within its full historical context: a context flooded with lesser music which the theorists ignore, coloured by historical performance conditions different from those we now accept, informed by complex economic, social, intellectual, and psychological forces, and cross-hatched by intertextuality – by the references composers make in one work to another as acknowledged model or unacknowledged influence.[1]

Although I have tried to be as meticulous as possible, I can only hope I have been able to avoid the "musicologists' characteristic failure" of superficiality which Kerman laments, something which would have been absolutely impossible without the help from numerous people. I would therefore like to thank my beloved Anouk, for her unremitting support and encouragement; my supervisor Dr. Paul van Emmerik, for his challenging and reassuring confidence; the staff of the Britten-Pears Foundation, Dr. Nicholas Clark in particular; Rémy Baudet; Michael Charry; Charlie Cross; Leo van Doeselaar; Mark Lubotsky; Arthur Olof; Johan Olof; Prof. Steve Nicholson; Petra Philipsen; Dr. Suzanne Robinson; Dr. Jaime Trancoso; and many others without whom my thesis would not have been what it presently is.

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[1] Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 72.

Thou mayst believe me, gentle reader, without swearing, that I could willingly desire this book (as a child of my understanding) to be the most beautiful, gallant, and discreet that might possibly be imagined; but I could not transgress the order of nature, wherein everything begets his like […].

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (trans. Thomas Shelton), Author's Preface to *Don Quixote.*

Introduction

"I will certainly tell you now the very little to say that there is about the Violin Concerto," Benjamin Britten wrote to his friend Albert Goldberg, the American critic, pianist and conductor.[2] Indeed, other than some (admittedly, useful) information on the revisions Britten made to the concerto, this letter contains no valuable insights into the score whatsoever. In fact, Britten deeply disliked discussing his own music:

> A composer's job is to create, not to comment; and this is not a theory, but a conviction & an inclination. I hate talking about my own music, or my own musical inclination, & avoid it whenever I can.[3]

When researching Britten's music – whether it is *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33 (1945), the *War Requiem*, Op. 66 (1962), *Lachrymae*, Op. 48 (1950) or, as is presently the case, the Violin Concerto, Op. 15 (1939) – this 'inclination' of Britten's is rather unfortunate. Although the abovementioned letter is certainly not the only one concerning the Violin Concerto, and although Britten did comment on his music, there is not much known of his views on this concerto. Whenever discussing the work, he usually confined himself to truisms such as the date and place of origin, and information on the first performance (which we obviously could as easily have found out by looking at the first and last pages of the score). On one occasion however (in the 1971 Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, in which Britten authored notes on some of the compositions he was going to conduct), Britten did comment on the work, albeit concisely:

> The first movement starts with a tiny phrase for timpani, answered by the cymbal [see Ex. 1]. This becomes the accompaniment for the first long tune on the violin solo, reappears many times during the movement, and finally accompanies a melodic cadenza descending slowly from the violin's highest notes, in double- and triple-stopping. There is a pleading middle section in the acrobatic *Vivace*, after which the previous material appears softly and muted. There is a slow crescendo to a

[2] Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976, Volume Three 1946-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 621-622.

[3] Paul Kildea, ed., *Britten on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239.

tutti which introduces a cadenza. This leads directly to the *Passacaglia*, of which the theme is announced by the trombones.[4]

Ex. 1 - Britten - Violin Concerto - Opening motif (mm. 1-3)

The violinist who was to give this performance (with Britten conducting), was Mark Lubotsky. In the same programme note, Britten wrote that a recording made by Lubotsky (and Kiril Kondrashin) of his concerto “was the performance I had been waiting for.” Although they met late in Britten’s life, Lubotsky and Britten stayed close friends until Britten’s death; but even to him, Britten never talked about any unique, personal details regarding the composition process of the Violin Concerto.[5]

Since extended research on the Violin Concerto up until now is fairly limited (and as shown above, since Britten did not really amplify on his views), it seems somewhat curious that there is such a rich discourse regarding this work in both scholarly and commercial writing. That is, a discourse which is way more intricate than the structural analysis Britten was willing to share, and far more concerned with external stimuli (musical and extra-musical) and subtexts. Humphrey Carpenter writes for instance, in his famous (and notorious) biography, that “[undoubtedly] the work, conceived during the first half of 1939 and sketched that summer, acquired some of its character from external events.”[6] Although the Second World War had started on the first of September that year (and the power of Hitler’s Germany and other totalitarian regimes was steadily growing in

[4] Ibid., 365.

[5] Mark Lubotsky, in discussion with the author, 22 April 2013.

[6] Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 141.

the preceding years), the “external events” Carpenter mentions are generally assumed to involve the Spanish Civil War in particular. Christopher Headington, for instance, refers in his (compared to Carpenter’s, relatively short) biography to the Spanish violinist who gave the first performance, Antonio Brosa, as the one who might have introduced the Spanish Civil War subtext to the discussion:

> Its first interpreter, the Spaniard Antonio Brosa, was to see Spanish elements in the work – perhaps a sadness for the Spain Britten had visited and then seen torn by its civil war.[7]

One of Britten’s (many) other biographers, Michael Oliver, makes a similar point, but in a slightly more accurate and critical manner:

> Brosa identified [the opening drum rhythm] as a ‘Spanish rhythm’ […]. The conclusion is a lament, leaving in its wake an inevitable question about the significance of the ‘Spanish rhythm’, in a concerto begun during the Spanish Civil War, for an expatriate Spaniard, and concluded in a World War for which the Spanish conflict seemed to many like a sinister rehearsal.[8]

David E. Schneider, author of the chapter “Contrasts and Common Concerns in the Concerto 1900-1945” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, takes a far less critical (and much bolder) stance towards this Spanish subtext:

> War, albeit viewed from a safer distance, is […] the subject of Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto, Op. 15 (1939). Completed in North America, where pacifist Britten took refuge from England bracing itself for war, his Violin Concerto is also a response to the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. […] Britten’s opening timpani motif at once […] suggests a Spanish rhythm, and, in its alternation of pitches a perfect fourth apart (F-C), carries a martial undertone. Passages composed of tattoos (figure 3ff.) and fanfare-like arpeggios (figure 4ff.) strengthen the military topic […].[9]

Regardless of this audaciousness, Schneider is not the only one who considers the martial features of the work (in addition to Brosa’s contention) in the context of the Spanish Civil

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[7] Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 48.

[8] Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2008), 79.

[9] David E. Schneider, “Contrasts and Common Concerns in the Concerto 1900-1945,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, ed. Simon P. Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 147.

War. Eric Roseberry sees these elements (and *en passant* adding a few) equally as indications of a Spanish Civil War subtext:

> The use of imagery with Spanish associations (castanet rhythms, flamenco-like guitar sonorities, the slow sarabande rhythm of the section beginning at Fig. 36 in the finale) together with pre-echoes of the *War Requiem* (fanfares, threatening trumpets and drums) would seem to point towards a Spanish Civil War sub-text. The hidden agenda suggested by such imagery links the work with Britten's contemporaneous tribute to the victims of the Spanish Civil War, the *Ballad of Heroes* (1939).[10]

On a less abstract (but nonetheless sometimes confusing) level are the various contemplations of musical influences on Britten's Violin Concerto. Britten, for instance, "knew his Prokofiev and Shostakovich," as Headington puts it, when dealing with the violin and the piano concertos.[11] "The 1938 Piano Concerto's Toccata first movement […] echoes a type of writing that was especially typical of Prokofiev's early period, for instance in the hammering rhythms of his First and Third piano concertos," writes Lyn Henderson in a contribution to *The Musical Times*, in which she discusses Prokofiev's influence on Britten. She also notes, regarding the Violin Concerto, that

> […] we know from the evidence of a diary entry on 19 March 1931 that [Britten] had already heard Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto [when composing his equivalent]. Even if his immediate response to the Prokofiev concerto had been to declare, "Prokofiev op.19 Vln. Concerto didn't contain much music, but was rather like a compendium of School for Virtuosity vln. exercises", a lingering remembrance of the earlier work is still perhaps to be felt in Britten's much later concerto, and especially in the second movement's predominantly stepwise-rising outlines.[12]

It seems rather far-fetched to deliberate on these similarities when we know Britten disliked Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto, Op. 19 (1917), but we need to take into account that Britten's musical taste changed considerably during the 1930s (the decade which spans his seventeenth to twenty-seventh year of life). Furthermore, the similarities

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[10] Eric Roseberry, "The Concertos and Early Orchestral Scores: Aspects of Style and Aesthetic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 238-239.

[11] Headington, *Britten*, 53.

[12] Lyn Henderson, "His Influence on Britten: The Vital Prokofiev," *The Musical Times* 144 (2003): 19.

in overall structure are hard failing to notice, since the slow-fast-slow outline which Britten's and Prokofiev's concertos share was not quite widespread at the time, or as Schneider writes:

> Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto is a highly original work – it may well be both the first twentieth-century violin concerto in three movements to break from the fast-slow-fast pattern, the first twentieth-century concerto to end slowly and softly, and, on a lighter note, the first concerto to contain a tuba solo (one of several details that seem to have inspired Britten).[13]

Micheal Kennedy sidesteps Prokofiev while describing Britten's concerto as "[keeping] step with the world of Shostakovich" in his liner notes to the fairly recent release of Theo Olof's 1948 recording of the work.[14] This "world of Shostakovich" most likely refers to his opera *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which Britten admired; Shostakovich had not written a violin concerto at the time, which makes such a connection practically impossible (Roseberry nevertheless argues that "Britten anticipates by nearly twenty years [sic] Shostakovich in his First Violin Concerto of 1947-8," when discussing the cadenza between the scherzo and the finale which "[brings] back material from both first and second movements"[15]). Even at the time, the comparison with those hugely influential Russians (Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and sometimes Stravinsky as well) was already made. Elliott Carter, for instance, commented in a review of the Violin Concerto's premiere (28 March 1940) that he thought Britten's work was "an English counterpart of recent Prokofiev and Shostakovitch music."[16]

Equally interesting are the numerous statements on the influential connection between Britten and Alban Berg. This connection, however, was completely unilateral: Britten admired Berg, and even wanted to study with him, but Britten never got the chance before Berg died. As 'substitute' for this loss, Britten never missed a chance to study Berg's music, attend a performance of it, or listen to a broadcast. Britten was, for instance, present at the International Society for Contemporary Music's 1936 festival in Barcelona,

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[13] Schneider, "Contrasts and Common Concerns," 148.

[14] Michael Kennedy, liner notes for *British Composers – Britten, Berkeley & Rubbra*, compact disc 3, EMI 0 29006 2, 2011.

[15] Roseberry, "The Concertos," 238.

[16] Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 47.

where he and Brosa played his recently completed Suite for Violin and Piano, Op. 6 (1936) on Tuesday 21 April.[17] The Sunday two days earlier he attended the first performance of Berg's Violin Concerto of 1935 (not played by Brosa, as Roseberry erroneously states, but by Louis Krasner; Brosa possibly did not even accompany Britten to the occasion) and, among other pieces, the *Drei Bruchstücke* (1923) from Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1921), which leaves many commentators to conclude (since Britten wrote that he was very impressed by the concerto, which he found "just shattering – very simple & touching" and that "the Wozzeck pieces [...] always leave me like a wet rag") that Berg had a primary influence on Britten, particularly while writing his Violin Concerto for Brosa two and a half years later.[18]

Among many other composers often mentioned in discussions about influences on Britten's Violin Concerto is Beethoven.[19] His Violin Concerto, Op. 61 (1806) is usually regarded as a source of inspiration for (or at least, a predecessor of) the opening timpani motif, but many more influences or connections are possible, or at least worth considering (for instance Bartók, Glazunov, Schönberg, Stravinsky or Walton). Within the scope of this thesis, however, the main question is how three main influences (the Spanish Civil War, twentieth-century Russian composers and Alban Berg) converged in Britten's Violin Concerto (if at all). Which associations are likely to have played a part in Britten's composition process, and what is the part they have played? How should we interpret the ones that are not that likely? Are these mere creative illustrations of a work which badly needs some kind of narrative, or is there more to it? This network of ideas, this intricate discourse, undoubtedly played a valuable part in the appreciation of the work, but the irrationality of it and the entanglement makes a musicological appreciation sometimes problematic. By analysing the historical data (diaries, letters, contemporary reviews) and studying the score in light of these associations, I will try to disentangle this network and sift the musicologically valuable information from the codswallop – and everything in between.

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[17] Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976, Volume One 1923-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 421-423.

[18] Ibid., 425-426.

[19] Michael Kennedy, *Britten*, rev. ed. The Master Musicians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141.

Chapter 1 – The Spanish Civil War

In a tribute to Michael Tippett in 1965, included in a symposium on Tippett's sixtieth birthday, Britten wrote to his friend that he "must not be made to feel – as I was [two years earlier, on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday] – that you are already dead and that the musicologists are busy on the corpse!"[20] Britten indeed did not particularly enjoy talking about and philosophising his music. In fact, he once stated that he thought it "[one] of the most disturbing features of this time […] that so many people seem to prefer to read about art rather than to experience it."[21] Imaginably this conviction grew from his ambivalent relationship with music criticism, but whatever the case, he hardly ever cooperated in musicological research conducted to study his life and works. Donald Mitchell was one of the very few who was allowed to examine his private collection – and recollections – but even so, only when Britten felt he would not live much longer, he gave Mitchell his diaries and collected letters to scrutinise: as he would be a 'corpse' soon after, he on the one hand possibly did not bother anymore, and on the other hand wanted the inevitable research to be done by his much admired friend.[22]

Mitchell's work ignited a raft of Britten studies, most notably the annotated and selected *Letters From a Life* (edited by Mitchell *et al.*), of which the sixth and final volume appeared in 2012. The letters and diary fragments from the thirties reproduced in this vast 'biography' (Britten was a prolific letter writer, and kept a diary up to 1938), give the reader a vital insight in both Britten's musical and personal life and the turbulent historical context of which he was quite aware.

Antonio Brosa's Rhythm

Britten detested (and feared) the rising totalitarianism, and was particularly worried about the tragic events in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, a concern of which the following diary entry from 22 July 1936 (among many others) is a vivid example:

[20] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 274.

[21] Ibid., 236.

[22] Donald Mitchell, "Preface to New Edition" in *Britten & Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000).

> News makes me sick from Spain. The rebel Fascists seem to be doing better, & according to the definitely pro-fascist Daily Telegraph – practically all N. Spain, Morocco, & alot of South is in their hands – including Barcelona! Toni [Antonio] & Peggy Brosa are staying there too. Let's pray for better news to-morrow. A big battle is likely to-day or to-night.[23]

What, however, does not appear in either the diary fragments or the letters Britten wrote, is a reading of the Spanish Civil War as subtext of the Violin Concerto. The connection with Brosa (whom Britten wrote it for and who had helped him edit the solo part) as Spaniard caught up in these troubles is the most significant suggestion that Britten might have composed the work as a musical reaction to this catastrophe. But although there is no further evidence to it, Brosa himself was convinced the connection was important, as he told in an interview for Donald Mitchell's BBC radio documentary *Benjamin Britten: The Early Years*, forty years after the first (and his first) performance.[24] John Evans mentions this in his article on Britten's concertos in *The Britten Companion*, and – as an influential early post-mortem publication (1984) on Benjamin Britten – this seems to be the seminal source for later accounts (for instance Schneider's and Oliver's) on the 'Spanishness' of the concerto (whereas Headington in his 1981 biography probably gathered his information from the aforementioned interview):

> Brosa recalled that the arresting, recurrent rhythm on percussion at the opening of the concerto […] was Spanish in origin; and he suggested that this, and the sombre, intense nature of much of the work, was Britten's musical response to the defeat and horrors of the Spanish Civil War.[25]

Of course, Brosa's view might be accurate, at least partially, but Britten and Brosa had not worked together for a very long time when Brosa gave this interview (as a matter of fact, at a performance of his Violin Concerto by Yehudi Menuhin in 1968, Britten told Donald Mitchell's wife, Kathleen, "the sad story of the man for whom it was written. He seems to

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[23] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 434.

[24] Donald Mitchell, *Benjamin Britten: The Early Years,* Series: Sound Seminars, BBC Study Tapes (Guilford CT: Jeffrey Norton Publishers, 1984).

[25] John Evans, "The Concertos," in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 415. As stated in an undergraduate thesis from 1995 by Charlie Cross, Brosa might have mentioned this as early as 1963 in an unknown BBC interview, but this appeared not to be verifiable. Charlie Cross, "The Benjamin Britten Violin Concerto Op.15: A Study of its Origin and Subsequent Alterations," (BMus thesis, University of Manchester, 1995), 5n14.

have fallen on to stony times."[26]), and it might therefore be equally plausible that this contemplation grew from Brosa's own preoccupation at the time. The importance of the Spanish Civil War to Britten was undeniably enormous, but after the Second World War this memory would presumably have been rather suppressed in the pacifist's mind by the horrors closer to home. For Brosa, on the other hand, as a lifelong expatriate Spaniard he would have continuously felt the emotional influence of Franco's dictatorship for thirty-six years after the end of the Spanish Civil War.

However, as mentioned earlier, there is no question whatsoever of Britten's feelings about the Spanish Civil War. Britten mentions the war quite often in his diaries and letters, and apparently did so in social conversations. Mrs. Joy Bowesman, the sister of Major-General Francis Barton (whom Britten befriended in the thirties), recalled Barton complaining to her that "Ben can't talk about *anything* but the Spanish war!"[27] Moreover, Britten's pacifism in general is well-known, even in his musical output: one has only to think of the famous *War Requiem* or the opera *Owen Wingrave*, Op. 85 (1971). This pacifism was the main reason he did not join the forces of the International Brigade, as did his close friend Wystan Auden; Britten, on the other hand, did offer a home (though because of domestic crises only briefly) to a Basque refugee boy, Andoni Barrutia.[28] For Britten, violence (however grim it may be) should not be fought with violence (and he tried to persuade Auden of this outlook, who thought quite the opposite, as a letter by Auden to his friend Eric Dodds unmistakably shows: "I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/for them without becoming one?"[29]).

War in Britten's Music

Britten's musical output showed his pacifism not only in the last decades of his life, but already in the thirties. Many works from this era arguably belong to the most politicised of his oeuvre. Especially noticeable in this respect is some of his incidental music. For instance the anti-war propaganda film *Peace of Britain*, the satirical revue *Pageant of Empire* or the special radio feature (actually an oratorio) *The World of the Spirit* all show

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[26] Kathleen Mitchell, "Edinburgh Diary 1968," in *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Philip Reed (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995), 196.

[27] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 104.

[28] Ibid., 555.

[29] Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 207.

how Britten could 'transform' his pacifism into music. In the compositions from this period Britten regarded worthy of an opus number there are also pertinent examples of politically engaged music: his orchestral song cycle *Our Hunting Fathers*, Op. 8 (1936) famously juxtaposes "German, Jew" and struggles with an 'Orwellian' plague of rats of which Michael Kennedy notes that "was all around Britten as he composed this work – Italy reducing Abyssinia to ruins, the Fascists rehearsing in Spain for the Second World War."[30] Probably the most well-known work of this early professional period of Britten's life is the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, Op. 20 (1940), commissioned by the Japanese government to celebrate the 2600th anniversary of the Japanese Empire in December 1940 (although the Japanese Government eventually did not think it was suitable for the occasion, partly due to its Christian nature).[31] The composition history of this work is quite fascinating, and still a bit mysterious, but here it suffices to say that it was a rather impudent move to propose a *requiem* symphony for the Japanese *celebrations*. Although the work officially was dedicated to the memory of his parents, he confessed in a letter to his sister Beth that the work was "combining my ideas on war & a memorial for Mum & Pop."[32] As Japan was already in war with China (and the United States were China's diplomatic allies, resulting in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941), making the work "just as anti-war as possible" was rather ironical indeed.[33] Britten was well aware of this, declaring to his publisher Ralph Hawkes that the work was "rather topical, but not of course mentioning dates or places!"[34] Lennox Berkeley, Britten's British colleague and friend (and former lover), obviously not knowing the full story, was even positively surprised that the commissioning was "really happening, though that they should commission an anti-war work seems a piece of disconcerting irony."[35] Although the Second Sino-Japanese War did not affect Britten personally,[36] the memory of the Spanish Civil War was (at least in 1942) clearly still on his mind:

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[30] Kennedy, *Britten*, 20.

[31] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 369.

[32] Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976, Volume Two 1939-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 803.

[33] Ibid., 705.

[34] Ibid., 703.

[35] Ibid., 705.

[36] Britten might have been truly aware and concerned about the worrying developments in China, since his close friend Auden went there together with Christopher Isherwood to write a (travel) book about the East

> For me to produce my best music it is always essential for the purely musical idea or germ to precede the external stimulus. In the case of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* this external stimulus was the death of my mother a few years ago. It had an especially powerful emotional effect on me and set me, in self-defence, analysing my feelings in regard to suffering and death. To this personal tragedy were soon added the more general world tragedies of the Spanish and the present wars.[37]

On the whole, the *Sinfonia da Requiem* could probably to some extent be considered as 'peace propaganda', but not as being overtly political. His *Ballad of Heroes*, Op. 14, for tenor solo, chorus and orchestra (1939) on the other hand – not to mention his *Pacifist March*, written for the Peace Pledge Union – has definitely a strong 'agitprop' underpinning, but although the work is rather neglected (written in a hurry before leaving for North-America, on not altogether very strong lyrics, it does indeed sound a bit sloppy compared to the Violin Concerto, *Les Illuminations* or the *Sinfonia da Requiem*), it shows an effervescent display of Britten's orchestral abilities and his political convictions at the same time. It was dedicated to Montagu and Enid Slater[38] and written to honor the British men who died fighting in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, which shows that during the composition period of the Violin Concerto the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War were indeed strongly on his mind.[39] That said, according to Donald Mitchell, "one might interpret *Ballad of Heroes*" – written on texts by Randall Swingler

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(*Journey to a War*). However, not seeing this war from up close, Auden's and Isherwood's real concern was for Europe, which was gripped by the German invasion of Austria: "By this evening a European war may have broken out. And here we are, eight thousand miles away. Shall we change our plans? Shall we go back? What does China matter to us in comparison with this?" W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), 59.

[37] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 42.

[38] Montagu Slater (Enid was his wife), who Britten regularly visited at his family home, was later to become the librettist of Britten's first opera *Peter Grimes*, but they had already worked together on different (left-wing) occasions. An interesting detail in this context is that Britten wrote the music for a puppet play, on a text by Slater, called *Spain*. It raises the issue of the Spanish people struggling with fascism, but unfortunately has the music been lost (the poem on which it was based, however, still exists).

[39] Britten started work on his Violin Concerto in November 1938 in England, did most of the work in Canada, and finished it on 29 September 1939 in the United States. The *Ballad of Heroes* was composed between 28 February and 4 March 1939 (with the full score completed on 29 March). Only a few weeks after the first performance he left for North-America.

and Auden (who wrote the poem for the central movement: "It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilised cry") –

> […] as Britten's farewell to more than his native land. *Ballad of Heroes* was the last politically engaged work of its kind he was to write, and in the Scherzo, it included his last 'Dance of Death' – a concept […] that had its origins in Auden's *The Dance of Death*, produced by the Group Theatre in 1934. There was in fact one further 'Dance of Death' to come, though it was not thus entitled – again a central scherzo, the 'Dies irae' from the *Sinfonia da Requiem*. However, by 1940, when that work was composed, the 'Dance of Death' idea had been transformed and now belonged to the area of private experience, rather than public comment. The concept disappeared along with the decade. *Ballad of Heroes* was Britten's final exercise in quasi-political commitment, and he was never to return to the style of substance of those works that helped to shape the thirties. It was, indeed, 'good-bye to you all': not only to family and friends, but also goodbye to the decade itself […].[40]

The Violin Concerto therefore, written both before and after this 'goodbye', cannot be easily interpreted as either a "public comment" or a "private experience." Or can it? The concerto indeed shows certain features that were already present in *Our Hunting Fathers* and continued to appear in the *Ballad of Heroes* and the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (and eventually, the *War Requiem*). For the second movement of the Violin Concerto is a similar 'Dance of Death' as the 'Dies Irae' from the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (which holds true to the *War Requiem* as well). Both these movements are artistic relatives of true dances of death Britten wrote earlier: the second movement – on Auden's lyrics – of the *Ballad of Heroes*, and the 'Dance of Death' (subtitled 'Hawking for the Partridge') of *Our Hunting Fathers* (which, occasionally, is the movement where Britten so famously placed "German" alongside "Jew"). Although Mitchell did not discuss the full scope of this leitmotif in Britten's work in the 1981 study *Britten & Auden in the Thirties*, he did eventually so in his chapter "Violent Climates" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*. In this chapter he set out to "[acquire] a familiarity with what [he] would describe as [Britten's] creative awareness of 'violent climates' […]" and mentions (although briefly) the Violin Concerto in this perspective:

> There are works from [the 1930s], up to *Sinfonia da Requiem*, that are altogether less explicit in their articulation of climates of violence; and yet who can doubt that the strangely parodistic finale of the Piano Concerto (1938) was not a kind of gesture – thumb to nose – aimed at militarism? […]

[40] Donald Mitchell, *Britten & Auden*, 143-144.

> Or there is the Scherzo, the second movement of the Violin Concerto […], a work which surely makes reference to the Spanish tragedy, just concluded in March, with Franco triumphant. The Scherzo may not be a dance of death, but it is a restless, ambiguous movement and one is aware of something unnerving and unsettling when the tuba, almost always the messenger of bad news in Britten's music, enters at Fig. 29.[41]

Yet, how certain it is that the Violin Concerto "makes reference to the Spanish tragedy" remains to be seen. Based on what notion can Mitchell (and virtually all other commentators mentioned here) be so sure? He could be right, of course, but so can someone who is sure there exists intelligent extraterrestrial life. If Mitchell had more tangible information, such as an explication by Britten, wouldn't he have shared it? But although the reference to the Spanish Civil War might not be a 'public comment', it may in a way show Britten's 'private experience' of the matter; the scherzo in the Violin Concerto is indeed "not […] a dance of death," but the *moto perpetuo*-like edginess (probably another – or the same? – leitmotif in Britten's early works[42]) is reminiscent of the 'Dance of Death' in *Our Hunting Fathers*. Incidentally, in 'Rats Away!', a movement with a similar edginess, representative of the (fascist) plague that infested Europe, the solo tuba is quite prominent as a sinister orchestral colour (as it is in the Violin Concerto), and Britten eventually would use that instrument similarly in *Death in Venice*, Op. 88 (1973), where it represents the plague that kills Aschenbach.

In *Death in Venice*, Britten used gamelan music to construct the identity of the young, attractive Tadzio, a music he used earlier (most noticeably) in *The Prince of the Pagodas*, Op. 57 (1956), and which Philip Brett (in)famously discussed in "Eros and Orientalism in Britten's Operas," as a marker of his homosexuality.[43] This might seem like straying off, but the point here is that Britten's interest in other musics (including Indonesian music) emerged already in the thirties. Among those musics Spanish folk music was quite prominent. So, to return to Brosa's interpretation of the opening motif of the Violin

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[41] Donald Mitchell, "Violent Climates," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 204.

[42] See for instance the second movement ('Moto Perpetuo') of Britten's Suite for Violin and Piano, Op. 6, the 'Moto Perpetuo' variation in *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, Op. 10, the first movement ('Toccata') of his Piano Concerto, Op. 13, or 'Villes' from *Les Illuminations*, Op. 18.

[43] Philip Brett, "Eros and Orientalism in Britten's Operas," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 235-256.

Concerto, it might be useful to consider Britten's interest in and usage of Spanish folk music in a broader context.

"Castanet Rhythms" and "Flamenco-like Guitar Sonorities"

One of the earliest appearances of Britten's interest in Spanish or quasi-Spanish music is to be found in a letter to his parents on 26 October 1930. "My darling Parents," he writes, followed by a musical quotation of Ravel's *Boléro*, "I am just back from a concert and am so mad that I can scarcely keep still. The cause is that there up above, which was last on the programme."[44] On 1 June 1932 Britten acquired a score of De Falla's *El Amor Brujo*, which he heard earlier and found "Wonderful" (and which he probably for this reason conducted in the Aldeburgh Festival of 1972), but when he started composing a ballet on a Basque theme two weeks later – with a scenario by Victoria Alford, a well-known authority on European folk dance – he confides in his diary that he "can't make much head way with it" (although this was perhaps due to the ludicrous scenario) and he eventually abandoned the project altogether.[45]

The first completed work in which Britten made use of a Spanish folk idiom, was the music for the film (a commercial in fact, for the Post Office Savings Bank) *The Tocher* (1935). For this film Britten made arrangements (for boys choir, woodwind, percussion and piano) of music by Rossini. Britten rearranged some of these movements (in addition to a few new ones) for his orchestral suite *Soirées Musicales*, Op. 9 (1936). As the title suggests, among the original music used, songs from Rossini's *Les Soirées Musicales* was prominent, and one of them was called 'Bolero' (which was also featured in *The Tocher*). Although Rossini's score already contained Spanish elements (Phrygian modal inflections, bolero castanet rhythms, see Ex. 2), Britten emphasised these constituents in his orchestration (most notably in the later orchestral suite): the castanet rhythms are not only heard more often (as a steady, persistent accompaniment), but are also played by castanets. From a pianistic point of view, Rossini's writing of the bolero triplets is effective (alternating octaves are easier to play than repeated notes), but Britten enhances the Spanish quality of this figure not only by using the castanets, but also by prescribing

[44] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 142.

[45] Ibid., 257.

repeated notes for woodwinds and strings in *saltando* bowing (see Ex. 3).[46] Although not as ubiquitously, Britten used the same feature – not in triplets, however, but in straight demisemiquavers – in the last movement of his Violin Concerto, in the variation at Fig. 37 (see Ex.4) – which, it might be noted, follows on from the slow sarabande variation Eric Roseberry regards as Spanish (because the *zarabanda* is Spanish in origin).

Ex. 2 Rossini – *Les Soirées Musicales* - Bollero

Ex. 3 - Britten - *Soirées Musicales* - Bolero

[46] This style of bowing is reminiscent of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio Espagnol*, a work which Britten heard in a 1931 concert conducted by his composition teacher Frank Bridge. Ibid., 165.

Ex. 4 - Britten - Violin Concerto – Passacaglia (Fig. 37^{+11})

Although far removed from a baroque dance suite, *Mont Juic*, Op. 12 (a Catalan dance suite jointly composed by Britten and Berkeley in 1937) has a movement in it – the third – that could be described as a sarabande (and the first as a minuet, the second as a gavotte, and the fourth as a waltz). Britten and Berkeley met at the above-mentioned ISCM Festival in Barcelona in 1936. Together, they made an excursion to a performance of folk dancing, were they notated some of the melodies they heard. At the back of a picture postcard from Barcelona Britten wrote to Grace Williams (a friend and fellow composer):

> This is really a lively spot, and the festival has been beautifully organized – not too much music, good excursions (Montserrat is uncanny) – & great dancing – the whole town turns out to dance Sardanas on the slightest provocation! Oh – this native music![47]

[47] Ibid., 425.

This ‘native music’ was nothing like the Spanish music Britten (and everyone else outside Catalonia) knew or recognised as Spanish and he therefore made a kind of a priori apology in a draft of a programme note:

> The composers were struck by the charm and vitality of many of the tunes used for the dancing and jotted down some of them. Back in England in the summer they decided to collaborate on a work based on these tunes. Mount [sic] Juic is the result. It will be noted that the tunes resemble the French and Italian rather than the Castilian, or what is usually expected of the Spanish.[48]

According to Mitchell and Philip Reed, both composers confirmed on different occasions that Berkeley wrote the first two and Britten the last two movements, although at first they decided not to give too much details on the allocation, since they (in Berkeley’s words) “discussed the form and orchestration of each piece in considerable detail, so that it would, in any case, have been difficult to disentangle […].”[49] However, in a commentary on the orchestral works issued by the Britten-Pears Foundation in 2010, there still seems to be a slight hesitation in accepting this assessment: “The two composers never admitted which movement was written by whom, though it is accepted that Britten contributed the third and fourth.”[50] Musically, Mitchell’s and Reed’s argument seems indeed very acceptable: the third movement’s alto saxophone solo and the fourth movement’s fragmented start (‘false starts’, as Berkeley called it[51]) at the same time resembles *Our Hunting Fathers* (‘Messalina’ and ‘Rats Away!’ respectively) and anticipates the *Sinfonia da Requiem* (‘Lacrymosa’ and ‘Dies Irae’ respectively).

Although the suite can be considered as a bit slight but entertaining and effective music (its premiere was featured in a broadcast concert of ‘light’ music by the BBC Orchestra), the reference to the seriousness of compositions like *Our Hunting Fathers* and the *Sinfonia da Requiem* was not only made in the score of *Mont Juic* but in the title and description of the third movement as well:

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[48] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 362.

[49] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 538-539.

[50] Britten-Pears Foundation, *Benjamin Britten: A Guide to the Orchestral Works* (2010), 7, http://www.boosey.com/downloads/brittenorchestralworkscatalogue.pdf.

[51] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 538.

III. Lament – Barcelona July 1936. (it will be remembered that there was a civil war in Spain three months after the Festival) This is a slow Sarabande-like dance, but in the middle comes a suggestion of a Sardana, the Catalan national dance, now forbidden in Fascist Spain.[52]

In the Violin Concerto, however, the Spanishness of the motto rhythm and the Spanish features Roseberry finds ("castanet rhythms, flamenco-like guitar sonorities, the slow sarabande rhythm of the section beginning at Fig. 36 in the finale") are well hidden, especially when considering the facts that Britten was quite familiar with representing recognisable Spanishness in his orchestration, and knew that it had to be recognisable if he did not want it to be mistaken for French or Italian. There are indeed a few bars with "castanet rhythms," as well as a "sarabande section" (although it would be intellectualistic to regard this as obviously Spanish). The repeated pizzicato chords in the first movement and the cadenza can be interpreted as "flamenco-like guitar sonorities,"[53] but wouldn't it be an equally viable interpretation to regard these chords as agitation through the repetition of notes (a common feature in Britten's music)? The hemiola figures in the second movement could as well be interpreted as Spanish flamenco rhythms (a twelve-beat *compás*, or metric pattern, is quite common in for instance *seguiriyas* or *peteneras*), but they are not uncommon in Western classical music history as well. The same applies to the motto rhythm Brosa considered Spanish in origin. The 4/4 time signature, silent first beat and rhythmically important second beat could suggest a basic (flamenco) tango rhythm for *palmas* (clapping), but it is not clear-cut (see Ex. 5).[54] It is very well possible that Brosa imagined this rhythm to be Spanish in origin; he might have simply been

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[52] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 362.

[53] Similarly (and almost simultaneously), Joseph Kerman mentions in *Concerto Conversations* that the violin in Britten's Violin Concerto evokes a flamenco guitar – equally without seeing reason to discuss the presumed reference. Perhaps the first reference to the guitar family (probably also in reference to these pizzicato chords) was made by James Whittaker, critic of the *New York Daily Mirror*, when he wrote that the Violin Concerto "digs up all the old four-string dodges, the banjo, fife and buck-saw imitations" and that Britten had made "a $40.000 Strad sound like an 88-cent ukulele." Joseph Kerman, *Concerto Conversations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 68. Suzanne Robinson, "'An English Composer sees America': Benjamin Britten and the North American Press, 1939-42," *American Music* 15, no. 3 (1997): 331.

[54] Corinne Frayssinet Savy, "De l'hybridation à la translittéralité. Le *tango*: un cante flamenco," *Cahiers de musiques traditionelles* 13 (2000): 126.

looking for a way to identify himself with this music and present himself as Spanish violinist, which was of great importance to him. It is telling that one of his first recitals after crossing the Atlantic Ocean (which he did to perform the première of Britten's Violin Concerto) included music by Granados and Lalo (*Symphonie Espagnole*).[55]

Ex. 5 Basic *Palmas* for Tango Flamenco & Motto Rhythm Violin Concerto

In the late thirties and early forties, the Spanish Civil War was often on Britten's mind when composing music. It seems arguable that this was no different when he was working on his Violin Concerto, but it is not at all self-evident. Never did he make a political comment regarding the concerto (as he did with the *Sinfonia da Requiem*), nor was there ever a program (as in the *Ballad of Heroes* or *Mont Juic*) which pointed towards a similar subtext. And although it would not be strictly necessary (the *Ballad of Heroes* isn't musically Spanish either, although this might be due to the fact that it was an 'Anthem for Englishmen', as it was originally called[56]), it would be reasonable to assume that Britten might have used more obvious Spanish folk idiom to make the supposed reference reverberate more effectively, or as Mitchell puts it regarding the "Russian-ness" in Britten's *Russian Funeral*, BTC – Britten Thematic Catalogue – 801 (1936) for brass and percussion:

> It was a characteristic of Britten as an artist – part of his 'realism', an aspect of his creative character to which I find myself returning again and again – that he took great care over matters of authenticity when composing a work that had quite clearly spelt-out associations or was tailor-made for a particular event.[57]

[55] His accompanist on this occasion was Benjamin Britten. Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 748.

[56] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 612.

[57] Mitchell, *Britten & Auden*, 72.

Chapter 2 – A Russian Trinity

Britten's appreciation of Russian composers is well-known and well-documented. His close friendship with Dmitri Shostakovich – and, among others, with Mstislav Rostropovich and Galina Vishnevskaya (and later, with Mark Lubotsky) – which commenced in the sixties gave rise to different studies into the mutual inspiration these composers were to each other.[58] But already long before these friendships, Britten had an interest in Russian music (which evidently is also apparent from his *Russian Funeral*). In a letter (dated 30 December 1935) to Marjorie Fass, a close friend of Britten's composition teacher Frank Bridge, he declared to her what an impact the death of Alban Berg had on him, but looking for names of equals or successors, he comes up with just six, of which three are Russians:

> I am afraid that Christmas was practically spoilt for me by the news of Berg's death. I feel it is a real & terrible tragedy – one from which the world will take long to recover from. The real musicians are so few & far between, aren't they? Apart from the Bergs, Stravinsksys [sic], Schönbergs & Bridges one is a bit stumped for names, isn't one? Markievitch may be – but personally I feel that he's not got there yet. Shostakovitch – perhaps – possibly.[59]

Prokofiev

Although Britten had some reservations about Prokofiev in the early thirties (according to Britten, his First Violin Concerto "didn't contain much music"[60]), he is conspicuous by his absence in the quoted list of names. As Lyn Henderson clearly shows, Prokofiev had a significant influence on Britten from his mid-twenties onward. She describes *Peter and the Wolf* as possible inspiration for *Paul Bunyan* (and she might have added *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*), *Lieutenant Kizhe* for *The Prince of the Pagodas*, and Prokofiev's First and Third Piano Concertos for Britten's Piano Concerto and the

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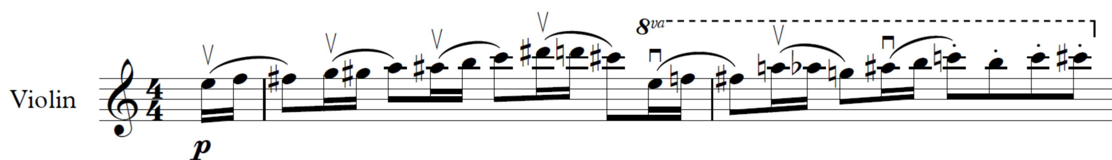
[58] Eric Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid? Some Observations on Shostakovich and His Late-Period Recognition of Britten," in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 229-253. Cameron Pyke, "Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony: A Response to *War Requiem*?," in *Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on His Life and Work*, ed. Lucy Walker (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 27-45.

[59] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 391.

[60] Ibid., 169.

Diversions for piano (left hand) and orchestra, a commission from Paul Wittgenstein. She also sees similarities between Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto and Britten's Violin Concerto, especially in the "second movement's predominantly stepwise moving outline," (see Ex. 6-7) which seems perfectly reasonable.[61] In addition to her premise, it seems that Britten modelled the framework (slow-fast-slow) of his concerto on Prokofiev's, and both concertos share an "ending [that] is uncommon, very earnest and far from the conventional 'hoopla' finale," as Olin Downes wrote of Britten's concerto in a review of the première in the *New York Times*.[62]



Ex. 6 - Prokofiev – First Violin Concerto – Scherzo (mm. 3-4)

Ex. 7 – Britten – Violin Concerto – Scherzo (Fig. 24^{+3})

But although Prokofiev's concerto is far more optimistic and lighthearted in nature, the real problem with this comparison is that William Walton wrote a viola concerto in 1929 that has the same characteristics (Walton admitted it was modelled on Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto), or as Schneider puts it: "[it is] a work so pervasively modelled on Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto that one suspects Walton had a copy of Prokofiev's score open in front of him while composing […]."[63] Britten knew this work well (he played it through on viola with Henry Boys, to whom his Violin Concerto was dedicated) and wrote to Walton on 16 December 1963 that "hearing your Viola Concerto &

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[61] Henderson, "The Vital Prokofiev," 19.

[62] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 391.

[63] Schneider, "Contrasts and Common Concerns," 149.

Portsmouth Point (works which I still love dearly) was a great turning point in my musical life." But even a comparison between Walton's Viola Concerto and Britten's Violin Concerto will eventually go off the rails when considering the general atmospheres or, more specifically, the endings of the works, as Whittall notes:

> The analogy with the ending of Walton's Viola Concerto of ten years earlier is of interest, but if Britten was conscious of the precedent [which he probably was] he was clearly not aiming to reproduce Walton's less overtly dramatic manner.[64]

What is therefore most of importance, is that Britten's model for his Violin Concerto might indeed have been Prokofiev's First Violin Concerto, because the works share so many distinct features, but the concurring similarities with Walton's Viola Concerto make Prokofiev's influence on Britten's Violin Concerto – except perhaps on the second movement – hard to pinpoint. Still, according to Roseberry,

> […] Britten's love of Russian music in general – in particular his life-long fascination with the Tchaikovsky ballet scores, his attraction towards Prokofiev and, to a more reserved extent, Stravinsky – is an acknowledged fact in the critical and biographical literature, and not hard to pinpoint in the music itself.[65]

Stravinsky

Roseberry considers Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and *Symphony of Psalms* as possible influences on Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37 (1946), but Stravinsky's neoclassicistic style of violin writing was probably an influence on Britten as well. Most remarkable are the (quasi-*verbunkos*) peasant fiddle passages in *Our Hunting Fathers* (Ex. 8), *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* (Ex. 9), and the Suite for Violin and Piano (Ex. 10), which remind one of Stravinsky's *Histoire du soldat* (Ex. 12). Another work in which this style of violin writing is apparent in Britten (and which clearly makes reference to the

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[64] Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 48.

[65] Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 234.

folk-tale of *Histoire du soldat*) is the unpublished and lost symphonic poem *The Bewitched Violin*, BTC 888 (1941) for violin and orchestra (Ex. 11).[66]

Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D, although of a more matured neoclassicistic nature, still makes use of the fiddling that was so prominent in *Histoire du soldat*, written thirteen years earlier. Since Britten was in the possession of a miniature score of Stravinsky's concerto, and played the work (at the piano) together with Brosa, it is very well possible that certain elements of this concerto influenced Britten when he composed his own.[67]

As Britten's review of Stravinsky's opera *Oedipus Rex* for *World Film News* (1936) shows, Britten was well aware of the audience's dislike of the then 'later' Stravinsky, but admired him (especially in his neoclassicistic works) all the same:

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[66] It is noteworthy to mention that although *The Bewitched Violin* was presumably never performed (or indeed, never finished at all), it perhaps was. Mitchell and Reed state in *Letters from a Life, Volume Two*, 884-885:

> The only association of Britten's name with [George] Szell's appears in an advertisement in *Tempo*, 1/4, American Series, January 1941, which lists a forthcoming performance in March of *The Bewitched Violin*, with the NBC orchestra under George Szell. Szell was indeed guest conductor of the NBC at this time and it may well have been this proposal to which Britten refers [as "the Szell matter"]. The work never materialized but for a handful of sketches […].

However, according to an article in the British counterpart of this American journal (which were both Boosey & Hawkes periodicals) issued August 1941, "*The Bewitched Violin* [was] performed in New York by Georg [sic] Szell and the N.B.C. Orchestra a few weeks ago." Anonymous, "Music in the Making," *Tempo* 5 [1941]: 7. Although this was published in August 1941, the publication was originally due for September 1939, but it was suspended because of the war. It is therefore unclear when this article was exactly written and hence when this performance took place. However, cross-Atlantic correspondence was tremendously slow and difficult during the Second World War, so Boosey & Hawkes' information might have been obsolete.

Furthermore, the interesting history of Szell's appearances at Toscanini's NBC Orchestra is reasonably well documented in Michael Charry's *George Szell: A Life of Music*, but there is no mention of Szell conducting *The Bewitched Violin* at one of his four concerts with the NBC Orchestra in 1941. Michael Charry, *George Szell: A Life of Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011). On the other hand, Walter Kolneder includes the work in his list of violin repertoire in *Das Buch der Violine*, which suggests it should have existed in one way or another. Walter Kolneder, *Das Buch der Violine: Bau, Geschichte, Spiel, Pädagogik, Komposition* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1972), 516.

[67] John Evans, *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928-1938* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 269.

grotesque
Violin Solo
f

Ex. 8 Britten - *Our Hunting Fathers* - Dance of Death (Fig. 46^{+7})

Violin Solo
f con bravura

Ex. 9 Britten - *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* - Bourrée Classique (Fig. 13)

Violin Solo
f
f

Ex. 10 Britten - Suite for Violin and Piano - Waltz (Fig. 27^{-8})

Violin Solo
f

Ex. 11 Britten - *The Bewitched Violin* - Sketch (m. 1)

Violin Solo
spiccato
f
p subito

Ex. 12 Stravinsky - *Histoire du soldat* - Le violon du soldat (Fig. 3^{+2})

> 'Oedipus Rex' demonstrated Stravinsky's remarkable sense of style in drawing inspiration from every age of music and in leaving the whole a perfect shape, satisfying every aesthetic and emotional demand. But since the established idea of 'originality' dies hard, it is easy to see why Stravinsky's later works are regarded with disfavour.[68]

The same would apply to Stravinsky's Violin Concerto in D, although the statement that Stravinsky's music satisfies every "emotional demand," can of course be contested. In any case Britten felt it did.

Among the many critical comments Britten received, one of them (by Edmund Rubbra) said that "emotionally the music lives in a vacuum."[69] Although Britten would of course have disagreed with this 'vacuum', the comment is understandable: Britten's early works rely heavily upon sarcasm (the Piano Concerto), pastiche (the *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*), playfulness (*Mont Juic*) and virtuosity in orchestration (*Our Hunting Fathers*).[70] Furthermore, an important and actually quite similar critique on his work came from his friend Henry Boys, who in 1938 wrote an article in the *The Monthly Musical Record* about Britten, saying that

> Britten's very spare harmony looks as though it might be a reaction against English lushness […]. Often, to get from one place to another, he will use harmony like Hindemith, pan-tonally. It generally seems to me too easy; it keeps a semblance of tonality without the organic functions of tonality, thereby becoming empty.[71]

Whittall argues that Britten dedicated his Violin Concerto to Boys as an answer to Boys's critique, suggesting that Britten wanted to counter the blow struck "at the composer's most necessary basis of communication":

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[68] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 17.

[69] Edmund Rubbra, review of *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, by Benjamin Britten, *Music and Letters* 19 (1938): 360.

[70] These couplings of categories and early Britten works are actually interchangeable.

[71] Henry Boys, "The Younger English Composers: V. Benjamin Britten," *The Monthly Musical Record* 68 (1938): 235.

> [The] most compelling of all is not the way in which [in the passacaglia] the return to D major is plotted and placed, but the treatment of the re-established D major to fill out the final, most memorable pages of the concerto. Here is the direct and decisive answer to Henry Boys.[72]

This contention might hold some truth, especially since Britten – who was notoriously thin-skinned – and Boys remained on friendly terms after publication of the article. Boys, for instance, was asked to accompany Brosa at the piano on the occasion of the first try-out with Barbirolli in London.[73] Boys kept on working with Britten at least up to 1946, when he made the vocal score of *The Rape of Lucretia*, and they kept occasionally in touch afterwards (although their friendship slowly watered down), at least up to 1953. Britten, however, never made a written response (at least insofar as is known) to Boys's article, while it was quite unlike him to ignore a critique like this. Given the dedication to Boys of the Violin Concerto, this could suggest that Britten rather chose to give a friendly response in musical form. Furthermore, Boys did not only criticise Britten, but also praised him in some respects, for instance for the way he dealt with the influence of Stravinsky (Boys was a great admirer of Stravinsky). For the most part, the article considerately describes the way Britten's eclecticism took form in his music, and acknowledges (for the first time) Britten's musical orientation towards Stravinsky:

> [He] has learned much from the less weighty and religious [than Nadia Boulanger] Stravinsky – chiefly in matters of orchestration and the use of notes: Stravinsky's wonderful flair for spacing and his exemplary economy. One of Britten's virtues is that he never tried, as so many have, to imitate Stravinsky's inimitable metric or his entirely personal aesthetic. Nor has he used his works as a dictionary. He has only taken from Stravinsky what he could easily assimilate, but it is undoubtedly a contributing factor to the piquancy of his music.[74]

Among other works by Stravinsky, his Violin Concerto would have been an instructive example of this piquant style. Britten's Violin Concerto, however, is less detached, more emotionally involved than Stravinsky's and Britten's own earlier works, probably as a reaction to the above-mentioned denunciations, to show that he could write music that was more than an "impersonal comment on [the] drama," as Britten wrote of *Oedipus Rex*. Nevertheless, Britten's Violin Concerto shows shades of his (and Stravinsky's) earlier

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[72] Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 48.

[73] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 687.

[74] Boys, "Benjamin Britten," 235.

fiddle style (see Ex. 13), as well as of Stravinsky's idiomatic violin writing in the concerto (see Ex. 14-16), but it is devoid of the peasantry usually encountered in his earlier works, and it is never used as detached sarcasm (as in the passage "with parody!" between figures 46 and 48 in *Our Hunting Fathers*[75]) to make an impersonal comment on the drama, but always as part of the same layer of musical narrative. In that respect, Britten's eclecticism is much closer to Berg's violin concerto than to Stravinsky's.

Ex. 13 Britten - Violin Concerto (Fig. 8) - Shadows of fiddle style

Ex. 14 Stravinsky - Violin Concerto in D (Fig. 9) - Idiomatic violin writing

Ex. 15 Stravinsky - Violin Concerto in D (Fig. 11) - Idiomatic violin writing

Ex. 16 Britten - Violin Concerto - Resemblances of Stravinsky's idiomatic violin writing

[75] Which is of course reminiscent of the third movement of Mahler's First Symphony, a composer whom Britten deeply admired.

Shostakovich

In the same review in which Britten discussed *Oedipus Rex*, he also commented on a work by another composer, whom he then considered "a young man of steadily growing reputation:" Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. It is well-known that Britten and Shostakovich became close friends in the 1960s, but Britten's veneration of Shostakovich probably started with him hearing a concertante performance of *Lady Macbeth* on 18 March 1936 (two years earlier he had heard the Suite from *The Nose* on the radio, but – except for the entr'actes – he was not quite as impressed by it as by *Lady Macbeth*: "Very amusing & exhilarating – but I shouldn't be surprised if it were found to be uneventful & even conventional with all the glitter taken off – this, especially the Entre Acts."[76]). In the review in *World Film News*, Britten contrasts the emotional aloofness of *Oedipus Rex* with the more involved music of *Lady Macbeth*:

> A deep contrast to [Stravinsky's] method appears in 'Lady Macbeth.' Here the music is the terrible sadistic drama itself, and it is only in the remarkable entr'actes that Shostakowitch makes detached comments on the previous gruesome events on the stage.[77]

Although in Britten's Violin Concerto the music appears to be the "drama itself," Britten is probably more famous for his use of the kind of "detached comments" similar to those in *Lady Macbeth*. The interludes, including the passacaglia, of *Peter Grimes* are perhaps the best examples of this procedure. The word 'detached' might however be inappropriate to describe these comments, as it implies an emotional emptiness the music does not have (nor the music for *Lady Macbeth*, for that matter); 'sublimated' would perhaps be more fitting. For instance, in *Peter Grimes* the apprentice (a silent role) is given a voice in the passacaglia interlude by the solo viola, thereby being the drama itself in a secluded and sublimated form; or as Richard Taruskin calls it, being "a vehicle of manipulative authorial commentary."[78]

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[76] Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 197.

[77] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 17.

[78] Richard Taruskin, "Chapter 5 Standoff (I)," in *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed June 23, 2013, http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume5/actrade-9780195384857-div1-005005.xml.

Britten's review is certainly interesting, but he made the most frank and open remarks in his diary entry of the date of the concert. Incidentally, the "rest of cast" Britten refers to included Peter Pears, the tenor who would become Britten's partner for the rest of his life:

> Slobodskaya sings beautifully as Katerina, […] – passable rest of cast. Of course it is idle to pretend that this is great music throughout – it is stage music and as such must be considered. There is some terrific music in the entr'actes. But I will defend it through thick & thin against these charges of 'lack of style'. People will not differentiate between style & manner. It is the composer's heritage to take what he wants from whom he wants – and to write music.[79]

Among the things Shostakovich 'took' from earlier music, one is of special interest here. The entr'acte in Act 2, Scene 4 (or actually between Scene 4 and Scene 5) is a passacaglia, a variation form both Shostakovich and Britten would frequently use during the rest of their lives. As Susan McClary writes regarding seventeenth-century passacaglias: "The association of the figure with ritualized mourning became so strong that it could signal grief all by itself in instrumental as well as vocal pieces."[80] The same applies to Britten and Shostakovich: whenever they employ a passacaglia form, graveness is never far away. Also, the ties with the seventeenth century are equally strong with both composers, but according to Roseberry, whereas Shostakovich's example might have been Bach, Britten's was Purcell.[81] The view that Britten used Purcell as an example, was already acknowledged in the 1950s, and indeed, the various Purcell realisations and works like *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* show Britten's deep admiration for this English composer.[82] Roseberry notes that

> [in] his Second String Quartet, a commission for the 300th anniversary of the birth of Purcell [it was in fact the 250th anniversary of his death], Britten constructed his long, climactic finale on the basis of the chaconne. The passacaglia was already well established around this time as a consummatory musico-dramatic device in Britten – both the Holy Sonnets of John Donne and

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[79] Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 341.

[80] Susan McClary, *Desire and Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 206.

[81] Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 241.

[82] Charles Stuart, "Britten, 'the Eclectic'," *Music Survey* (Spring 1950): 249-250.

> *Lucretia* have resort to the form's capacity to effect a clinching concentration in underpinning a wide span of valedictory images.[83]

Although Shostakovich's passacaglia from *Lady Macbeth* was of course not the first passacaglia Britten ever encountered: he once made a piano transcription of Brahms' Fourth Symphony – a composer whom he later came to dislike – and he particularly enjoyed Berg's *Wozzeck*, in which a twelve-note passacaglia theme with twenty-one variations is used to portray the cold-heartedness of the Doctor (Act 1, Scene 4). Shostakovich, however, might have been the first to show Britten how to incorporate such a powerful, but outdated form in a contemporary musical language more similar to his own, or as Roseberry argues:

> [With Britten and Shostakovich,] there is the striking common attachment to baroque stylisations (especially passacaglia and fugue), a rich mixed-modal and tonally ambiguous language which, as it happens, is emblematised in a common use of the famous D-S-C-H motif, a pronounced degree of motivic obsessiveness, and the crucial importance to their musico-dramatic work of the art of thematic transformation.[84]

The first large-scale passacaglia in a long sequence of passacaglias Britten composed (his first actual passacaglia being the 1937 'concert study' *Reveille* for violin and piano[85]), was the third movement of his Violin Concerto, and although Britten (later) frequently used Purcell as an example, the ground bass of the passacaglia in the Violin Concerto is predominantly modelled on the ground in Shostakovich's entr'acte from *Lady Macbeth*. The overall rising and descending scalar motion, but above all the tonally unstable octotonic rise and diatonic – Aeolian – descent (less clearly in Shostakovich) seems clearly 'taken' from Shostakovich's example (see Ex. 17).

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[83] Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 241.

[84] Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 232.

[85] The work was written for Brosa, and even had an airy-fairy programmatic basis related to the violinist: "It is well-known among his friends that the violinist found waking up in the morning a difficult undertaking. Hence the title of this concert study (the composer was a notoriously early riser), and hence too the tempo indication *Andante – rubato e pigro*." Christopher Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten: A Study of Stylistic and Technical Evolution* (New York: Garland, 1995), 130.

Britten

Octotonic rise

Aeolian descent

Shostakovich

Ex. 17 Ground bass – Britten Violin Concerto and Shostakovich *Lady Macbeth*

The similarities in musical language are already apparent in *Our Hunting Fathers,* a work which Britten wrote shortly after he heard *Lady Macbeth.* Britten's song cycle displays an indebtedness to Shostakovich's potent sarcasm (Britten considered it "biting & brilliant" in *Lady Macbeth*), in features such as the out-of-key xylophone part in the 'Epilogue and Funeral March', which "naive futility […] is a typical Shostakovich device," according to Kennedy.[86] Furthermore, Shostakovich's "tonally ambiguous language" is recognisable in some of the woodwind motifs, which are even showing shades of a D-S-C-H pattern (see Ex. 18).[87]

Very slow ♩ = 44 - 50

Fl., Ob. Cl.

dolce

dim.

Ex. 18 Britten – Our Hunting Fathers – Tonally ambiguous woodwind

Technically, this "tonally ambiguous language" can be more or less specifically explained as 'bitonality', as 'polymodal chromaticism' as in Bartók, or as 'mixed-modality'. Other

[86] And also according to David Matthews and Cameron Pyke. David Matthews, *Britten* (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), 35-36. Pyke, "Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony," 35.

[87] The D-S-C-H motif was at the time for Shostakovich purely idiomatic. The first time it appeared 'as signature' was probably in his Tenth Symphony (1953). It would be pretentious to suggest that Britten 'discovered' the signature and made use of it as a 'tribute' to Shostakovich, even in such seemingly concrete instances (as Derek Hulme argues) as in "For I am under the same accusation" from *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Op. 30 (1943). Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 232.

terms could be coined as well, but the point here is that this extension (or departure) of classical major-minor tonality in Britten's music is comparable to that in Shostakovich's. The final bars of Britten's Violin Concerto exemplify this quite well. After the D major climax at figure 43, Britten makes a transition to a 'hymnal' passage (Lento e solenne) at figure 45 with what Peter Evans calls "chant-like phrases."[88] Although there are some tonal departures, the music finally returns to D (after figure 47), now minor, with an open fifth on D in the orchestra and the violin playing the minor third. The "semitonal inflections," however, culminating in a final trill between F and G flat on the open fifth, leave the tonality undecided (as signifier for the world's future, one might creatively add), as many commentators argued. According to Whittall, for instance, "[the] point, tonally, is that either major of minor will 'do'."[89] However, the final trill could enharmonically be described as a "shake between F and F sharp," but what is written is a G flat, not an F sharp, making the tonality not undecided, but in fact reinforcing the minor character of the final bars, by means of a lowered fourth scale degree (as auxiliary note), a modality Shostakovich regularly used in his "rich mixed-modal and tonally ambiguous language."[90]

Britten's musical kinship with Shostakovich was already recognised in the early 1940s. In January 1943 William Glock (then music critic of *The Observer*) wrote a lengthy article comparing Britten with Shostakovich (which Britten very much approved),[91] but even earlier such a comparison was made by the music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune* Virgil Thomson whom Britten disliked (he called him an "old stinker" because of his negative criticism).[92] In a not altogether positive review of Britten's operetta *Paul Bunyan* on 6 May 1941, Thomson wrote:

> Benjamin Britten's music here as elsewhere, has considerable animation. His style is eclectic though not without savour. Its particular blend of melodic 'appeal' with irresponsible counterpoint and semi-acidulous instrumentation is easily recognizable as that considered by the British Broadcasting Corporation to be at once modernistic and safe. Its real model is, I think, the music of Shostakovitch, also eclectic, but higher in physical energy content than that of Mr Britten.[93]

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[88] Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1979), 52.

[89] Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett*, 48.

[90] Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 52.

[91] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 1113-1114.

[92] Ibid., 1008.

[93] Ibid., 916.

All things considered, the connection between these two composers seems already quite intricate far before they first met and became friends. However, one caveat must be made: not every similarity in "style & manner" needs to point towards a progenitor, which is why studies of influence are indeed risky, as Roseberry states. But rather than to "examine certain aspects of Shostakovich's creative personality, biography, style and aesthetic in so far as they would seem to establish meaningful connections with Britten" and vice versa, it might prove more rewarding to take a chance and try to find the closest connections possible (not necessarily as 'direct influence') to reveal the ways in which that musical relation was expressed, as the example of Britten's and Shostakovich's passacaglias hopefully demonstrates. [94] That said, accuracy remains imperative: one might consider (or suggest) Britten's passacaglia in the Violin Concerto as a direct 'precursor' of the one in Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto, but that would be a bit coquettish, on the verge of being deceptive, or at least specious.[95] In fact, it is quite unlikely that Shostakovich knew Britten's Violin Concerto already in the 1940s (Britten had not yet achieved worldwide fame at the time, certainly not in the Soviet Union; Lubotsky and Kondrashin were probably the first Russians to play and record the work in 1968, as there is no record whatsoever of the music being sold, sent, or played in the Soviet Union before), but it is nevertheless possible. The same applies to *Peter Grimes*, which Shostakovich probably first heard in 1963 during a visit to Britain, after which Britten wrote to him:

> […] You know how much I love this opera [*Lady Macbeth,* or as it was called then, *Katerina Izmaylova*] myself, & rejoice that it has made so many new friends here. […] I must say that there is no one composing to-day who has an equal influence on me. That you find pleasure in my own works, had time to see Grimes while you were here, & liked it, is for me a great thrill & honour.[96]

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[94] Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 230.

[95] That accuracy should be equally imperative when considering the indebtment the other way around: when Roseberry states that "the idea of the functional placing of the cadenza as a progressive transition from slow movement to finale in the Cello Symphony is surely indebted to Shostakovich in both his First Violin and Cello Concertos," he somehow overlooks the fact that Britten did this already in his Violin Concerto (although here from fast scherzo to slow finale). Besides, this technique was actually already practiced in earlier concertos, for instance by Glazunov in his Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 86 (1905). Roseberry, "A Debt Repaid?," 235n21.

[96] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 1113-1114.

All the same, it is possible that Shostakovich was already familiar with *Grimes* in the late 1940s, or perhaps just with the interludes (which were published as Op. 33a, the *Four Sea Interludes*, and Op. 33b, the *Passacaglia*). If that can be plausibly demonstrated, it might shed some fascinating new light on the similarities between the passacaglia ground in *Grimes* and the one in Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto (see Ex. 19-20). Until then, we can do no better than note the striking similarities in the musical languages from these two composers.

Ex. 19 Britten - *Peter Grimes* - Passacaglia ground

Ex. 20 Shostakovich – First Violin Concerto - Passacaglia ground

Chapter 3 – Britten's Lament for Alban Berg?

Benjamin Britten's use of orchestral interludes (as 'sublimated comments') in *Peter Grimes* might have been a feature he developed with Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth* on his mind, but the same can be said – and indeed often is – for Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, an influence on Britten which he himself gladly acknowledged:

> '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.[97]

Britten's admiration for Berg is well-known and usually dramatically exemplified (not least by Britten himself) by his denied request to study with this composer. Britten had won the Arthur Sullivan travelling scholarship in 1933, worth £100 GBP, which he wanted to spend on a postgraduate study with Berg in Vienna. He was, however, dissuaded by his parents, who were probably encouraged to do so by someone in the Royal College of Music. Britten never found out what exactly happened, but often talked about it in interviews, and wrote down what he knew or suspected in 1963, in an article called "Britten Looking Back:"

> [Frank Bridge] intervened, with no […] success, when the question arose of my going to study with Berg. I'd finished at the College with a small travelling scholarship and wanted to go to Vienna. Bridge greatly admired Berg (he later, after Berg's death, introduced me to Schoenberg). But when the College was told, coolness arose. I think, but can't be sure, that the Director, Sir Hugh Allen, put a spoke in the wheel. At any rate when I said at home during the holidays, "I *am* going to study with Berg, aren't I?", the answer was a firm, "No dear." Pressed, my mother said, "He's not a good influence," which I suspected came from Allen.[98]

With Berg's death in 1935, Britten's wish could no longer be fulfilled, but his reverence for Berg remained. In April 1936 Britten attended the world première of Berg's Violin

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[97] Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 292-293.

[98] Ibid., 252.

Concerto in Barcelona, at the abovementioned ISCM Festival where Britten would perform his Suite for Violin and Piano with Antonio Brosa. The performance made a very strong impression on Britten, and although it is quite unnecessary to repeat the whole story, the importance of this impression cannot be overestimated.

Within Britten's oeuvre, there are certain indications of the influence Berg's music had on him. Some of these indications, as mentioned in studies on Britten, are more convincing than others, and it might be useful to discuss them briefly in order to give us some guidance on possible connections between Berg and Britten. Philip Rupprecht, for instance, traces Britten's quotation technique in *Lachrymae* to the model of the Bach chorale quotation in Berg's Violin Concerto, arguing that

> [the] conflated themes opening *Lachrymae* recall Berg's canonic overlapping of first and second phrases of "Es ist genug" (Violin concerto, finale, at m. 134); Berg's score too (at m. 175) stresses multiple transpositions of a single motivic fragment.[99]

Although it is not unlikely that Britten's quotation (or variation) model for *Lachrymae* was Berg's Violin Concerto, it should be remembered that these techniques were already quite ubiquitous in early polyphonic (variation) writing. A quick glance at a round or even choral prelude could tell us as much, but perhaps the most convincing example (because both elements of Rupprecht's observation are to be found in there together) is the quodlibet, Variatio 30, from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988.[100] Britten's counterpoint might be more complex than Bach's, allowed by the 'emancipation of the dissonant' in twentieth-century idiom, but arguing that Britten imitated Berg's Violin Concerto (which obviously makes use of complex counterpoint) in his *Lachrymae* is too guileless.

Although Britten was very much interested in the contemporary idiom of the Second Viennese School, he was (and remained) reluctant to incorporate it fully in his style. Henry Boys regarded Britten "technically capable" of using twelve-tone technique and even advised him in his article in *The Monthly Musical Record* to do so, by saying Britten

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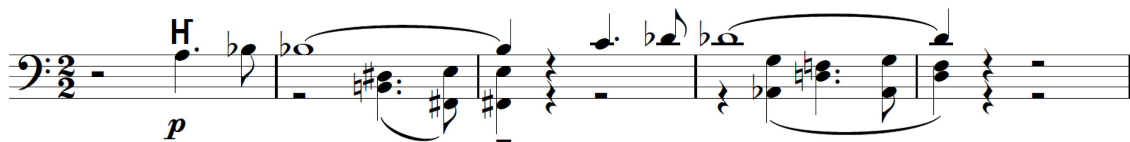
[99] Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 301n30.

[100] In mm. 7-8 we can find the "canonic overlapping" of the first and second phrases of the German folksong *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben*, whilst the rest of the variation consists mainly of "multiple transpositions of a single motivic fragment," or actually multiple transpositions of multiple motivic fragments.

"would be able to integrate much in English music which badly needs integrating" (in order to make English music matter again, which it no longer really did after Purcell), but Britten never felt completely comfortable with it.[101] Besides Berg, Britten also admired Arnold Schönberg (which Boys acknowledged as well), but it would be misleading to regard the opening of the passacaglia in Britten's Violin Concerto as inspired by Schönberg, as Bernhard Stoffels argues:

> Die überraschenden Ähnlichkeiten zwischen markanten Eröffnungspartien in den Violinkonzerten von Schönberg (1936) [opening first movement] und Britten (1939; vgl. die Halbton-Ganztonfolge, den Rhythmus und die Aufwärtsführung) [opening passacaglia] lassen vermuten, dass Britten Schönbergs Schaffen auch später nicht aus den Augen verliert.[102]

Ex. 21 - Britten - Violin Concerto - Opening passacaglia



Ex. 22 - Schönberg - Violin Concerto - Opening first movement

Although one can indeed regard these similarities (see Ex. 21-22) as surprising, they probably are just that. The year of composition Stoffels mentions regarding Schönberg's Violin Concerto is slightly misrepresentative: Schönberg did indeed finish the work in 1936, but only published it after Britten finished his Violin Concerto.[103] It seems therefore unwise to assume that Britten was in possession of a score before the publication date,

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[101] Boys, "Benjamin Britten," 237.

[102] Bernhard Stoffels, *Tradition, Einfachheit, Verzerrung und Brechung: Aspekte der Instrumentalwerke von Benjamin Britten* (Hans Schneider: Tutzing, 2012), 20.

[103] "Concerto for Violin and Orchestra op. 36," Arnold Schönberg Center, accessed June 23, 2013, http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=217&Itemid=381&lang=en.

since no such information is known. In fact, it is not even clear that he knew the work at all.

Less unwise, and perhaps more to the point, is Stoffels's remark about the relation between Britten's feeling of guilt (about the terrible suffering Europe had to endure in his absence) and the partial quotation of the twelve-tone row from Berg's Violin Concerto in Britten's *Introduction and Rondo alla Burlesca*, Op. 23 (1940):

> Die […] Ernsthaftigkeit zeigt sich etwa im Zitat der Zwölftonreihe aus Bergs Violinkonzert (*Dem Andenken eines Engels*), das er 1936 kennengelernt hatte. Eingefügt ist es in die *Introduction* aus op. 23 Nr. 1 für 2 Klaviere. Der h-Moll-Begleitklang (h ist der Todeston in Bergs *Wozzeck*) ist im schwerblütigen Rhythmus des französischen Ouvertüren-Typus gehalten – ein mehrfaches Gedenken an Brittens biographische und künstlerische Heimat Europa und an das von den Nazis 1940 besetzte Nachbarland Frankreich.[104]

Extract of inversion twelve-tone row
Extract of twelve-tone row
pp ma espress.

Ex. 23 - Berg - Violin Concerto - Extracts of twelve-tone row and inversion

Quotation extract of twelve-tone row
Quotation of extract of inversion
p dolce

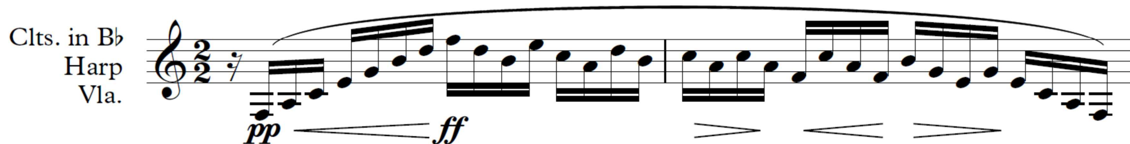
Ex. 24 - Britten - *Introduction and Rondo alla Burlesca* - Quotation twelve-tone row

But perhaps this observation (see Ex. 23-24[105]) isn't that to the point at all. Firstly, the connection with France (and the French rhythm) can probably be equally well explained in a perspective of Britten's eclecticism (an eclecticism that was at certain points notably

[104] Stoffels, *Tradition, Einfachheit, Verzerrung und Brechung*, 36.

[105] Ibid.

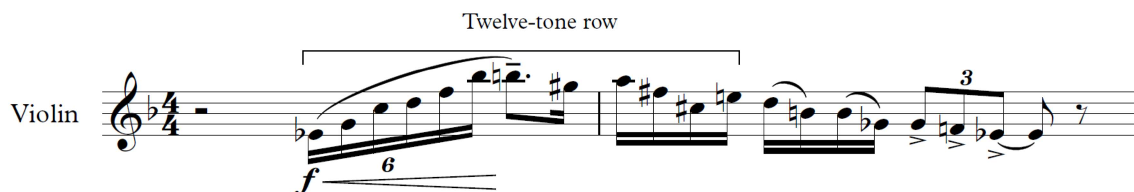
France-oriented; his song cycle *Les Illuminations* was written just a year earlier) and secondly, the idea that a single tone can evoke associations of death seems certainly attractive, but this emotional charge is not something that can be easily transferred from one work to another: it should therefore be regarded as confined to *Wozzeck*, unless it is made (hyper)explicit – which it is not in the *Introduction*. Even the Berg quotation can be disputed, since stacked thirds are a common Britten device in itself (see for instance the 'Dawn' Interlude from *Peter Grimes*, Ex. 25), although the specificity of the quotation should give Stoffels the benefit of the doubt.



Ex. 25 Britten - *Four Sea Interludes* - Dawn (Fig 1^{-3}) - Stacked thirds

The question therefore is if there are any references to Berg's Violin Concerto, as strong as (or stronger than) the one in the *Introduction*, in Britten's Violin Concerto. One can imagine such possible clear references as ascending and descending perfect fifths (as in for instance Igor Raykhelson's Violin Concerto in C minor [2007]), chorale quotations (Hartmann's *Concerto Funebre* [1939]), tone rows based on Berg's (Bernstein's Symphony No. 3 "Khaddish" [1963][106]), or direct quotations from that tone row like the one in Britten's *Introduction*. None of these or other possible strong references appear, however, in Britten's Violin Concerto. Indeed, apart from just one (repeated) example at Fig. 35 in the third movement, Britten's Violin Concerto contains no twelve-tone rows at all (see Ex. 26). Incidentally, this dodecaphonic fragment was added by Britten in his 1950 revision of the concerto, which renders it improbable as a response to Boys's suggestion, because of the long time span between Boys's article and Britten's revision.

[106] David M. Schiller, *Bloch, Schoenberg, and Bernstein: Assimilating Jewish Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 151-152.



Ex. 26 Britten - Violin Concerto (Fig. 35) - Twelve-tone row

Overall, references in Britten's music to Berg's Violin Concerto are not abundant. Kennedy regards the "saxophone's rising and falling seventh" in the first movement of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* as "perhaps a direct tribute to Berg's Violin Concerto, where the same interval is given to the same instrument," but even such a small and questionable reference is lacking in Britten's Violin Concerto.[107] Roseberry, however, contemplates the connection between the works from a different perspective, regarding Berg's concerto a "likely 'mood' model" for Britten's and claiming that "[certain] correspondences between the Berg and Britten concertos are unmistakable, especially the conception of a slow (variation) finale […]."[108] Slightly more precise, but otherwise quite similar, is Christopher Mark's observation that "[the] final variation [of Britten's passacaglia], an impassioned arioso for the violin against a solemn, hymn-like texture in the orchestra, is distantly reminiscent of the final section of Berg's Violin Concerto.."[109] He is right in saying that the last 'variation' (actually, it is not a variation within the passacaglia, but rather a coda to it) has a "solemn, hymn-like texture," but that is exactly the Achilles heel of his argument: Berg's chorale (or for that matter, Hindemith's or Hartmann's) is genuine and recognisable, not just "chorale-like," which is of great importance to the musical narrative, or as Kerman writes:

> At the beginning [of Hartmann's *Concerto Funebre*] the violin plays a chorale, a Hussite hymn still remembered in Czechoslovakia, "Kdož jste Boži boyavníci." It's important that audiences catch this reference, just as listening to the Berg they need to know the unsung words of the Bach chorale.[110]

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[107] Kennedy, *Britten*, 144.

[108] Roseberry, "The Concertos," 238.

[109] Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten*, 167.

[110] Kerman, *Concerto Conversations*, 116-117.

If the supposed reference in Britten was to be palpable, the recognisability itself would be of equal importance. However, Britten's 'hymn' is not recognisable at all. It is solemn, for sure, and probably hymn-like as well, but as such it is more fitting for discussion in a follow-up article on Graham Elliott's chapter about Britten's use of plainsong and hymn tunes included in *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*.[111] Britten might have wanted to make a delicate reference by leaving any textual implications out of it, but as substantiated and probable reference to Berg's Violin Concerto, the suggestion won't stand the strain.

On the other hand, references to *Wozzeck* are firmer and clearer in Britten's Violin Concerto, although some connections (with other works by Britten as well), are still a bit frail. In addition to the connection with *Peter Grimes* mentioned above, references have been observed in, for instance, *Our Hunting Fathers*. Oliver writes:

> Britten's motto phrase [A – F# – D – E – F] could be inserted without much difficulty into the most eloquent of the *Wozzeck* interludes [Act 3, between Scenes 4 and 5]. Like 'Messalina', that interlude is in the key of D minor; Berg's opera, like Britten's cycle, is an expression of pity for helpless suffering.[112]

If Oliver would actually try to insert this motto phrase into the last *Wozzeck* interlude, he would probably succeed (one way or another), but what does that tell us? Sensibly speaking, merely that Britten's multimodal phrase in D fits the extended tonality of this interlude (which is in D as well) in a quite superficial way. This motto phrase, however, does prefigure the opening of the Violin Concerto (as Mark shows[113]), which in its turn can be plausibly related to the very same interlude of *Wozzeck*, as Roseberry does:

> [A] thematic connection with Berg suggests itself in the main theme of the first movement [of Britten's Violin Concerto], its falling shape and tonic-dominant accompaniment corresponding strikingly with the theme of the famous 'Adagio' interlude in D minor after the death of the title character in *Wozzeck* […].[114]

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[111] In this chapter, Elliott discusses Britten's use of "pseudo-Gregorian incantations" as well. Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47-73.

[112] Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, 58.

[113] Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten*, 130-131.

[114] Roseberry, "The Concertos," 238.

As mentioned in the introduction, Britten was particularly fond of "the Wozzeck pieces," the *Drei Bruchstücke* Berg excerpted from his opera for concert performances at the suggestion of Hermann Scherchen in 1923. In fact, before Britten wrote his Violin Concerto, he had probably heard the complete opera only once as a radio broadcast of a concert performance shortly after Berg's death (which "wasn't very satisfactory as a broadcast – voices too loud & blurring. Only the third Act (& bits of second) were intelligible."[115]). Conversely, Britten knew the *Drei Bruchstücke* very well. He heard them quite a few times, and studied them extensively with Boys, who visited Britten in Lowestoft for a fortnight in August and September 1934, a visit Boys recalled vividly:

> He used to play the viola sometimes, trying to go through cello sonatas of Beethoven in that week [...] and he showed me a lot of Frank Bridge and other things that I didn't know very well, or at all, and I took *Oedipus Rex* and Three Pieces from *Wozzeck*, I remember.[116]

According to Mitchell and Reed, "[Britten's] friendship [with Boys] continued in London and was characterized by the same 'explorative instinct' and much debate."[117] Two years later, Britten's and Boys's shared fascination for *Wozzeck* hadn't diminished in the slightest, as a diary entrance by Britten from 11 October 1936 demonstrates: "Henry comes back to supper [...] & we talk & talk music etc (mostly pro-Mahler & anti-Brahms), & play Wozzeck. I should work but this is good."[118] All in all, if one considers the Violin Concerto to be a kind of acknowledgment of Britten's friendship with Boys, or an answer to Boys's article (although that would be slightly oversimplified), references to Berg's *Drei Bruchstücke* (rather than his Violin Concerto) seem perfectly appropriate. From that perspective, the second half of Britten's passacaglia ground is most likely a reference to the opening of the first of the *Drei Bruchstücke* alongside the earlier mentioned reference to Shostakovich (see Ex. 27-28): note the tempo, the crescendo, the tie across the barline, the descending scalar motion and the emphasis placed on each note. Furthermore, as 'Hauptstimme' Berg's melody is of equal importance to the *Drei Bruchstücke* as Britten's passacaglia ground is to the Violin Concerto.

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[115] Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 393.

[116] Ibid., 397.

[117] Ibid., 398.

[118] Ibid.

Andante lento ♩ = 52-54

Trombones

p *marcato*

Ex. 27 Britten – Violin Concerto – Passacaglia (Fig. 32^{-3})

Langsam ♩ = 60

H

Violin 1

poco *mp*

Ex. 28 Berg – *Drei Bruchstücke* from *Wozzeck* – I (m. 302)

Conclusion

Combining the three main components related to Britten's Violin Concerto discussed in this thesis (the Spanish Civil War, Russian composers, and Alban Berg), there emerges a seemingly impenetrable, patchy and chaotic narrative of possible influences on Britten's Violin Concerto, beautifully encapsulated by Joseph Kerman (although his purpose probably was just to illuminate):

> [In] 1939, [a] precocious English composer took his own measure of the Berg Concerto. Once again [as in Walton's Viola Concerto], the reference in Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto, Opus 19 [sic], was evidently specific, though not specified; Britten was mourning the Spanish Civil War (with "disarming frankness," according to a review at the time by Elliott Carter. Britten had attended the touch-and-go premiere of the Berg Concerto at Barcelona in 1936, when Scherchen had to take over the orchestra from Webern). The keening violin cantilena with which the concerto closes sounds above a passacaglia, rather than a chorale. The same topos of threnody is encountered in the finest of the Shostakovich concertos, the first Violin Concerto, another work with political overtones […].[119]

Kerman's résumé makes painfully clear what almost seventy-five years of musicological reflection on Britten's Violin Concerto has made of the work: an intricate story of a young, talented English composer trying to conquer his place on the musical world stage, who travels to Barcelona where he hears the première of a hauntingly beautiful work by a composer whom he adores, but never had the chance to meet. His visit to this city is shortly followed by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, whereupon he started to write a modern masterpiece embedded in tradition to mourn all these horrors of death and destruction, prefiguring the great political works of a repressed Soviet composer. The subplots of this story are his friendship with an expatriate Spanish virtuoso violinist, his nascent homosexuality, the death of his parents, and his escape from World War II, trying to find a better life in the United States.

It would most definitely make a convincing feature film ('based on a true story'), but as musicologists we should not write Hollywood screenplays (at least, not within academic writing). Narratives can be accommodating in understanding music history, but care must be taken not to yield to an '*unwilling* suspension of disbelief'. For sure, there is

[119] Kerman, *Concerto Conversations*, 117.

no question of truth regarding most of the separate elements of this story, but the sophisticated fabric that musicology has tried to weave should not be taken for granted; a musicologist's narrative should illuminate music history, not make it. This narrativisation has most likely been of great importance to the appreciation of the work, and is as such of importance to musicology, but that does not necessarily mean that it is equally important to make musicology into a story telling contest, although that is sometimes inevitable in constructing a convincing argument.

All of the discussed features have certainly, or at least probably, played their part in the composition of Britten's Violin Concerto, or in Britten's life at the very least, but should we really regard the motto rhythm of the first movement as Spanish, and therefore as a reference to the Spanish Civil War? Should we really regard the passacaglia as a prefiguration of Shostakovich's passacaglia in his First Violin Concerto? Should we really regard the mood of the concerto as a reference to the mood in Berg's Violin Concerto? Not without yielding to our unwilling suspension of disbelief. As critical musicologists, however, we can at best try to describe the historical context of the composition process, and try to dissect the cross-hatching of the intertextual relations within that context we encounter. Those intertextual relations, those (extra-)musical references, whether acknowledged or not (be it Beethoven's Violin Concerto, Berg's *Drei Bruchstücke*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*, one of Britten's earlier works, Henry Boys's influence, or such horrors as war and death), have all influenced Britten's Violin Concerto in one way or another, but not always as unswerving as one would hope from a narrative perspective: sometimes it is more than enough to simply note that "everything begets his like."

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