

PART THREE

Perspectives

9 Distant horizons: from Pagodaland to the Church Parables

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Writing this work [*Canticle III: 'Still Falls the Rain'*] has helped me so much in my development as a composer. I feel with this work & the *Turn of the Screw* (which I am impatient for you to hear) that I am on the threshold of a new musical world (for me, I am not pretentious about it!) I am worried about the problems which arise, & that is one reason that I am taking off next winter to do some deep thinking. But your great poem has dragged something from me that was latent there, & shown me what lies before me.

Britten wrote these lines to Edith Sitwell on 28 April 1955, six months before the momentous concert tour which took him halfway across the globe for five months in the winter and spring of 1955–6 and provided him with the opportunity for 'some deep thinking'. The significance of those travels in exposing the composer to vivid firsthand experiences of various Asian musical traditions, and the surface impact these had on his own style, have long been recognized. But Britten's identification with Far Eastern music went far deeper than the obvious borrowings from the Balinese gamelan to be heard in *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1955–7) or the emulations of the Japanese Nō theatre in *Curlew River* (1956–64) would suggest. Britten's style was at a turning-point in the mid-1950s, as his remarks to Sitwell attest: the intense motivic economy and dodecaphonic techniques in *Canticle III* and *The Turn of the Screw* had clearly left him wondering in which direction his style would now develop. The Asian adventure, with perfect timing, opened his ears to other traditions of musical economy and structural clarity while his compositional thinking was clearly running along similar lines, and his travels strengthened a latent curiosity about exotic cultures that had originated many years before.

Britten's eclectic tastes during the 1930s had been sufficiently enterprising to embrace an incipient interest in non-Western music. Between 1933 and 1940 he encountered for the first time the three musical cultures with which he was to identify more closely in later years, those of Indonesia, Japan and India. His first recorded experience of ethnic music in live performance came on 6 May 1933, when he confessed in his personal diary to having been greatly impressed by a concert of Indian music and dancing he attended at the Ambassador Theatre.¹ Then, in 1938, he

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became involved in Ezra Pound's eccentric attempt to mount a performance of a Japanese Nōplay.² Only in the sphere of Indonesian music did Britten's early experiences bear almost immediate artistic fruit: his encounter in 1939–42 with the Canadian composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee (a frequent guest at the home of Dr William Mayer on Long Island, New York, where Britten and Pears were based during their transatlantic sojourn) gave him a basic introduction to the fundamental principles of Balinese gamelan music that would later become absorbed into his own compositional style.

McPhee had lived in Bali for many years in the 1930s, making a thorough study of the island's musical traditions and distilling his knowledge into a series of transcriptions for two pianos, some of which Britten and McPhee performed in New York and subsequently recorded for Schirmer in 1941.³ Balinese influences are abundant in certain of McPhee's compositions, most notably in his toccata for two pianos and orchestra entitled *Tabuh-tabuhan* (1936), in which some of the orchestration is so close to the procedures later adopted by Britten in *The Prince of the Pagodas* that it comes as a surprise to discover that Britten probably never heard McPhee's piece (although it seems plausible that he would have been shown the score). McPhee's two-piano transcriptions, three of which were published by Schirmer in 1940 under the title *Balinese Ceremonial Music*, were of sufficient interest to Britten for him to mount their first British performance with Clifford Curzon on 29 March 1944 at the Wigmore Hall; the programme notes for this concert were provided by Britten himself, heavily based on the introductory notes written by McPhee for inclusion in the published scores.⁴ Britten's copy of the transcriptions was inscribed by McPhee in April 1940 with the words 'To Ben – hoping he will find something in this music, after all',⁵ a remark clearly implying that Britten had not yet been convinced that Balinese music ought to engage his attention, and all the more surprising in view of the undeniable influence that McPhee's transcriptions appear to have had on Britten's subsequent output.

McPhee's arrangements had furnished Britten with clear examples of the principal styles and tuning systems of Balinese music, and the piece entitled 'Taboeh Teloe' had an immediate impact on Britten's own music by suggesting the scheme of colotomic (i.e. 'dissecting') punctuation underlying the 'Sunday Morning' interlude which begins Act II of *Peter Grimes* (see Ex. 9.1).⁶ Britten appears to have transposed the pentatonic Balinese *selisir* scale down a semitone and used this as the basis for the layered ostinati of the upper parts of his orchestral texture, which clearly owe much to his post-Debussy awareness of stratified gamelan polyphony. One of the dissonant triads used in McPhee's transcription to

Example 9.1

The musical score for Example 9.1 consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The upper staff is divided into two sections: the first section is labeled 'McPhee' and the second section is labeled 'Britten'. The lower staff has a '[Gong:]' label under the first measure. The music consists of notes and rests on both staves, with some notes marked with accidentals.

suggest the resonance of the gamelan's punctuating gong strokes is also transposed down a semitone and deftly transformed into a tolling Suffolk church bell. It seems unlikely to be coincidental that this derivation should occur in a work written while Britten was studying the *Balinese Ceremonial Music* with Curzon.

Britten's works from the period 1939–56 contain many further examples of such dissonant punctuating devices, and of motivic material corresponding to the intervallic contours of the two principal Balinese tuning systems (as standardized in Western notation in McPhee's transcriptions). Stratified counterpoint based on superimposed ostinato patterns and a notable fondness for metallic percussion sonorities are both widespread, the latter most obvious in the emphasis placed on the alluring celeste and gong associated with the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* (1954). An increasingly important equality between melody and harmony as different manifestations of identical pitch content was ultimately to reach its culmination in the sparse textures of the Church Parables under the direct influence of Japanese music, while heterophonic techniques which may be related to those of the Balinese gamelan occur as early as the Prologue to *Paul Bunyan*, composed in 1940–1 when Britten was collaborating with McPhee in the USA.⁷ The use of this 'exotic' technique to depict a supernatural event is itself significant, since virtually all Britten's later applications of Balinese material were to fulfil strikingly similar musico-dramatic functions. Britten was clearly interested in such heterophonic techniques long before he met McPhee (see, for example, the superimposition of motivic fragments in 'Rats Away!' from *Our Hunting Fathers* in 1936), and between 1941 and 1955 Britten's use of heterophony significantly increased.

In November 1955, Britten and Pears left England on their five-month concert tour, which took them to Austria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand and Sri Lanka. The fortnight they spent in Bali in January 1956 was kept completely free from engagements, and was intended to be a holiday from the punishing recital schedule.⁸ Whilst relaxing on the idyllic island, Britten found time to make a remarkably comprehensive study of the local gamelan music, visiting temples, attending dances and the shadow-play, and immersing himself

in many different genres of Balinese music. On his return to England, the composer directly incorporated Balinese material into the score of his ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (see below), completed later in 1956 and his first work to make widespread use of specific oriental borrowings – although, as we have seen, by no means the first to demonstrate his latent interest in the music of the Far East.

Britten first experienced a live performance of Indonesian music in Bandung, Java, on 8 January 1956. Both Britten and Pears could easily distinguish between the basic melody of the composition and the embellishments added by the performers, and Britten delighted the musicians by accurately singing back their scale to them.⁹ A diversion to Semarang proved to be of considerable interest, since the town is an important centre of gong manufacture in South-East Asia and Britten was thus provided with the opportunity to see gamelan instruments being made.¹⁰ His enthusiasm for the instruments is revealed somewhat later by an undated postcard sporting a picture of typical gongs he sent to James Blades from Indonesia with the message: ‘I’ve heard Gongs of all shapes, sizes and metals here – producing fantastic notes – you’d be very interested. I hope to bring back some tapes of the music here – fantastic stuff.’ It was to Blades that Britten would later turn for specialized advice on the exact choice of Western percussion instruments to represent specific gamelan sonorities in *The Prince of the Pagodas*.

The tour party flew on to Bali on 12 January. Britten’s visit was confined to the south of the island, the foothills of the volcanoes Gunung Agung and Gunung Batur marking the limit of his excursions northwards.¹¹ Most of his artistic experiences seem to have occurred during the few days he spent in the peaceful village of Ubud and its satellite community Peliatan, noted for its famous gamelan which had toured the West with the entrepreneur John Coast in 1952.¹² Britten availed himself of specialized instruction in the shape of Bernard ‘Penny’ IJzerdraat, who helped him to label the sketches he made during the visit with accurate Balinese terminology. Britten later wrote to Imogen Holst: ‘We are lucky in being taken around everywhere by an intelligent Dutch musicologist, married to a Balinese, who knows all musicians – so we go to rehearsals, find out about and visit cremations, trance dances, shadow plays – a bewildering richness.’¹³ IJzerdraat was director of the gamelan *Babar Layar* at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, and was an expert on rhythmic patterns in gamelan music; he had contributed a transcription of West Javanese *angklung* music to Jaap Kunst’s monumental study of Javanese music, first published in 1949.¹⁴ John Coast recalls that Mr IJzerdraat played for a time in the Peliatan gamelan – an extremely rare privilege for a Westerner in those days.¹⁵

Britten compiled a set of manuscript sketches from the music he heard on the island, carefully labelled with details of dance genres and musical scales, the most significant of which originated from his time in the region of Ubud where he saw the famous *legong* dance. A representative page from Britten's sketches is reproduced in Plate 12. It was from Ubud on 17 January that Britten wrote his much-quoted remarks to Imogen Holst: 'The music is *fantastically* rich – melodically, rhythmically, texture (such *orchestration*!!) & above all *formally*. It is a remarkable culture . . . At last I'm beginning to catch on to the technique, but it's about as complicated as Schönberg.' In the light of Hans Keller's remark that Britten's interest in the heterophonic techniques of Asian music should be related to his equally strong involvement with twelve-tone procedures, Britten's mention of Schoenberg in this context is especially noteworthy¹⁶ – and the parallel reminds us that it was precisely the dodecaphonic techniques with which he had been experimenting before his departure that had forced him to find the opportunity for 'some deep thinking' about general compositional issues during his world tour.

During the morning of 23 January, an event took place which provided important source material for the Balinese sections Britten had by this stage evidently decided to include in *The Prince of the Pagodas*: the making of a studio tape recording of gamelan pieces in which he was especially interested.¹⁷ Sent to Britten in the UK after his return home, recordings from this session were edited by IJzerdraat onto a tape that included extracts from many other musical genres Britten encountered during his time in Indonesia. The most important item on the tape proved to be a performance of 'Tabuh Telu', the melody of which Britten incorporated more or less directly into the score of *The Prince of the Pagodas*.¹⁸ It was on the day these recordings were made that Britten sent an optimistic telegram to Dame Ninette de Valois at Covent Garden to say 'CONFIDENT BALLET READY FOR MIDSEPTEMBER LOVE BRITTEN'.

The genesis of *The Prince of the Pagodas* dates back to January 1954, when the Sadler's Wells Ballet announced a forthcoming collaboration between Britten and the choreographer John Cranko. Britten had begun work on the ballet's music in the spring of 1955 and had reached Act II by mid-August, when it became apparent that (most uncharacteristically) he would be unable to complete the score on time. A new February deadline was scrapped, and the ballet's production was postponed until July 1956.¹⁹ It was, in the event, highly propitious that Britten should have had Act II of the ballet in his mind when he arrived in Bali, since it was into this act that he subsequently incorporated material borrowed from the gamelan music he encountered there. Britten's ballet score contains several features that clearly parallel aspects of gamelan music he had

Pennis javanica (near Wood copy)

The image shows a page of handwritten musical sketches on ten staves. The sketches are organized into several sections, each with a label on the left side:

- Pattern:** The first section, labeled 'Pattern', consists of the first three staves. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The first staff contains a melodic line with a few notes and a fermata. The second staff contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with stems pointing up and down, some with '+' signs above them. The third staff contains a complex rhythmic pattern with many notes and stems.
- Grand staff:** The second section, labeled 'Grand staff', consists of the next three staves. It features a treble clef, a bass clef, and a key signature of one flat. The first staff has a few notes, the second has a rhythmic pattern, and the third has a melodic line.
- Detail:** The third section, labeled 'Detail', consists of the next three staves. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The first staff has a melodic line with many notes and stems, the second has a rhythmic pattern, and the third has a melodic line.
- Flute:** The fourth section, labeled 'Flute', consists of the next three staves. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The first staff has a melodic line with many notes and stems, the second has a rhythmic pattern, and the third has a melodic line.
- 5th higher:** The fifth section, labeled '5th higher', consists of the final three staves. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The first staff has a melodic line with many notes and stems, the second has a rhythmic pattern, and the third has a melodic line.

Plate 12 Britten's sketches from Bali, January 1956 (fol. 2^v)

encountered through McPhee's transcriptions years before. Polyphonic stratification occurs in the Prelude (a late addition written well after the Balinese trip) and in the massive crescendo between Figs. 19 and 23 in Act III where all the themes associated with the Prince are combined as the lights come up on the Pagoda Palace. Familiar pentatonicism colours much of the ballet's music, but an equal debt is shown to the Russian ballet tradition with ubiquitous and affectionate echoes of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Stravinsky: the score is finely balanced between East and West.

The direct appropriation of Balinese musical material in Act II presented Britten with the challenge of emulating gamelan sonorities strictly within the confines of the Western orchestra. The resulting 'gamelan' passages symbolize the attraction the supernatural Prince holds over Belle Rose in his guise as Salamander and as ruler of the exotic Pagodaland, an important parallel with the symbolic use of tuned percussion in several of Britten's operas. The Balinese sonorities were reconstructed with the aid of the sketches from Bali, four gramophone recordings of gamelan music which may have been in Britten's possession before his visit to the island, and the tape recording of miscellaneous Indonesian music made under the guidance of IJzerdraat. Two of the gramophone records are 78rpm discs (MO 104 and MO 105) which contain music from Java and Bali, and two are LPs (Argo RG1 and RG2) containing Balinese *kebyar* music performed by the Peliatan group during their 1952 tour. Britten filled both sides of a half-folio of eighteen-stave manuscript paper with sketches taken down from four of the recorded pieces.²⁰ The sketches from Bali provided Britten with a reminder of the popular *gambang* theme he first encountered in McPhee's second transcription, which he now decided to include in the ballet at Fig. 73 in Act II (Ex. 9.2 and Plate 12). The 'salamander' theme (Ex. 9.3) was probably added to the Balinese sketches at a later date from the tape recording Britten had made for him in Bali and sent on to the UK, since the composer wrote out the melody in a ballpoint pen quite distinct from the pencil used consistently elsewhere in the sketches. In addition to his memories of McPhee's transcriptions, he must certainly have had in mind Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos (1932), which he had recently performed alongside its composer on 16 January 1955 at the Royal Festival Hall. Poulenc and Britten first performed the concerto at the Royal Albert Hall in 1945, and the work's 'gamelan' material is also based on a Balinese *selisir* scale on B \flat – presenting precisely the same pitches as those used by Britten between Figs. 69 and 74 in *Pagodas*, and in McPhee's transcription of 'Taboeh Teloe' (cf. Ex. 9.1).²¹

Britten's orchestration in Act II of *Pagodas* demonstrates an intuitive grasp of the structure and instrumentation of gamelan music and an

Example 9.2



Example 9.3

astonishing ear for percussion sonorities. At Fig. 71, the piano, celeste and xylophone present a much simplified version of a cadenza for the reong (a rack of gong-chimes played by four musicians) which occurs shortly after the opening of Britten's LP recording of the Peliatan gamelan's 'Kapi Radja'. At Fig. 72, the gamelan's colotomic gong strokes are suggested by a conventional orchestral gong doubled with a sustained doublebass note of definite pitch (Ex. 9.4). The distinctive timbre of the kempli, a small hand-held timekeeping gong, is captured by a repeated staccato C# on piccolo timpano (played with hard sticks) and harp *près de la table*. The smallest Balinese metallophones are evoked by rapid figurations on the xylophone, with two dovetailed piccolo lines representing the popular Indonesian bamboo flute (suling), while the vibraphone and celeste provide the slowly moving ostinato of the deeper and softer metallophones. A small pair of clashed cymbals serves as their Balinese equivalent (cengceng), and throughout the passage a piano duet doubles most of the individual lines – undoubtedly signifying the renewed influence of the McPhee and Poulenc precedents. Three tom-toms represent the kendang (the Balinese double-headed drum), and at several points the vibraphone solo recalls the melodic function of the trompong, a rack of gong-chimes played by a soloist (e.g. first- and second-time bars before Fig. 73 and Fig. 74²). The music then launches into a brilliant and extended free reconstruction of one of the toccata-like sections from 'Kapi Radja', cul-

Example 9.4

72 **Slower**, ♩ = 62

1. She eats the apple.
2. She drains the goblet.

8va-

Piano, Piccolo, Flute, Timp., Hp., Vib., Cel., Db., Gong

8va-

8va-

minating at Fig. 73 in the authentic *gambang* melody, scored for glockenspiel, celeste, harp harmonics, piano and solo violin in an uncanny imitation of the sonorities of the suling and bright, high metallophones (Ex. 9.2 above).

At Fig. 74, the trumpet fanfares which began the ballet's Prologue are modified to reflect the intervallic contours of the *selisir* scale, and the music is now transposed down a semitone. The 'gamelan' then enters with a tutti chord at the new pitch level in a gradual, unmeasured accelerando. Such cluster chords are a strong characteristic of the Balinese *kebyar* style: the accelerating rhythm is also typical, and Britten would have heard it with particular clarity towards the end of the *legong* dance on the second side of one of his Peliatan records (RG1) and in the shadow-play music on his reel-to-reel tape recording (track 5). At this stage he had not yet developed the special notation for this accelerating or decelerating pattern which was to become a prominent feature of many works composed in the 1960s and 1970s. (For an example from *Death in Venice*, see Ex. 8.7,

p.159.) The transposition of *selisir* at this point not only relieves the potential monotony for the Western ear: it also allows Britten to incorporate the Prince-as-Salamander theme at Fig. 75⁺⁵ at the same pitch level at which he had encountered it in Bali and on IJzerdraat's tape recording (see Ex. 9.3 above). Britten relaxes the stringently applied *selisir* scale at Fig. 77⁻⁴ to effect a transition to the entry of the full orchestra in an emphatic C major. The theme announced by the trumpet at this point represents the Prince-as-Human, and the contrast between the thoroughly Western key of C major and the preceding *selisir* is an obvious musical comment on the dramatic situation. Nevertheless, the interjected clusters from the 'gamelan' remind the listener of the duality in the Prince's character; and when Belle Rose flees at the end of the Act, slowly followed by the Prince-as-Salamander, Britten superimposes a recapitulation of his gamelan music over a dissonant C \sharp in a typically economical and graphic reminder of the Prince's dual nature.

The incidence of heterophonic techniques, polyphonic stratification, colotomic percussion patterns and scales resembling the two Balinese tuning systems in Britten's music composed before 1956 could in many cases be viewed as a product of the composer's subconscious. Those features recalling the early stimulus provided by McPhee's *Balinese Ceremonial Music* were equally well inherent characteristics of Britten's compositional style well before his initial contact with Balinese music. One reason for his intense involvement with the gamelan in 1956 must therefore have been his realization that certain Balinese musical procedures paralleled his own stylistic preoccupations at the time. There seems little doubt, however, that the notable intensification of these devices after *The Prince of the Pagodas* represents a more conscious application of Balinese devices on the composer's part, especially in cases such as *Noye's Fludde* (1958) where adumbrations of his later Japanese-inspired Church Parable style co-exist with quasi-gamelan sonorities and pentatonicism. Heterophony and the derivation of both harmony and melody from identical pitch content become more widespread from the *Nocturne* (1958) and *Missa Brevis* (1959) onwards, and stratified polyphony culminates in the superimposed textures of the *War Requiem* (1962) – which in places looks directly ahead to the free metrical alignment of the Church Parables. Colotomic gong strokes occur in virtually every post-1956 orchestral score and are especially prominent in the first movement of the *War Requiem*. Equally notable is Britten's increasingly systematic use of quasi-gamelan sonorities as a consistent musical response to comparable dramatic situations in different stage works: the tinkling allure of the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* is recalled by the fairy 'gamelan' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), while the percussive

sonorities in *Owen Wingrave* (1970) are disconcertingly associated both with the martial heritage from which the protagonist attempts to escape, and with the attractiveness of the peace that eludes him (see pp. 190–5).

The gamelan influence on Britten reached its final fruition in his last opera *Death in Venice* (1971–3), in which Balinese procedures and sonorities were allocated to the beautiful Polish boy Tadzio and his associates in a deliberate attempt to provide the maximum possible contrast to the music associated with Aschenbach. As the opera's librettist Myfanwy Piper put it, 'the type of melancholy gaiety in the Balinese sound is in total contrast to the rather Germanic character of Aschenbach's self-absorption and underlines his feeling of alienation'.²² In contrast to the direct reconstruction of specific Balinese prototypes in *Pagodas*, Britten's empathy with gamelan techniques allowed him in *Death in Venice* to compose in his own synthetic 'gamelan' idiom in which pentatonic scales were treated less rigorously, and both percussive sonorities and scale configurations were transformed and deployed in economical and effective moments of musico-dramatic symbolism. While the music for the children's beach games directly recalls the scoring of *Pagodas* (compare, for example, *Death in Venice*, Act I, Fig. 82, with Ex. 9.4 above), the music for Tadzio is provided by the vibraphone in the manner of a trompong solo, and remains resolutely on a *selisir* scale based on A – and inevitably suggesting a parallel with Britten's habitual key of innocence and purity. On the Polish boy's first appearance, this pentatonic configuration is treated as part of a dodecaphonic pitch collection in a striking fusion of Eastern and Western musical procedures.²³

Shortly after their memorable stay in Bali in January 1956, Britten and Pears flew on to Japan, arriving in Tokyo on 8 February. Three days later, another inspiring artistic experience awaited Britten in the shape of a performance of Nō theatre, which his librettist William Plomer – who lived in Japan in the 1920s – had strongly recommended him to see for himself.²⁴ In preparation for the event, Britten had acquired a copy of Faber's reissue of Ezra Pound's Nō-play translations before his trip.²⁵ A detailed description of the performance seen by Britten is to be found in the travel diary written by Prince Ludwig of Hesse (who, together with his wife, accompanied Britten and Pears during the latter stages of their tour): it concentrates on the verbal unintelligibility of the genre, but notes that the drama nevertheless exerted a profound impact on the composer.²⁶ That Britten's imagination was principally fired by the play *Sumidagawa* was revealed by his desire to see the performance once again (on 19 February), just before his departure from Tokyo; he subsequently acquired a tape recording of

the play for his own use.²⁷ In a special radio message broadcast to the people of Japan on New Year's Day 1958, he declared:

I count the [Nō theatre] among the greatest theatrical experiences of my life. Of course it was strange to start with, the language and the especially curious kind of chanting used; but we were fortunate in having excellent literal translations to follow from, and we soon became accustomed to the haunting sounds. The deep solemnity and *selflessness* of the acting, the perfect shaping of the drama (like a great Greek tragedy) coupled with the strength and universality of the stories are something which every Western artist can learn from.²⁸

An excursion to Kyoto in the period 12–14 February had meanwhile brought an amusing encounter with D. J. Enright at a geisha evening, an event recorded by the poet:

The most highly-regarded samisen [*sic*] players and singers were brought in to entertain the guests. As they performed, Britten scribbled down the musical notation while Pears (an even greater feat, I should think) swiftly made his own transliteration of the words. Then Britten borrowed a samisen and plucked at it while Pears sang – the result being an uncanny playback. The effect on the geisha, a race who tend to be excessively conscious of their inimitability, their cultural uniqueness, and aggravatingly assured of the pitiable inability to understand their art inherent in all foreigners, was almost alarming. They paled beneath their whitewash. A more violent people would have seen to it that their guests' throats were cut the moment they left those sacred halls. This was one of the few indubitable triumphs for British art or artists which I noticed in Japan – and probably the most striking.²⁹

The shamisen referred to by Enright is a three-stringed banjo played with a large plectrum, the traditional accompanying instrument for geisha singing; unfortunately, Britten's jottings from this extraordinary evening have not survived. The composer was by this stage becoming familiar with the relevant musical idiom, having already heard a similar performance in Tokyo. The distinctive heterophonic techniques of shamisen songs, in which the single instrumental line 'shadows' the vocal melody, were later to exert a far greater influence on the contrapuntal procedures of the Church Parables than the music of Nō, which is notoriously complex and virtually impossible to express adequately in Western musical notation.

Perhaps the most significant event of the three-day excursion to Kyoto was Britten's purchase of a shō, the mouth-organ employed in traditional Japanese court music (*Gagaku*). After his return to Tokyo, Britten paid what was probably his second visit to the Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency on 18 February to hear the haunting hetero-

phonic textures of the court orchestra, which were also to leave their mark on the innovative idiom of the Church Parables. As a result of his interest in Gagaku, Britten obtained two Columbia long-playing recordings (BL 28–9) made by the Music Department of the Imperial Household and a volume of printed transcriptions from the Gagaku repertory.³⁰ After his return to England, Britten received a warm letter from his Japanese host, Kei-ichi Kurosawa, sent on 31 March 1956 as a covering note with an article specially written for the composer by Leo Traynor and wittily entitled ‘A Young Britten’s Guide to the Shō’. Britten had already received instruction on the instrument while in Japan, as shown by a photograph taken in Tokyo (Plate 13).

Britten’s fascination with Nō and other traditional Japanese genres was to lead to the composition of the first Church Parable, *Curlew River* (completed in 1964 after an eight-year gestation), a work which embodies an unconventional dramatic aesthetic created from a combination of elements borrowed from Japanese theatre and the mediaeval English mystery play, and which spawned two successors: *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).³¹ The composer communicated his enthusiasm for Japanese theatre to Plomer immediately upon his return from Japan, singling out *Sumidagawa* for comment in a letter dated 13 May 1956. Correspondence between the two men surviving from the summer of 1957 reveals that the possibility of an operatic adaptation of the play had been discussed but temporarily shelved, but in the autumn of 1958 Plomer went ahead and produced his first draft libretto in the shape of a straightforward paraphrase of the authorized English translation of the play.³² On 2 October, Plomer wrote to Britten to communicate his desire to retain various Japanese details, including names, to which the composer responded six days later: ‘I am very keen on as many nice evocative Japanese words as possible!’ Plomer duly handed over his completed libretto, and Britten thanked him for it in a letter dated 16 November in which he declared: ‘The more I think of it, the more I feel we should stick as far as possible to the original style & look of it – but oh, to find some equivalent to those extraordinary noises the Japanese musicians made!’ Plans were made to mount the new work in 1960, but the reopening of the Jubilee Hall at Aldeburgh in that year necessitated a change of direction (see p. 129).

On 15 April 1959, Britten wrote a long and carefully considered letter to Plomer in which he advocated a radical rethinking of the work’s content: having resolved to perform the piece in a local church setting, he had conceived the idea of Christianizing the story and removing the ‘little bits of Zen-Bhuddism [*sic*], which don’t mean much to me’. He continued:



Plate 13 Britten playing the shō in Tokyo, February 1956

The story is one which stands strongly wherever it is placed. I have been *very* worried lest the work should seem a *pastiche* of a Noh play, which however well done, would seem false & thin. I *can't* write Japanesy music, but might be led into trying if the rest of the production (setting, clothes, moves) were Japanese . . .

. . . if we made it Mediaeval, or possibly earlier, it would be accurate that no women should be used; also if the style were kept very artificial, very influenced by the Noh, then it wouldn't seem so odd for a woman to be played by a man, especially if the dresses were very carefully & strongly designed . . . we might get a very strong atmosphere (which I personally love) if we set it in pre-conquest East Anglia . . .

Working on a typed version of the earlier libretto, Plomer accordingly set about transposing the action of *Sumidagawa* to mediaeval England, making ingenious emendations in ballpoint pen. The most significant alterations were the provision of a new and strongly cathartic ending, in the sharpest possible contrast to the bleak conclusion of the Japanese original, and the addition of a narrative frame in order to present the tale as if enacted by a group of Christian monks. Heavy compositional commitments prevented Britten from resuming work on the project until Christmas 1963, when Plomer completed his libretto in time for Britten to compose the bulk of the music in Venice in the following February and introduce the work at the 1964 Aldeburgh Festival.

Clearly, Britten's decision to Christianize the plot of *Sumidagawa* marks a radical departure from the aesthetic effect of the Japanese original. To the uninitiated Westerner, many Nō plays seem highly static in their dramatic effect because stage action and plot developments are less important than the philosophical contemplation expected from cognoscenti of the genre. Britten's Western approach to the story has a dramatic cogency equal to that of *Sumidagawa* if based on entirely different aesthetic principles: *Curlew River* may be viewed as a spiritual progression towards a single climactic and cathartic moment (a familiar scheme in the composer's operatic output), this simple and tangible dramatic momentum greatly aiding the Western audience's appreciation of the story. In spite of this significant shift in dramatic emphasis, the first production of *Curlew River* reflected the original Japanese stimulus in numerous respects, although Colin Graham (the work's producer) has recalled that Britten requested him not to see a genuine Nō play lest his ideas should be too heavily influenced by the genre.³³ The Nō theatre evolved in mediaeval times specifically to suit the tastes of the aristocratic warrior class (Samurai), which forbade the uninhibited expression of emotions: this consideration was clearly crucial to the formulation of an art famously characterized by extreme stylization and restraint, both of

which left their mark on the dramatic style of all three Church Parables. The economical and versatile stage set evolved by Graham for the trilogy perfectly captured the unelaborate functionality of the Nō prototype, and emulated the special ramp along which characters enter in Nō (and which symbolically links the real world with the supernatural), Britten responding in his score to the Nō convention of providing entrance music specifically associated with each actor. The function of the Nō mirror room, where the principal actor dons his mask in order to study its reflection and where the instrumentalists play a sacred prelude before processing on stage, is replaced in Britten's parables by the initial procession and subsequent on-stage robing ceremony (suggested to Britten by an ecclesiastical ritual he witnessed in Venice while at work on *Curlew River*). Many details of set design, masks, costumes, props, stage directions and stylized acting gestures were directly modelled on the Japanese original and further developed in the two later Church Parables.

On the evidence of the score of *Curlew River* and Britten's correspondence with Plomer, it seems incontrovertible that the composer was primarily attracted by the dramatic qualities of Nō and not by its musical idiom: the latter is emulated at a fairly superficial level, chiefly in matters of sonority (exclusively male voices, with a predominantly monophonic chorus and prominent flute and drums – the only instruments used in Nō) and in a clear preoccupation with quasi-Japanese vocal portamento. Although Britten made no attempt to study or emulate in specific detail the complex rhythmic procedures of Nō music, it nevertheless seems likely that his liberation of rhythm in *Curlew River* was inspired by the sense of rhythmic freedom which will strike any Westerner listening to a Nō play for the first time (the product of a complex theoretical system 'following the fluid rhythm of life and avoiding mechanical arrangement'³⁴). Much more seminal Japanese influences on the musical style of the parables were Gagaku, which showed him how to organize heterophonic textures on a grand scale and which may have provided a model for the dense canonic writing in certain passages,³⁵ and the simple style of two-part heterophony to be found in traditional vocal music with shamisen accompaniment (both that performed by geishas and in the Kabuki theatre, which Britten attended in Tokyo on 17 February 1956). Gagaku drumming provided a model for the accelerating drum patterns heard in the narrative frames of the first two parables (transferred to a suspended cymbal for variety in *The Prodigal Son*), and Britten had previously encountered similar accelerating repeated notes in the Balinese *kebyar* style; these were directly recalled in the 'Sanctus' of the *War Requiem* (and indicated by an innovative notation).³⁶ The gamelan parallel was retained in *Curlew River* where the accelerating rhythms appear on the set of small bells at Fig. 87.

Example 9.5

(*Sempre 8va*)

takai- jū ge otsu kū bi ichi gyō bō kotsu hi
jū

Example 9.6

(with soft 4')

Org.

p

always sustained

Britten's understanding of the *shō* (three of which participate in the Gagaku ensemble) contributed significantly to the unusual style of the music for the chamber organ in the three parables. The Japanese instrument can play eleven different chords of five or six notes each, termed *aitake* ('complementary bamboos'), the lowest notes of which are heterophonically related to the thematic material of the melody instruments. These chords, which are given in Ex. 9.5, are linked in performance by subtly blurred transitions, faithfully reproduced by Britten in the chamber-organ part of *Curlew River* (Ex. 9.6).³⁷

The initial eight-year gestation period which had led to the creation of the new idiom allowed the subsequent members of the Church Parable trilogy to be conceived and executed at a far greater speed. The Christianized *Nō* play was followed by an Old Testament story in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), with the New Testament parable of *The Prodigal Son* completing the triptych in 1968. The *Furnace* managed to achieve a high degree of instrumental colour and dramatic vitality, perhaps in part reflecting Britten's and Pears's memories of Kabuki, while adhering closely to the dramatic and musical conventions of *Curlew River*.³⁸ *The Prodigal Son* deftly combined the austerity of the first parable (for the tranquillity of the family environment) with the hedonism of the second (in the nightmarish city scenes), while leaving some commentators with the feeling that the initial impulse behind the trilogy had now grown somewhat tired.³⁹ The function of the chorus as the principal

commentator on the action in *Curlew River* – a feature directly inherited from Nō – was one of many elements to undergo significant transformation. Britten had already made his chorus participate directly in the action of *Curlew River*, in sharp contrast to their strictly sedentary narrative function in the Nō prototype, and the still greater participation of the chorus in the dramatic action of the two later parables (as courtiers, workers, revellers and beggars) is a further move away from the aesthetic principles of the Nō theatre towards a more Westernized operatic conception.

The Prodigal Son provides an isolated but striking example of Britten's response to the Indian music which he had first encountered as a student. During the 1955–6 world tour, he was greatly impressed by the Indian music he witnessed on several occasions – including a dazzling performance by Ravi Shankar in Delhi on 22 December 1955 which Pears described in his travel diary as 'brilliant, fascinating, stimulating, wonderfully played' – and on the return leg westwards from Japan, Britten added a tape of virtuoso Singalese drumming from Kandy (Sri Lanka) to his growing collection of ethnic source material. In the 1958 Aldeburgh Festival, the Asian Music Circle presented a programme of Indian music and dance at the Jubilee Hall.⁴⁰ Although Britten was never to return to Bali or Japan after 1956, he did find the opportunity to travel once more to the Indian subcontinent for a holiday in the spring of 1965 (and a programme of Indian dance was again included in the Aldeburgh Festival later that same year).⁴¹ Amongst the fragmentary sketches for *The Burning Fiery Furnace* he made at the end of 1965, there exists a curious passage marked 'Toda welcome song'. This theme was not incorporated in the second parable, or apparently anywhere else in Britten's output, but it was certainly derived from Indian sources since the Toda are a southern Indian people whom both Britten and Pears had described in correspondence written during their 1965 trip.⁴²

Britten possessed a gramophone recording (EALP 1252) of the Indian flautist Pannalal Ghosh performing two Ragas: *Yaman* and *Shri*. Britten was so captivated by *Raag Yaman* that he notated parts of it in his sketchbook and subsequently incorporated sizeable portions of Ghosh's melody in the music for *The Prodigal Son*: a comparison of representative extracts is given in Ex. 9.7. Transferred to the alto flute (the Western instrument closest to the sonority of the mellow Indian flute), the languid and repetitive patterns conjure up the tranquil, pastoral atmosphere at the father's estate. At some point in 1968 Britten purchased a copy of Alain Daniélou's newly published study *The Râga-s of Northern Indian Music*, in which the raga is described as 'joyful and contented'.⁴³

Britten's sustained involvement with Asian music is significant on at

least three different levels. In its most straightforward manifestation, the composer reconstructs and reinterprets specific techniques in certain works where the influence of Asian music is both precisely definable (the relevant source material having survived) and unequivocal; in doing so, Britten continued to reveal the astonishing technical facility that had characterized his work since the 1930s, when he had shown himself capable of imitating virtually any style of music that attracted his attention.

On a more general level, many characteristics of the composer's style before his world tour in 1956 suggest that various developing technical preoccupations offer a plausible explanation for his growing interest in Balinese and Japanese musical procedures. In some cases, however, the extent to which the appearance of a particular musical technique may be attributed to a process of 'influence' is clearly open to question. (One is reminded of Jaap Kunst's remark that the final phrase of the Javanese theme *Plenchung Wetah* is virtually identical to a cello melody in the finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in F major, Op. 135.⁴⁴) But Britten's early compositional style was well suited to the admixture of more explicit Asian material, and the success of his combination of Eastern and Western elements was undoubtedly made possible by a degree of inherent stylistic affinity. As with Debussy before him, Britten's experience of the gamelan acted as a catalyst by throwing up fortuitous musical parallels that focused his attention on the more radical aspects of his own style – to reapply the composer's own words to Edith Sitwell, it had 'dragged something from me that was latent there, & shown me what lies before me'. Neil Sorrell's remarks on Debussy's interest in Javanese gamelan music may be applied to Britten with equal relevance: 'The key word is *influence*, with its suggestion of bringing about a change of course. With Debussy a much more fruitful word would be *confirmation*. It seems far more plausible that what he heard . . . confirmed what he had, at least subconsciously, always felt about music, and this experience went far deeper than a desire to imitate something new and exotic.'⁴⁵

Finally, the precise nature of the personal significance with which Britten appears to have invested his Asian borrowings is likely to prove a source of ongoing interpretative fascination. Philip Brett has been the first to explore the close connection between the phenomena of orientalism and homoeroticism in Britten's operas in a groundbreaking essay.⁴⁶ Although it transfers McPhee's own (and explicitly confessed) erotic view of Bali too unquestioningly onto Britten without supporting evidence, Brett's research nevertheless offers much food for thought in its perceptive account of the musico-dramatic function of those disquieting 'gamelan' sonorities in *The Turn of the Screw* and other stage works. From

the disturbing allure of Quint's celeste and Miss Jessel's gong, through the exotic attraction of Pagodaland and its supernatural Prince to the sexual chemistry dispensed by Oberon's spells in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, from the ritualized restraint of the Church Parables to the invocation of peace in *Owen Wingrave* and the celebration of adolescent beauty in *Death in Venice*, Britten's transformation of Far Eastern techniques proved to be the basis for a remarkably flexible and suggestive musical language.