

PART ONE

Apprenticeship

1 Juvenilia (1922–1932)

CHRISTOPHER MARK

It is clear from the assuredness of his Op. 1, the *Sinfonietta*, that Britten was already a composer of some experience when he started work on the piece in June 1932 at the age of eighteen.¹ He himself hinted at the extent of that experience in interviews and articles published in the early and mid-1960s,² while evidence of it began to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he released reworked versions of a few childhood pieces: the *Five Walztes* [*sic*] for piano, originally written between 1923 and 1925 (published in 1970); *Tit for Tat*, a collection of songs written between 1928 and 1931 (1968); and a String Quartet in D major written in 1931 (1975). Because of the reworkings, however, the published versions of these pieces are not reliable as indicators of Britten's early achievement.³ It was only after his death and the establishment in 1980 of the archive in the Britten–Pears Library in Aldeburgh, when access to unrevised material became possible, that a critical portrait of his juvenilia could begin to be constructed.

By 1987 most of the music composed before the *Sinfonietta* had been listed in *A Britten Source Book* (*BSB*), and a few key childhood works had been performed, recorded and published under the auspices of the Britten Estate.⁴ Until much more recently, though, the only juvenilia available for study were these works and those donated to the British Library in lieu of death duties, so that commentaries on Britten's early progress have of necessity been circumspect.⁵ Now that the entire corpus of extant juvenilia can be surveyed, it is clear that nothing short of an extended study will do it justice. What is offered here is a brief overview, with some more detailed observations on particularly significant pieces.⁶

It is well known that one of the major influences on Britten's compositional development was Frank Bridge, whom Britten first met in the autumn of 1927 and with whom he studied from January 1928. Bridge was initially reluctant to see him because he was 'always being asked to interview young people who were supposed to show musical promise, which they rarely had', but he was persuaded by Audrey Alston, Britten's viola teacher, to do so.⁷ Clearly, he was impressed; and not least, one may surmise, by the sheer volume of music Britten had composed. The major items are listed chronologically in Table 1.1, although those dating from

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1925 and 1926 were not all completed. For instance, the Octett of June 1925 has a substantial first movement, but the 'Presto' second movement peters out after a few bars, and no other movement was attempted. Other incomplete pieces include the Mass in E minor, abandoned in the middle of the Credo, and the second movement of the untitled orchestral piece, both also composed in 1925. However, the vast majority of pieces were completed, and this determination to see a project to its conclusion, plus the business-like presentation of his scores (the Symphony in D minor, for example, is provided with rehearsal numbers even though the possibility of a performance must have seemed unlikely), must also have convinced Bridge about Britten's seriousness. Most impressive of all, however, would have been the steady improvement of skills and the expansion of creative vision between 1925 and the middle of 1927, a period that, for reasons that will become clear, I shall divide into two: 1925 to mid-1926, and mid-1926 to late 1927.

In an earlier study of the juvenilia I observed that, on the basis of the pre-Bridge music I had been able to see, 'Britten's initial musical environment was all too representative of the conservativeness and provinciality of English music-making'.⁸ Examination of the complete corpus confirms that up to around April 1926 the underlying style is essentially classical and early romantic, with little sign of any influence more modern than Brahms, let alone any knowledge of contemporary developments. It is often not possible to determine specific stylistic models, still less model compositions, though Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann and Brahms all suggest themselves at various points.

Mozart's influence is most obvious in the Violin Sonata in D major (April 1925), especially at the end of the first movement,⁹ but it is also present in the soprano aria 'Gratias agimus tibi' from the Mass in E minor (March–April 1925), not least in the wide vocal range (from b to a²). At least one harmonic event in this aria, the bald shift from B minor to D major in bar 3, is more suggestive of Schubert, however, and it is he who is the guiding spirit behind *The Elected Knight*, a grand setting (multi-sectioned, along the lines of 'Viola' or 'Sehnsucht') of Henry Longfellow's narrative poem completed in June 1925. Another Schubertian third-shift, from B \flat to G \flat , appears in the first of the Ten Walztes (1922–5).¹⁰ Surprisingly, perhaps, there is little sign of Chopin in these pieces. However, the Polish composer clearly lies behind the second of the Two Fantasies 'Op. 17' (June 1925) as well as the Masurka [*sic*] in F# minor 'Op. 43a' (18 April 1926) and parts of the Fantasie in E \flat 'Op. 29' (10–24 December 1925) – principally in terms of texture, though the harmonically oblique opening of the first of these works suggests his influence too. Ex. 1.1 shows another oblique opening, the piano introduction to

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Table 1.1: Chronology of Selected *Juvenilia*

1922–3	‘Beware!’ (voice and piano)
1922–5	Ten Walztes [<i>sic</i>]
?1924	‘The March of the Gods into Paradise [<i>sic</i>]’ (piano duet)
1925	Andante in F major (violin and piano) Fantasia (piano)
March–April	Mass in E minor (soloists, chorus and orchestra)
April	Sonata in D major (violin and piano)
June	<i>The Elected Knight</i> (voice and piano)
	Octett in D major (2 violins, 2 violas, 2 celli, 2 doublebasses)
	Two Fantasies, Op. 17 (piano)
28 July – 3 August	Piano Sonata (Grand) No. 3 in B \flat , Op. 5
August–September	4 Scherzos (piano) Untitled orchestral piece in two movements
14 November	Rondo Capriccio in B minor, Op. 28 No. 1 (piano)
December	3 Fantasies (piano)
?1925/6	Allegro Appassionata in G minor (piano) Allegro ma non troppo in D major (violin and piano)
1926	
4 January	Suite No. 5 in E major, Op. 30 No. 2 (piano)
5–10 January	3 Toccatas (piano)
10–12 January	4 Etudes Symphoniques (piano)
7 April	Trio in Fantastic Form (violin, viola and piano)
17 April	Sonata in A (cello and piano)
18 April	Masurka [<i>sic</i>] in F \sharp minor, Op. 43a (piano)
29 April	Overture No. 1 in C, Op. 44 (orchestra; version 2)
1–29 June	Ouverture (orchestra; under pseudonym ‘Never Unprepared’)
5 September	Suite fantastique for large orchestra and piano obbligato (second movement dated 21 April 1926)
26 September	Poème No. 1 in D (orchestra)
24 December	Poème No. 2 in B minor (small orchestra)
29 December – 3 January	Poème No. 3 in E (orchestra)
1927	
17 January – 28 February	Symphony in D minor (large orchestra)
12–14 February	Poème No. 4 in B \flat (small orchestra)
14–19 February	Poème No. 5 in F \sharp minor (orchestra)
March–May	String Quartet in G
June–July	String Quartet in A minor
29 July – 2 August	<i>The Pale Stars are Gone</i> (chorus, piano and strings)
22 August – 5 September	<i>Chaos and Cosmos</i> , symphonic poem for large orchestra
27 September	Sonata No. 10 in B \flat (piano)
October–February	Sonata No. 11 in B (piano)
1928	
25 January	<i>Dans les bois</i> (orchestra)
6 March	<i>Humoreske</i> (orchestra)
11 April	String Quartet in F
16 April	Menuetto in A minor (piano)
16–23 April	Elegy (strings)
13 June	‘Silver’ (voice and piano)
13 June – 31 August	<i>Quatre chansons françaises</i> (soprano and orchestra)
31 December – 25 February	‘Tit for Tat’ (voice and piano)
1929	
1 January – 7 February	‘A Song of Enchantment’ (voice and piano)
7 January – 24 April	<i>The Quartette</i> (SATB soloists)
13 January – 25 October	<i>Elizabeth Variations</i> (piano)
26 January – 8 March	<i>Miniature Suite</i> (string quartet)
28 January – 21 March	Rhapsody (string quartet)
30 March – 22 April	Rhapsody (violin, viola and piano)

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Table 1.1: (cont.)

30 March – 15 January	Bagatelle (violin, viola and piano)
June	'The Birds' (version 1)
21–31 October	<i>Introduction and Allegro</i> (viola and strings)
17 November – 24 December	2 Pieces (violin, viola and piano)
1930	
3 January – 17 April	<i>Quartettino</i>
11 April – 1 June	Piece (violin and piano)
9 July	<i>A Hymn to the Virgin</i> (double chorus)
1 August	Piece for viola solo [Elegy]
7 August	Movement for wind sextet (flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, horn and bassoon)
27 August	Sketch No. 1, 'D. Layton' (strings)
10 September	Sketch No. 2, 'E.B.B.' (viola and strings)
16 September – 27 December	3 Pieces (piano)
23 December – 17 January	'Vigil' (voice and piano)
1931	
February – 26 March	<i>Thy King's Birthday</i> (soprano, contralto and mixed chorus)
1 April – 6 May	<i>12 Variations on a Theme</i> (piano)
8 May – 2 June	String Quartet in D major
8–24 June	3 Small Songs (soprano and chamber orchestra)
12–28 August	<i>Plymouth Town</i> (ballet; orchestra)
26 December	<i>Psalm 150: 'Praise ye the Lord'</i> (chorus and orchestra)
1932	
19 January	<i>Psalm 130: 'Out of the Deep'</i> (chorus and orchestra)
25 January – 11 February	Phantasy in F minor (string quintet)
9 March – 4 May	Concerto in B minor (violin, viola and orchestra)
20 May	<i>Introduction and Allegro</i> (violin, cello and piano)
June	<i>Ballet on a Basque Scenario</i> (orchestra; incomplete)

the Andante in F major (1925); but here the homophonic texture and melodic cast suggest Schumann as a more likely model. As we might expect from the title, some of the strongest traces of that composer can be found in the Four Etudes Symphoniques (10–12 January 1926), particularly in No. 2 in A \flat minor, which seems to have been conceived as a study in hemiola.¹¹ Meanwhile Brahms is a more shadowy presence, hinted at by details such as the I–vii⁰⁷/V–V progression in B \flat over a V pedal in bars 25–6 of Waltz No. 8 of the Ten Walztes, and the weighty homophonic texture of the opening of the Rondo Capriccio in B minor 'Op. 28 No. 1' (1925).

The strongest influence up to the middle of 1926, however, was Beethoven. Later diary entries show the extent of Britten's admiration for him. On 13 November 1928 he declared Beethoven to be 'first . . . in my list of Composers . . . and I think will always be', while on 24 June 1929, after hearing Kreisler's recording of the Violin Concerto, he enthused, 'Oh! Beethoven, thou art immortal; has anything ever been written like the pathos of the 1st & 2nd movements, and the joy of the last?'¹² By the time he started to study with Bridge, Britten had acquired more miniature

Example 1.1



scores by Beethoven than by any other composer, including Symphonies Nos. 1 to 6 (the ‘Eroica’ was the first score he bought), the second volume of an edition of the string quartets, the Violin Concerto, and Piano Concerto No. 4.¹³ One of Britten’s most overt compositional references to Beethoven at this time is the protracted cadencing at the end of the first movement of the Octett in D (1925), which imitates the rhetoric of the final pages of Beethoven’s Fifth and Eighth Symphonies. The *Fantasia* in E♭ ‘Op. 29’ ends in a similar fashion. The key of this is, of course, Beethoven’s heroic key, and several traits associated with Beethoven in that vein are apparent. They include the highly dramatic appearance in the first part of the ternary form of the flattened seventh degree (D♭), which is protracted as a pedal before forming the root of a diminished-seventh chord that resolves to F minor; the use of the dotted rhythmic motif shown in Ex. 1.2 (subsequently, *a* is isolated for reiteration by itself); and the protracted use of syncopation in the coda. Further Beethovenian influence at this time can be seen in the orchestration of both the untitled orchestral piece (1925) and the huge (84-page) Overture No. 1 in C ‘Op. 44’ (29 April 1926); in the harmonic breadth of the fourth of the 4 Scherzos (August 1925–January 1926) – see Plate 1 after the second-time bar – and in the cadential ‘winding-down’ that occurs at the end of the *Trio in Fantastic Form* (7 April 1926).

Of greater interest than these various influences *per se*, however, is the use to which Britten puts them, though it would be perverse to attach too much importance at this stage in his development to formal and syntactical niceties: in numerous contexts the composer evidently delights in expressive details and grand gestures for their own sake, and it could be argued that such involvement in ‘the moment’ is a more important attribute for a beginning composer. Perhaps it is not surprising that the compositional situations in which the details most often don’t ‘add up’ are developmental and transitional ones: statements are generally more controlled. The *Trio in Waltz No. 5* (bars 25–72 of the whole) demonstrates this.¹⁴ This Waltz forms the first of the published *Five Walztes*, but the original *Trio* was severely pruned in 1970: only bars 25–40 – simple variants of the initial four-bar phrase – remain, with very few alterations. The

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Example 1.2



A handwritten musical score for a piano piece, consisting of six systems of music. Each system contains a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings. The first system is marked with a piano 'p' dynamic. The second system has a first ending bracket. The third system has a second ending bracket and a fortissimo 'ff' dynamic. The fourth system has a fortissimo 'f' dynamic and the word 'crescendo' written above the staff. The fifth system has a piano 'p' dynamic. The sixth system has a fortissimo 'ff' dynamic and the words 'rall... atempo' written above the staff. The page number '12.' is visible in the top left corner of the manuscript page.

Plate 1 No. 4 of Four Scherzos (1925–6), autograph manuscript

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Example 1.3

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system consists of two staves: the upper staff is in treble clef and the lower in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass and chords in the treble. The second system continues the same texture, with the bass staff showing a more active line and the treble staff containing chords. The piece concludes with a double bar line and the word "etc." written to the right.

Example 1.4

The image shows a musical score for two instruments. The upper staff is for the first violin, marked "1st" above it, in treble clef. The lower staff is for the double bass, marked "Db." below it, in bass clef. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The violin part is marked "pp" (pianissimo) and features a melodic line with some chromaticism. The double bass part provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and some movement. The score ends with a double bar line.

remainder of the original Trio was obviously seen as casting too much caution to the wind (it is clearly intended as intensificatory, with its sudden shift from 'maestoso' to 'vivace' in bar 29, its fractured harmonic progressions, and its left-hand crescendoing tremolos leading to grandiloquent V/V–V cadences). Endings of sections are sometimes the cue for harmonic 'purple passages', such as bars 23–31 of the Prelude of the Mass in E minor (Ex. 1.3) and the first-time bars of the first movement ('Presto con molto fuoco') of the untitled orchestral piece (Ex. 1.4). In general, though, even if the content is sometimes wayward, Britten had a reasonably secure grasp of form and long-term timing. Sometimes he followed conventional formal models, but he was equally happy to depart from them, as in the second movement of the Beethovenian Sonata in A for cello and piano (17 April 1926), which, after starting out as an Andante, turns into a scherzo.

Some of Britten's most expressive and polished music of this time comes from the setting of texts. A very early example is 'Beware' (1922–3), its simple but telling expression deriving from the contrast between chromaticism and diatonicism learnt from the lieder Britten heard and sometimes accompanied during musical evenings in the Britten household.¹⁵ Another example is the ending of *The Elected Knight*. Marked 'lento pathetico', the sorrowful mood (occasioned by the opposing knights' slaughtering of each other) is distilled traditionally enough

through chains of 7–6 suspensions; what is interesting in view of later operatic subject-matter is the appeal of a narrative with death as the final outcome.

The spring and summer of 1926 saw the beginnings of an updating of Britten's range of stylistic reference. He remarked in a letter to his mother dated 28 August that he had been to a concert at the Queen's Hall in London which 'was all modern music, and I have taken a great like to modern Orchestral music'.¹⁶ The works included Ernest Schelling's *Suite fantastique* for piano and orchestra (1905), which he seems to have thought rather shallow, Delius's *Life's Dance* (1901; revised 1912), and three movements from Holst's *The Planets* (1914–16): 'Mars' (which he especially liked), 'Venus' and 'Mercury'. In fact, his fondness for orchestral music had already shown itself a few months earlier, when work on the Overture No. 1 initiated a one-and-a-half year period dominated by orchestral composition. By the standard of some of the surrounding pieces this overture, which exists in two versions, is disappointing: the material is undistinguished, the harmonic moves bald, and the orchestration clumsy. Neither have the stylistic horizons widened at this stage. They begin to do so, however, in his next completed orchestral piece, the Overture in B \flat minor (completed on 29 June) by 'Never Unprepared', the identifying motto Britten employed when he submitted the work to the BBC's 1926 Autumn Musical Festival Prize Competition.¹⁷ The work is considerably more impressive than the earlier overture, not least in its orchestration. The wind and brass choirs are better voiced, for example, and the string writing is much more imaginative. The tonal moves within the otherwise standard nineteenth-century sonata-form design are also more adventurous. But perhaps the most remarkable feature of the music is its breadth, suggesting the example of Bruckner, or possibly, given the frequent use of measured tremolos, Sibelius.

More indicative of future directions, however, is the French influence in the *Suite fantastique* 'pour grand orchestra e con movimento quattro con pianoforte obbligato'. This, Britten's grandest conception to that date, was eventually completed on 5 September in time for his parents' silver-wedding anniversary, though the second movement ('Rondeau') was finished on 21 April before he began the Overture No. 1 in C. Cast in A minor, the work has as its first movement a reworking of the Trio from the second of the Ten Waltzes.¹⁸ Meanwhile 'Rondeau' displays here and there a genuine relish in orchestral sound for perhaps the first time in Britten's work, particularly in the solo passages for bassoon and trumpets and in the use of percussion (the latter evokes the Iberian music of Debussy and Ravel). The most striking orchestration in the work occurs in the huge (102-bar) cadenza of the fourth movement, entitled 'Fantasie-

Example 1.5



Concerto', where, during the last fifteen bars, the piano soloist is accompanied by six timpani (three players). This is clearly modelled on the slow movement of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, though Britten's use of the word 'fantastique' in his own title seems more likely to have been prompted by the Schelling work mentioned above (perhaps Britten's work was written as a criticism of the latter). In general the movement reverts to a more Romantic style, suggesting at times background models of Schumann and Grieg (the main key is again A minor). After the cadenza, however, a folk-like tune (Ex. 1.5) is introduced and played in various environments and guises, so that the work concludes with an English ambience.

At the end of September 1926 Britten embarked on the first of a series of works entitled 'Poème', completing the first on the 26th. Poème No. 1 is less resourceful orchestrally than *Suite fantastique*, but the series in general shows an increasingly imaginative and accomplished orchestral technique. In opening obliquely, Poème No. 1 also demonstrates increasing harmonic adventurousness. Poème No. 4 in B \flat (12–14 February 1927) continues Britten's exploration of oblique openings, with the B \flat triad outlined by the harp being blurred by conflicting pitches, including an E \natural and a G in the upper strings' melodic line, and a G \flat and a C in the viola. Principal harmonic shifts again include movement by major third (B \flat –G \flat –B \flat in bars 5–6). This is essentially a romantic legacy, but the blurred opening may suggest the influence of impressionism (Debussy – or perhaps, as a result of the concert mentioned in his letter of 28 August, Delius), and some aspects of the orchestration (frequent use of descending string tremolos, string divisi and harp arpeggios supporting woodwind solos) reinforce this. Debussyan method, if not Debussyan sound, also seems to lie behind the passage which begins as shown in Plate 2, where transpositions of a simple two-bar melody articulate a 'non-functional' harmonic succession.

The importance in Britten's mind of the Symphony in D minor (17 January – 28 February 1927) can be gauged by his subsequent arrangement of the work for two pianos, in which form it was no doubt

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for Benjamin Britten's *Poème No. 4 in Bb* (1927). The score is arranged in ten staves. The top two staves are for woodwinds, with dynamics like *pp* and *ppp*. The middle staves show complex chordal textures with various accidentals (flats, naturals) and dynamics (*p*, *pp*, *ppp*). The bottom staves include a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The manuscript is signed "R. C. 1" in the bottom left corner.

Plate 2 *Poème No. 4 in Bb* (1927), autograph manuscript

performed in the Britten household. The forces required are very large, including triple woodwind plus oboe d'amore (which has a solo at the beginning of the third of the four movements, 'Andante'), eight horns, and percussion. The key is that of both Britten's mature symphonic instrumental works, *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940) and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* (1963); further premonitions of the *Sinfonia* include the major-minor (F#/F \sharp) equivocations and D/B \flat juxtapositions in the

The image displays a page of handwritten musical notation, identified as Plate 2 (cont.). The score is arranged in a system of ten staves. The top three staves are in treble clef, and the bottom seven staves are in bass clef. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings such as *ppp* and *pp*. Performance markings like *tr* (trill), *trem* (trémolo), *h* (hairpins), and *h2m* (hairpins) are also present. The handwriting is clear and legible, typical of a composer's manuscript.

Plate 2 (cont.)

coda of the first movement, and the use of the major mode for the very substantial Finale ('Allegro con brio'). Much of the work stems from the Austro-German late-romantic tradition in expressive tone and gesture. Britten had developed a significant interest in Wagner: he bought the miniature score of *Siegfried Idyll* sometime between August and November 1926 (and apparently often played it on the piano),¹⁹ and when he acquired the 'Prelude and Transfiguration' from *Tristan und*

Isolde in the first quarter of 1927 his Wagner scores totalled eight, just under a third of his miniature-score collection. Wagner may lie behind some of the chromatic counterpoint for strings in the first movement. Some moments, though, are post-Wagnerian; indeed a few, especially the opening of the Scherzo reproduced in Plate 3, suggest a composer who was to have a much more lasting influence: Mahler (though there is no documentary evidence that Britten had heard any of his music by this time, and Mahler is not an influence that looms large in the rest of the juvenilia).

It is the Austro-German flavour of the Symphony in D minor rather than the (less sustained) French stylistic leanings of the Poèmes that dominates the music of the remainder of 1927. (An exception is the modally inflected first movement of the String Quartet in A minor of June–July 1927.) Thus in the first movement ('Presto con molto espressione; ma non troppo agitato') of the String Quartet in G (March–May 1927) the essentially Germanic notion of opening obliquity already essayed in Poèmes Nos. 2 and 4 is expanded to the extent that no clear tonal centre is sighted until page 3, where G emerges as V of C in preparation for the second subject. The opening texture is Britten's most chromatic to this point in his output, and is notable for being integrated by a rhythmic figure, ♯♯♯♯♯♯, rather than a melodic shape. But perhaps the most interesting feature is the departure from the sonata-form archetype in the recapitulation: the latter is compressed and considerably varied, and is followed by an 'Allegro' coda which winds down to produce what seems to be Britten's first 'dissolving' ending, prefiguring those of the Phantasy Quintet and Phantasy Quartet (both 1932).²⁰

Obliquity is put to highly atmospheric use at the beginnings of both *The Pale Stars are Gone* (29 July – 2 August 1927) and the 'symphonic poem for large orchestra', *Chaos and Cosmos* (22 August – 5 September 1927). *The Pale Stars*, for chorus, piano, and strings, sets part of the fourth act of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and contains some striking word-painting, such as the long-held, not-quite-resolving, gently dissonant chords underpinning 'winds that die on the bosom of their own harmony'. It also contains more diatonic, more 'English' sections (for instance the setting of 'The voice of the Spirits of Air and Earth'), an apparent retrogression in style in comparison with the Quartet in G that, as we shall see, is not unique in the juvenilia. *Chaos and Cosmos*, too, has passages that can be identified as English: the E-based folksy viola tune that begins the second section ('Andante con molto moto e con molto espressione'), for instance, and the rhapsodic style in which it is extended. This is the more stable 'Cosmos' section; 'Chaos' ('Allegro moderato') is centred on an ambiguous half-diminished seventh (F♯–A–C–E), and it is

exploration of added-note harmony, but there is a good deal which seems unfinished. Much more consideration would seem to have gone into the first two movements of the Sonata No. 11 in B, also for piano, although the last of the three movements again looks rather rushed. This sonata was started at about the time of Britten's first meeting with Bridge but was not completed until sometime during the month after his first actual lesson, which took place over the period 11–13 January 1928.²¹ The first movement, closer to C at the opening than the titular B major that emerges only at the close, is a sardonic march for which Prokofiev seems the most plausible model. But the 'Presto' section of the second movement contains the most interesting feature: the first instance in Britten of the influence of the metrical innovations associated with Stravinsky, with frequent changes of time signature and the overlaying of 2/4 and 3/4 in different hands.

It seems likely that Sonata No. 11 was discussed at the January lesson. It would be fascinating to know in exactly what terms. Britten referred to the nature of his lessons in a very general way in several sources, emphasizing Bridge's concern with professionalism and the importance of technique.²² However, there is little detailed evidence of Bridge's response to specific contexts: there are only a few annotations on Britten's work (chiefly concerning alternative part-writing or harmonies, as in the Quartet in F (1928), Menuetto in A minor for piano (1928), and 'The Quartette' (1929) for SATB soloists), and these make relatively superficial points. It is impossible, therefore, to be definite about the part Bridge played in the major developments in Britten's style and technique. It seems likely that, rather than signalling specific directions, Bridge's principal role was to refine and coax, and at times (whether intentionally or not) to provide a position against which Britten could rebel.

It is, though, safe to infer that Bridge encouraged his pupil's interest in some of the more radical Continental figures, especially since Bridge's own style had undergone profound changes through his contact with the same. This influence did not emerge immediately, however. In *Dans les bois* (25 January 1928), a nature-picture probably stimulated by Bridge's *Enter Spring* (which Britten had heard at the time of their first meeting), the chief influence, not surprisingly, is turn-of-the-century French rather than contemporaneous Austro-German; and French, specifically Debussyan, influences also surface in *Humoreske* (6 March 1928), though they are less to the fore.²³ Meanwhile the String Quartet in F (11 April 1928) is conventional to a degree that suggests it might have been set as an exercise, though paradoxically it contains a quintessential Britten sonority – the syncopated major second, A/G, played by the second violin throughout the second movement. *Elegy* (16–23 April 1928), too, is an

essentially diatonic work spiced with added-note chords, modal variants and fairly standard chromaticisms. Its fantasy-type form is rather diffuse, but the material is more economical, generated in the main from a small number of simple, concise thematic ideas.

Paralleling Britten's activity in the sphere of instrumental music was a passion for song-writing. As he himself wrote:

between 1922 and 1930 when I was a schoolboy, I must have written well over fifty songs – most of them straight off without much thought; others were written and re-written many times in a determined if often unsuccessful effort to 'get them right'. The choice of poets was nothing if not catholic. There are more than thirty of them, ranging from the Bible to Kipling, from Shakespeare to an obscure magazine poet 'Chanticleer'; there were many settings of Shelley and Burns and Tennyson, of a poem by a schoolmaster friend, songs to texts by Hood, Longfellow, 'Anon', and several French poets, and one to the composer's own words ('one day when I went home, I sore a boat on the sands').²⁴

Most of the songs are accompanied by piano. But the most celebrated and the most impressive of the songs completed before Britten entered the Royal College of Music were written for soprano and orchestra: the *Quatre chansons françaises* (13 June – 31 August 1928).

Given that the texts are French ('Les nuits de juin' and 'L'enfance' by Victor Hugo, 'Sagesse' and 'Chanson d'automne' by Paul Verlaine),²⁵ and given the French sonorities and procedures of some earlier orchestral scores, it is not surprising to find the influence of Ravel and Debussy; more surprising, perhaps, is what amounts to a reworking of the closing bars of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at the end of the work, though Britten's interest in Wagner's music has been noted above. The correspondences are too close to be coincidental: both works end in the same key, enharmonically (B major in Wagner, C \flat major in Britten); the final cadences are very similar (both plagal variants); the spacing of the string parts is almost identical save for an extra E \flat in Britten; the last chord is stated three times by both composers; and the soprano ends on the same note. Even more intriguing is the apparent influence of Berg: the chord construction in bars 6–8 of the same song (Ex. 1.6) suggests the Viennese composer with its mixture of half-diminished chords (x), chords of fourths or fifths (y), and chords of fourth or fifth plus tritone (z).

The most remarkable idea in *Quatre chansons françaises* occurs in 'L'enfance'. A child sings outside the house where his mother lies dying, unaware of her condition: his innocence is symbolized by the flute's nursery tune, with which the movement begins.²⁶ The betrayal of that innocence is symbolised by the tune being at odds with the harmonic plane of the rest of the orchestra, both at the opening (bars 1–8) and

Example 1.6

[Lento e molto rubato]

Sop.
La plai - ne ver-se au loin un par - fum e - ni-vrant:

Orch.
Fl. 2, Cl. 1 & 2
Pno

x y z x

rall.....

Fl. 1 & 2, Cl. 1

y x

during the setting of the poignant lines ‘Et la mère, à côté de ce pauvre doux être / Qui chantait tout le jour, toussait toute la nuit’ (bars 33–40: see Ex. 1.7).²⁷ The latter presents one of the most Brittenesque passages in the work both technically and, as Evans points out, in terms of its psychological acuity.²⁸

It is clear from recent biographical research that Britten had a particularly intense relationship with his mother, and that he found separation from her painful when he moved to Gresham’s School in September 1928; soon after he arrived he wrote to her saying ‘I have had some horrible dreams lately about people being ill and dying.’²⁹ The possibility of impending separation influencing (consciously or subconsciously) the choice of ‘L’enfance’ as a text is intriguing, all the more so when the dedication of the songs – to his parents on their twenty-seventh wedding anniversary – is taken into consideration. Certainly leaving home was a major event, and even if Britten did not feel that this definitively marked the end of his childhood, it can be argued that the *Quatre chansons françaises* was his last childhood piece: although it is very far from the case that spontaneity is absent from the music he wrote between Autumn 1928 and the composition of the *Sinfonietta* in summer 1932, there is a distinct sense of composition being work rather than uninhibited play. It is at least worth asking the question whether Britten’s obsession with lost innocence in his mature vocal works resulted in part from the imposition of

Example 1.7

The image shows two systems of a musical score. The first system is for Soprano (Sop.) and Orchestral (Orch.) parts. The Soprano part has the lyrics "Et la mère à cō-te de ce pauvre doux ê-tre". The Orchestral part includes parts for Violins and Cellos/Double Basses (Vc., Db.), Bassoons (Bsns), and Viola (Vla). The tempo is marked "rall. molto" and "Lento". Dynamics include "pp" and "pp poss.". The second system continues the vocal and orchestral parts. The Soprano part has the lyrics "qui chan-tait tout le jour, tous-sait tou-te la nuit." The Orchestral part includes parts for Flute and Clarinet (Fl. & Cls.), Horns and Strings (Hns; Strs pizz.), and Tutti. The tempo is marked "ad lib." and "a tempo". Dynamics include "pp" and "pp".

adult, professional compositional responsibilities so early in life – however willing Britten might have been to adopt them.

The most obvious sign of the new seriousness is the amount of revising that Britten now undertook. Most of the major pieces of 1929 and the first half of 1930 were revised, or drafted in two or three versions. The *Elizabeth Variations* (13 January – 25 October 1929) appear to have been composed in a single day, but the work was later slightly revised and substantially extended by the addition of a sixth variation, a fughetta. The *Rhapsodies for quartet* (28 January – 21 March 1929) and violin, viola, and piano (30 March – 22 April 1929) exist in three and two versions respectively, while the *Bagatelle* (30 March 1929 – 15 January 1930) and 'The Birds' (first version, June 1930) have several preliminary drafts. The *Quartettino* (3 January – 17 April 1930), too, required a considerable amount of sketching.

The result of all this endeavour was a substantial gain in technique, the speed of which may be gauged by comparing the *Quatre chansons françaises* with the *Rhapsody for quartet*. Although these works were completed only just over six months apart, the definitive version of the *Rhapsody* displays a much surer touch in the unfolding of events as well as a marked advance in the art of transition. It is also a good deal more focused than the string *Elegy* completed eleven months earlier. The *Rhapsody* adapts sonata form in two ways. First, the sonata-form action is enclosed within an 'Andante' frame employing first-subject material. Second, sonata expectations are manipulated in the service of a refined

and extended version of what was already for Britten a well-established harmonic archetype: the gradual emergence or clarification of the tonic.

No fewer than four other works from 1929 – three of them written for violin, viola and piano – end, like the Rhapsody, on C: the more diatonic *Elizabeth Variations*; the Rhapsody, in which C maintains a rather stronger profile than in the Rhapsody for quartet; the Two Pieces (17 November – 24 December 1929), in which the final accented unison C emerges rather less persuasively from more consistently non-tonal textures; and the Bagatelle, which partly reworks material from the Rhapsody for trio. Together with the Rhapsody for quartet and the *Introduction and Allegro* for viola and strings (21–31 October 1929), these works edge into increasingly chromatic territory, employing a style that owes much to late Bridge. The chromaticism peaks in the *Quartettino*; but before turning to that work a little more should be said of the *Elizabeth Variations* and another work with a diatonic basis, the *Miniature Suite* (26 January – 8 March), both of which introduce approaches of signal importance in Britten's development.

Indeed, in being based on a pitch-motto, C–E–B (the initials of Britten's sister, Charlotte Elizabeth (Beth) Britten), the *Elizabeth Variations* initiate an embryonic form of the intensive thematic working that was to characterize many of Britten's mature works; moreover, the notion of a 'fundamental shape', developed further almost immediately in the Two Pieces and *Quartettino*, plays an important role in such major works as *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936), *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) and *Death in Venice* (1972). The *Miniature Suite*, too, has links with *The Turn of the Screw* in that, like the 'Screw' theme (see p. 106, Ex. 5.6), the main theme of the first movement ('Novelette') is built from a chain of disjunct fourths – A–D–B–E–C–F#–D–G – though here the territory is diatonic rather than chromatic. Meanwhile the characteristic basis of the suite foreshadows much of Britten's instrumental music of the mid-1930s.

Mention of 'fundamental shapes' and intensive motivic working may bring to mind Schoenberg's concept of the *Grundgestalt* and the thematism that informs so much of his music. It so happens that Britten was listening to and thinking about Schoenberg with considerable interest in late 1929 and early 1930 during the composition of the Two Pieces and the *Quartettino*. On 20 November he wrote in his diary that he was 'thinking much about modernism in art. Debating whether Impressionism, Expressionism, Classicism etc. are right. I have half-decided on Schönberg. I adore Picasso's pictures.'³⁰ A few months later, on 7 April 1930, he listened to a 'marvellous Schönberg concert' on the radio, including the Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 (in the arrangement by Webern), the

Suite for piano, Op. 25, and *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21; 14 April saw him buying a copy of the Six Little Pieces, Op. 19, and writing that he was 'getting very fond of Schönberg, especially with study'.³¹ The Two Pieces are not actually called 'Zwei Stücke', but there is no doubting Schoenberg's background presence, even if Britten is not prepared to move away from tonal moorings to anywhere near the same degree. The beginning of the second piece even has a textural similarity with the opening of *Pierrot lunaire*, though it was apparently four months later that he heard Schoenberg's piece for the first time.

The Two Pieces are built on a motto of disjunct thirds, shown in Ex. 1.8 as Britten notated it. The lack of clef suggests that specific intervallic content is not so significant as contour, though thirds remain referential even if no single motive-form does. The same is the case in the *Quartettino*, the motto of which is shown in Ex. 1.9 along with some of the more important transformations. This is Britten's most ambitious work in the period between the *Quatre chansons françaises* and his entering the Royal College of Music in September 1930. Remarkably, there is no evidence of Bridge's involvement, though his Third Quartet (1926) must have been an important exemplar, not just of concentrated motivic techniques, but also of how to create a sense of motion in highly chromatic, non-functional textures: the controlling semitonal descent from A to E in the cello across the first 18 bars of the third movement has precedents (if not its actual source) in Bridge's Quartet (see for example Figs. 9ff. and 24ff. in the first movement of the Third Quartet). Another link between the *Quartettino* and the Two Pieces is the ending on a single accented pitch-class – this time C#. As in the earlier work, such an emphasis cannot be regarded as a genuine tonal outcome, but it seems more appropriate here because C# is consistently stressed throughout the work.³² If the trajectory of the piece cannot be said to involve the emergence or clarification of a tonic as in the Rhapsody for quartet, the overall formal gesture is very much related: the first movement does not attain closure, and while the second does, a sense of unfinished business persists until the clinching rhetorical gestures of the final page.

After completing a movement for wind sextet (7 August 1930) – for which a companion movement was begun but not completed – his next project, a series of three character sketches, was again for strings. Only two Sketches were completed: No. 1, subtitled 'D. Layton' (27 August 1930), and No. 2, 'E.B.B.' (10 September 1930); these pieces were performed under the title *Two Portraits* in 1996. No. 1 is a portrait of David Layton, a friend at Gresham's whom Britten was to describe in 1936 as 'my good looking, aristocratic, acme of ideal manhood, friend David Layton'.³³ No. 2, for viola solo and strings, is a rather melancholy self-portrait. Both

Example 1.8



Example 1.9



I

b. 1
Vla

b. 11
Vla

b. 41
Vn I

II

b. 1
Vn I

b. 32
Vc.

III

b. 2
Vc. Vla

Inversions:

II b. 54
Vn I

III b. 65
Vla

show something of a retreat from the chromaticism of the preceding instrumental works, No. 1 continuing Britten's predilection for ending with the C major triad, No. 2 beginning and ending in E Dorian. Neither Sketch was written up into a fair copy, suggesting that Britten was perhaps not entirely happy with them. Certainly they have problematic aspects: No. 1 has a tendency towards long-windedness due to thematic over-extension (the remorseless patterning of bars 3–7 is the first example of this), while the tune-and-accompaniment texture of No. 2 exposes the

uncertainty of Britten's harmonic thinking at this time. But both have effective and memorable endings, especially No. 1, where – after a climax and aftermath at bars 250–66 of much greater harmonic clarity – violin I, violin II and viola soloists play the opening material in imitation over a sustained C major triad. Once again Bridge is the clearest stylistic reference: his fingerprints include the overlaid triads in bars 2–3 and 30–2; the semitonal voice-leading in the bass in bars 25–7, 30–2, 48–50, etc.; and the use of bass pedals as stabilizing devices at bars 56–62 (the tritonal approach here, D \flat moving to G at bar 56, is also reminiscent of Bridge) and 163–70 (both these pedals are on G and point to the eventual C outcome).

Twelve days after completing Sketch No. 2 Britten entered the Royal College of Music. John Ireland became his official teacher, initially setting him pastiche exercises such as the Mass in Palestrinian style that Britten worked on between October 1930 and January 1931.³⁴ However, Bridge remained his most trusted source of compositional advice, as Britten himself noted: 'I studied at the RCM from 1930–1933 but my musical education was perhaps more outside the college than in it. Although my teacher for composition was John Ireland, I saw Frank Bridge almost daily and I showed him every "major" work.'³⁵ In fact, it could be argued that the greatest educational opportunity afforded by the College came from its location: living in London allowed Britten access to performances of works that proved instrumental in helping him define his own territory.³⁶ The earliest of these performances – it took place on the day after he arrived at the College – was of Mahler's Fourth Symphony. Britten was equivocal about the impact of the work as a whole, writing in his diary that it was 'Much too long, but beautiful in [?] parts'.³⁷ We do not know which parts appealed most; if they were the luminous diatonic passages of the final movement they may well have contributed towards Britten's heavy investment in diatonicism in the first major work he completed at the RCM, the Christmas suite *Thy King's Birthday* (February – 26 March 1931; published by Faber Music in 1994 as *Christ's Nativity*). Another reason for Britten's apparent retreat from more radical territory might have been his need to distance himself from Bridge's influence; or it may reflect his exploration of aspects of Ireland's style, most obvious in the Three Pieces for piano (16 September – 27 December 1930) – three character sketches titled 'John', 'Daphne' and 'Michael' along the lines of the Sketches for strings. The most straightforward explanation is the work's relationship to the conservative English choral tradition: the original version of *A Hymn to the Virgin* (9 July 1930) had already taken what seems like a retrogressive step.³⁸ Or Britten might simply have been able to see greater potential for structural control and depth, and hence expressive power, in a fundamental diatonicism.

Thy King's Birthday inevitably invites parallels with *A Boy Was Born* (November 1932 and May 1933). Cast in five movements,³⁹ the earlier work seems to have been conceived on a larger scale than that disclosed by the finished product – several other settings were begun but not completed – so that *A Boy Was Born* may be seen as the successful second attempt at the realization of an ambitious idea. As it is, *Thy King's Birthday* is loosely structured in comparison with its successor: although there are thematic relationships between some of the movements, there is nothing like the motivic saturation of *A Boy Was Born*, or its rigorous large-scale control of harmonic areas. The looseness of structure in the earlier work was conveyed in Britten's diary entry for 30 March 1931: 'Write some more var. [the Twelve Variations for piano] in morning & stick my "Thy King's Birthday" together'.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the textural resourcefulness of *A Boy Was Born* is adumbrated in passages of 'Christ's Nativity' and 'Preparations', though the second part of 'New Prince, New Pomp' (from bar 20) has perhaps rather too much of the classroom about it (Britten had completed his Palestrinian Mass a few weeks earlier). The composer revived 'New Prince, New Pomp' for performance at the 1955 Aldeburgh Festival, but it is the other number heard (in a revised version) during his lifetime – 'Sweet was the Song', first performed at the 1966 Festival – that seems the most fully achieved and, through its simplicity, warm sonorities, and ambivalent modality, most indicative of the Britten to come.

Although Britten continued to write vocal music during his time at the RCM – the *Three Small Songs* (8–24 June 1931) and two Psalm settings, No. 150 (26 December 1931) and No. 130 (19 January 1932), are the most substantial examples – it was in instrumental music that the most important gains in technique were made. His first major instrumental score of the College years, the String Quartet in D (8 May – 2 June 1931) – the first pre-*Sinfonietta* instrumental score to see the light of day, when Britten revised it in 1975 after his heart operation – reworks the overall shape of the *Quartettino* and continues the composer's interest in thematic integration, though this time with a greater fund of motives (four basic shapes), allowing a greater variety of melodic invention. The opening unison seven-bar statement is drawn from the D major collection, reinforcing Britten's commitment to diatonicism. The final is ambiguous, and Britten seeks to brace the span of the work with a quest for a clearly defined tonal centre: as in the *Quartettino*, the first movement does not achieve closure, and the opening material returns at the end of the final movement (bars 272ff.) before matters are concluded with a D-based chord. This fundamental goal often seems to sink below the horizon, however, largely because of the diffusing effect of the clotted added-note

harmony redolent of some of the senior figures associated with the RCM at that time.

A significant step towards a more focused style was taken in Britten's first stage work, the ballet *Plymouth Town* (composed 12–28 August 1931; the full score was completed on 22 November), written to a scenario by Violet Alford and based on the folksong 'A-Roving'.⁴¹ The simple plot presages Britten's typical operatic subject-matter: an innocent sailor is led astray by the lure of drink and sex, and returns to his ship a wiser man, in Prodigal Son fashion. Musically, the textures are leaner and the writing generally more economical. Britten's celebrated gift for sharp characterization is already apparent in the luminous 'Good Girl' music, while the passage depicting the errant sailor's lonely misery contains, in the highlighted flattening of E to E \flat , a highly Brittenesque gesture. Also prescient is a moment of drama in the 'Bad' Farandole when, after the crowd begins to fight amongst itself, the trumpets of the Marine Patrol are heard off stage,⁴² subsequently taking over proceedings by developing their music into a march: the layering involved here anticipates that of Act II scene 1 of *Peter Grimes*. While modality is frequently less ambiguous than in stretches of *Thy King's Birthday* and the String Quartet in D major (the opening, for instance, is solidly B \flat Mixolydian), the role of movement away from referential collections (often involving the careful balancing of sharpwards and flatwards excursions) is rather more sharply defined. A new feature is the mirror harmony of the 'Good Advice' motif, presaging the string harmony at Fig. 11⁻² in the slow movement of the *Sinfonietta*. Meanwhile, the use of pedals to build up tension over quite long spans is reminiscent of Walton, though Britten was yet to hear his Viola Concerto and *Belshazzar's Feast*.⁴³

An important consequence of Britten's composing a dance work was that it concentrated his mind on rhythm: it is noticeable that, in comparison with the String Quartet in D, the opening of the Phantasy in F minor (25 January – 11 February 1932) – the first major instrumental piece composed after the ballet – is far more propulsive rhythmically, even if later profiles are not quite so taut. The way in which the opening cello line builds through 'evolutionary variation' provides a foretaste of another process used to more powerful effect in later works, as does the semitonal friction introduced in bar 5 and subsequently amplified into a conflict between modes based on G and A \flat between Fig. 9⁺³ and Fig. 12 (though here the harmonic energy released is not harnessed to long-term structural ends). A general intention to pursue a greater degree of focus is also apparent in the pared-down 'slow movement' textures, and in Britten's treatment of the fantasy form: the work was written as an entry for the Cobbett Chamber Music Prize, but the composer departed from the

customary loosely organized assemblage in favour of a scheme developed in the nineteenth century and used most notably in the early twentieth century by Schoenberg in his First String Quartet, Op. 7, and First Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 – the integration, in one continuous span, of music of first-movement, scherzo, and slow-movement character. Once more the chief agent of integration is thematic variation and transformation, effected with perhaps even greater virtuosity than in the *Quartettino* and the String Quartet in D.⁴⁴ Again there is no underpinning tonal structure as such: the ambiguity of the dissolving ending (F minor/C minor) is a local phenomenon.

The Phantasy Quintet received its first performance on 22 July 1932 as the Cobbett Prize winner, and the String Quartet in D was tried out by the Stratton Quartet on 16 March 1932, but Britten did not hear many performances of his work at this stage (*Plymouth Town* was submitted to the Camargo Society but not taken up).⁴⁵ Perhaps the poor prospects for performance discouraged him from scoring the Concerto in B minor for violin and viola (9 March – 4 May 1932) – it exists only in sketch form, with detailed annotations as to instrumentation – though his diary entries might suggest he did not take the project further because he was so dissatisfied with his efforts: on 21 March he wrote of having written ‘a fatuous slow movement for my concerto’, and on the 29th he noted he had composed ‘more of last mov. of Concerto in morning – I shall tear *that* up soon’.⁴⁶ But in many ways this is the finest version before the *Sinfonietta* of the three-movement archetype introduced by the *Quartettino*. Particularly noteworthy is the motivic integration of horizontal and vertical material (Schoenberg’s ‘unity of musical space’), as in the opening stretch reproduced in Ex. 1.10: the framework of fourths underpinning the horn’s fanfare grows out of the underlying chord of fifths.

The distance from here to a work deserving the official status of Op. 1 is not great. The gap was bridged by the *Introduction and Allegro* (20 May 1932) and the incomplete ballet on a Basque scenario (June 1932). Both works consolidate or refine aspects of technique that contribute vitally to the dynamism of the *Sinfonietta*, especially movement through the circle of fifths by collection, which is more extensive than before (this plays a central role in the first and last movements of Op. 1),⁴⁷ and evolutionary variation (which makes a considerable advance in the *Introduction and Allegro*); the more propulsive rhythmic style of *Plymouth Town* and the Concerto is also consolidated. The area still requiring the most substantial work was the management of slow-movement textures: even after taking into account the need for greater expansiveness in a piece for two soloists, the Concerto has a good degree of rhapsodic indulgence in the middle movement (it may have been this that led to Britten’s despairing

35 *Juvenilia* (1922–1932)

Example 1.10

Allegro ma non troppo

Hn

Ww. *ff* *pizz.*

Strings *pizz.* *f* (Strs trem.)

f molto marcato

sempre f

più p *pp*

comment quoted above), and the *Introduction and Allegro*, abetted by the fantasy format, hardly represents an advance. Indeed, the gains in slow-movement conception in Op. 1 are hard-won, and in his Op. 2, the *Phantasy Quartet* (1932) – his final exercise in fantasy form – Britten still finds it difficult to dispel the rhapsodizing tendency. The problem was one of identity: while his technique was already approaching that of a virtuoso, it would be a number of years before certain questions of style would be fully resolved.