11 Britten as symphonist

ARVED ASHBY

Britten originally thought of using the designation 'First Symphony' for his first large-scale, purely orchestral score – the composition, sketched and completed in the spring of 1940, that would instead carry the final title *Sinfonia da Requiem*.[1] But within seven years the momentous premières of *Peter Grimes* and *The Rape of Lucretia* and subsequent formation of the English Opera Group channelled his energies in different and ostensibly non-symphonic directions. The variety of music that followed, most of it involving text and the voice, shows a composer consistently ambivalent about those ideas central to symphonic traditions – tonal hierarchies, authorship and genre writ large, the grand and universal statement, and the classicist and folklorist ideas that spawned a symphonic renewal in the decades after the First World War. Perhaps it was to be expected, then, that Britten's symphonic works would be few and undoctrinaire: the *Sinfonietta* (a student composition written in 1932), *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940), *Spring Symphony* (1949), and Cello Symphony (1963) differ extremely in tone, instrumentation, structure and symphonic morphology. Like the contrasting 'symphonies' and symphonic attempts by those who influenced Britten's early development most directly – Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg and Stravinsky – his four symphonic scores define the post-tonal symphony, and things post-tonally 'symphonic', in at least four different ways.

The variances to Britten's essays in this most generic of forms – that is, the form saddled since Beethoven with the heaviest conventions of structure, instrumentation, and manner of performance and reception – also point to a non-generic and non-serial quality to this composer's output that goes beyond issues of genre and structure. Even Mahler's symphonies, which invite a collective hearing in series as some kind of autobiographical meta-symphony, obey certain laws of genre that Britten's symphonies and operas and canticles do not.[2] (One could say the same of Tippett's symphonies, which describe a fairly linear path from Hindemithian classicism to more improvisatory structures, not to mention Walton's essays in more consistent four- and three-movement symphonic forms.) In this respect, Britten's evasion of the simple English title 'symphony' – and his relative avoidance of symphonic works more generally – becomes symptomatic of larger, compositional evasions in all

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

genres.[3] But then an uneasiness with genre conventions becomes apparent in many of Britten's titles, which tend toward neologism. For example, the unique stringing-together of nouns for the titles *Spring Symphony* and *War Requiem* differs from the usual parenthetical or characteristic descriptions – such as Mahler's original heading *Symphonie ('Titan')* for his First Symphony, Vaughan Williams's *Sinfonia antartica*, or Delius's use of the indefinite article and preposition for *A Mass of Life*.

If Britten's four 'symphonies' do have something in common, it is their nonconformity with the classic Viennese legacies of Beethoven and Brahms, the defining presences in any history of symphonic music and compositional presences in England even into the 1920s and 1930s. Britten was an outspoken critic of these two composers, which in itself might have been nothing more than an alibi against their influence.[4] But his music and methods of working corroborate these distastes: he consistently compared his process of composing to an architect's labours – imposing form from without – thereby invoking contrast with the Brahmsian organic form described by Dahlhaus as 'development or elaboration, both logical and rhetorical, of a process of thought' – which is more like letting a natural form grow from within, unwilled.[5] A listener might also hear Beethovenian and Brahmsian symphonic teleologies subjugating momentary pleasure to long-term cumulative effect, giving them historical value as tropes on the Hegelian division between *werden* and *aufheben*. By contrast, critics both sympathetic and fault-finding are often struck by Britten's ear for things momentary – fleeting and memorable nuances of sonority and affect, moments that are *sui generis* and therefore non-symphonic.[6]

Britten's *Sinfonietta* for ten instruments, which he wrote in 1932 as an eighteen-year-old student at the Royal College of Music, documents his thoughts on symphonic composition at a time when he was still enthusiastic about Beethoven and Brahms, seeking out their music on the radio and playing them at the piano for his own pleasure. To be more precise, the concise *Sinfonietta* shows an apathy toward the various Brahms and Beethoven legacies heard in the music of Parry, Stanford, and Vaughan Williams, and an unfashionable fascination with Schoenberg's reconception of Beethoven's and Brahms's symphonic legacies in his early chamber music. This Schoenbergian work, Britten's Op. 1, must represent a similar stepping-stone in what he later called his 'struggle ... to develop a consciously controlled professional technique. It was a struggle away from everything Vaughan Williams seemed to stand for.'[7] Britten's form, instrumentation, motivic writing, and polyphony were clearly influenced by Schoenberg's First String Quartet and especially the First Chamber Symphony, Op. 9. Like many composers beginning with Webern, Britten

https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011

was fascinated and stimulated by Schoenberg's attempts to contrive a kind of symphonic meta-unity – a large-scale and organic structure that would, in Schoenberg's words, 'include all the four characters of the sonata type in one single, uninterrupted movement'.[8]

Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony is a feat of structural virtuosity, an increasingly extreme – indeed, dangerous and exhilarating – steeplechase of development, episode and recapitulation. With Britten's *Sinfonietta* as with the Schoenberg, a running-together of movements works with a thematic-motivic teleology to help the composer postpone any real sense of recapitulatory satisfaction until the very end of the composition. Britten ends his first movement with only tenuous and abbreviated restatement, layering the opening theme with an augmented version of the second subject (first heard at Fig. 8, transposed for the recapitulation) and leaving a listener open to the more definitive restatement of this material heard at the end of the finale. Any sense of arrival or relaxation is doubly tenuous here because Britten does not state the first theme in the distinctive form heard at the very opening, but in the telescoped form heard later, at Fig. 2. (In Ex. 11.1, compare bars 1–8 with bars 20–4. Ironically, this kind of selective recapitulation of the opening subject is also prominent in Brahms – compare Britten with the first movement of the Clarinet Quintet, Op. 115, for example.) He also cuts off the recapitulation abruptly and prematurely: after a mere 22 bars of reprise (to be compared with 89 measures of introduction and exposition), Britten ends the movement on a repeated major-seventh chord on B♭ without a third. This chord acts as a formal signpost, referring back to the piled B♭–A sevenths of the introduction and forwards to the end of the slow movement and to the beginning of the third movement, where the chords, instrumentation, and voicing pick up precisely where the first movement had left off.

Despite these long-range, pitch-specific connections, Britten seems to identify with his Schoenberg exemplar – and with the idea of an end-weighted symphonic teleology – less and less as the music proceeds. The development in his first movement (Figs. 10–19) recalls fragments from both thematic areas but has clearer and more stable tonal leanings than the exposition and offers little if any climactic and comprehensive working-out. It is also thinner in texture than the second subject area and saves any imitative counterpoint for the lengthy retransition, concentrating instead on simple sequential manipulation of the opening figure of the second theme. A rigorously intervallic as opposed to functional-harmonic language makes Schoenberg's aggressive organicism possible, and by Britten's second movement – with its surprising 'English pastoral' tone – one hears him straining against this borrowed language. Likewise, in the final 'Tarantella' one might hear the composer escaping to a more

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Example 11.1

characteristic, highly rhythmic *moto perpetuo* and more relaxed functional-harmonic trappings.[9] And Britten's patient reassembly here of the original form of his first subject from the first movement sounds more forced than teleologically satisfying – the work of an ambitious student using a Schoenbergian model in some ways incompatible with his language.

The *Sinfonietta* is conspicuously Schoenbergian in its motivic thinking: the first movement cogently reconfigures and expands upon a small number of motifs, all of them stated within the first eight bars. Yet Britten's score also comes across as only selectively organic. Three ideas from the first movement reappear in the introductory opening of his second movement, with changes of tempo and affect that suggest the

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Example 11.2

Andante lento

thematic transformation of Liszt and Tchaikovsky more than Schoenberg's motivically based techniques of 'developing variation' (see Ex. 11.2): (1) the secondary theme now reappears in flute and bassoon; (2) the emphatic and highly rhythmic pentatonic horn call leading up to Fig. 2 now appears as a loosely canonic figure in the strings; and (3) the opening of the very first subject is now recalled in flute and clarinet (bars 5–7). With their original phrasing, articulations, contour and rhythm retained, the first and third of these become less motivic entities or motto-themes than themes to be recalled literally but at a different tempo and imbued with a different character.

Much of the particular urgency and import of the symphony since Mahler stems from the problem of just how to maintain or revitalize this author-heavy, grandiose form – its status as a proving-ground of compositional competence and artistic vision inescapable even in the modernism of Schoenberg's Op. 9 – when the functional harmonic interrelationships that had grown symbiotically with it had eroded or been thrown out altogether. This challenge must have been particularly imposing for the young Britten, whose structuralist thinking and intrinsically diatonic but non-hierarchical harmonic language lay uneasily alongside his appreciation of Mahler's large and 'cunningly contrived' symphonic forms, where 'every development surprised one and yet sounded inevitable'.[10] Britten answered the challenge with his *Sinfonia da Requiem*, a work that creates a truly symphonic dialectic by pitting tonal uncertainty against tonal certainty. In Arnold Whittall's words, 'Britten's answer [to the post-tonal symphonic dilemma] was to let the strong assertion and elaborate prolongation of the tonic itself justify – indeed, make inevitable – the non-diatonic motions which remain subordinate to that asserted tonic.'[11]

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The tonal assertiveness of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* lies in an almost oppressive insistence on D at the middle-ground level in all three movements. This D tonality is enforced in the 'Lacrymosa' by an insistent and inexorable bass-line, which dwells on this tonic and twice ascends the octave from the opening D – an ascent the final 'Requiem aeternam' movement will answer with its own twofold *descent* over the D octave. The regularity of this bass motion in the 'Lacrymosa' promises a processional, non-dialectic kind of formal logic more like the passacaglia than sonata-allegro precedents. (The formal dynamic of this movement, and of the *Sinfonia da Requiem* as a whole, bears the imprint of Britten's interest in ground-bass forms; in this, it also shows his propensity for writing sonata forms that, as Peter Evans describes the first movement of the *Sinfonietta*, 'continue to rise after the mid-point' instead of tracing a dynamic arch.[12]) At the same time, Britten accommodates this processional structure to certain expectations of sonata-allegro form. Confronting the tonal insistence and certainty of the bass-line are passages of harmonic uncertainty arising from two interruptions in the bass-line. The second of these episodes, moving away from the tonic D minor and toward the tritone axes F–B and C–F♯, displays the kind of conflicted and uncertain tonal structures common to Britten's years in America (1939–42).[13] The bass arrives on the diminished-fifth degree (A♭) at the onset of this passage, setting off a new turn toward flat keys, and the interruption in the bass ascent and the new chordal texture make the series of juxtaposed chords starting at bar 3 of Fig. 5 sound like the onset of the classical second subject. But Britten does not present any harmonic pole – or harmonic duality, even – as a counter to the firmly defined tonic D minor. According to tradition, ostensibly new themes would appear here to articulate and fix a turn toward a new harmonic area. Instead, Britten offers a series of ambivalent and restless chord juxtapositions, the profusion of unresolved tritones defusing any sense of stable functional relation – he downplays the point of furthest harmonic and thematic 'remove' that is intrinsic to the traditional sonata-allegro shape, preferring instead to trace a uniform and more dramatically convincing dynamic line.

One could find Britten's pointed avoidance of any clear-cut thematic and harmonic duality non-symphonic, but then the *Sinfonia da Requiem* shows especially clearly the necessary interrelationship between Britten's non-teleological, non-hierarchical harmonic thinking and his incapacity – at least as Hans Keller would have it – for symphonic development in the conventional thematic-motivic sense.[14] Like Liszt, Britten replaces exposition, working-out, and reconciliation of thematic and harmonic contrasts with 'thematic transformation' and the linearity of a simple extramusical idea or character transformation: Britten's final 'Requiem

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Example 11.3

aeternam', which Auden described as 'a movement of peace and quiet rejoicing',[15] resolves the conflicts of the 'Lacrymosa' and allays the scarifyingly numb atomization of the 'Dies irae' by bringing back the initial material – anxious in those earlier movements, where it had been laden with semitones, minor sixths and minor sevenths, but now hopeful and finally ecstatic (Ex. 11.3). Liszt spoke of a 'progression of soul-states' in discussing his own symphonic poems, and works like *Tasso* and *Les préludes* trace a will to apotheosis, dramatic outline *per aspera ad astra*, movement from darkness to light, that is linear without being teleological.

The slowly moving bass pattern of 'Lacrymosa', and insistence on D throughout the entire work, creates and enhances extra-musical associations: the funeral march and religious sub-text, two trademarks of Mahler's symphonic thinking. Britten borrows many of Mahler's gestures – among them his juxtaposition of conflicting major and minor third degrees, the irony of purposefully banal material, the thematic use of rhythm, and certain ideas on orchestration.[16] But the more fundamental affinities between Britten and Mahler are less immediately audible – characteristics that have more to do with the symphonic accomplishments than the immediate styles of these composers.[17] Like Mahler in his Second and Fifth, Britten begins his symphony with a funeral march and uses this to create an especially symphonic structural tension and breadth. This particular conflation of extra-musical illustration and high formalist traditions of absolute music – a collusion of theatrical gesture and concert-hall periodicity – was one of Mahler's most original and indelible contributions to twentieth-century symphonic music. A processional rhythm and tempo also help Britten introduce an indistinct spiritual or religious programme – as arranged from the Requiem Mass, a

https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011

linear and dramaturgically effective juxtaposition of the sinner's guilt, the dreadful spectacle of damnation, and the comforting promise of eternal peace – into the ostensibly secular, 'pure music' realm of the symphony. This in turn provided a way of bringing together church and secular genres and two opposing tendencies of nineteenth-century symphonic music: the tendency towards universality – Alfred Einstein referred to the classical symphony as 'an orchestral work addressed, above and beyond any occasion for its composition, to an ideal public, to humanity'[18] – and the tendency towards the individual or even the autobiographical.

Beethoven had given a precedent for rendering spirituality within an 'absolute' genre in the third movement of his String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, his 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart'. But the very vagueness of Britten's religious ethos in the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, its universality and non-sectarian nature, more directly recalls Mahler – for both the *Sinfonia da Requiem* and Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony, in which that composer had broken off his setting of Klopstock's *Resurrection Ode* at its first mention of Jesus, are really no more specifically Christian than they are Judaic or Buddhist. This non-denominational quality makes doubly ironic and bizarre the tale of how the Japanese authorities who commissioned the *Sinfonia da Requiem* came finally to reject – and profoundly misunderstand – Britten's work as 'purely religious music of a Christian nature'.[19] In fact, the *Sinfonia da Requiem* is like a Mahler symphony or later example such as Honegger's *Symphonie 'Liturgique'*, in that the contrast between its nebulous extra-musical programme and its emotional specificity send the curious listener back to the composer's biography rather than to any theological issues. Those seeking reason or context for the *Sinfonia da Requiem* turn not to Catholic or Anglican belief but to biographical events: the deaths of Britten's parents, his recent life-threatening illness, fascist victories in Europe, and his self-exile from a country that was at war and besieged.

With his next large-scale orchestral work, the *Spring Symphony* of 1949, Britten demonstrated a more enigmatic creative relationship with the symphonic oeuvre of Mahler – and also a more enigmatic idea of what a symphony could be in the late 1940s. Commentators have called the *Spring Symphony* a cantata, a song-cycle, and a latent opera. In truth, the work is all and none of these: in some ways a profoundly non-Mahlerian composition, it nevertheless represents a playing-out of some of the formal ambiguities and genre-allusions of Mahler's symphonies. Britten's own description of his piece – 'a symphony not only dealing with the Spring itself, but with the progress of Winter to Spring and the reawakening of the earth and life which that means'[20] – might suggest the vocal

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

symphonies of Mahler, especially *Das Lied von der Erde*. Like Mahler, Britten emphasizes orchestral colour but usually breaks his ensemble into a variety of chamber groups. Britten also uses solo voices in the 'concise' and 'specific' – operatic as opposed to instrumental – style that Mahler heard in his own early symphonies.[21] More precisely, we might turn to the fifth movement of Mahler's Third Symphony – his setting of 'Es sungen drei Engel' from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* – or to a Purcell opera to find similar dance rhythms, onomatopoeic vocal effects, alfresco lustiness, and changeable collusions between soloists and choruses.

The operatic cast to the voices in Britten's *Spring Symphony* might suggest Mahler, but Britten goes further than Mahler in suggesting the operatic stage.[22] Though unnamed, his singers are as much characters as they are voices – like Lukas in Haydn's secular oratorio *Die Jahreszeiten* or Mahler's wandering penitent in 'Urlicht', but unlike Doctor Marianus in Mahler's Eighth or the heartsick wanderer in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Already a consummate composer for the stage, Britten emphasizes the individuality of each character by plumbing and complicating their individual psychologies. The tuba line in the outer sections of 'The driving boy', grinding repetitiously through the same II–V–I progression in E♭ and asserting a low brass tone-colour that always connotes morbidity in Britten, hints surreptitiously that the pubescent male might not find spring to be all strawberries and cream (or cakes and ale, to take an expression from the finale). Likewise, the bristling and polytonal string and harp ostinati of 'When will my May come' take us beyond the impatience and unrequited arcadian love of Richard Barnefield's text and into something more Stravinskyan, almost animalistic – thereby injecting a sense of irony and frustrated sexuality into the naive, strophic setting of the inner two stanzas.

The *Spring Symphony* actually comes across as the least Mahlerian of Britten's symphonies if one searches it for Mahler's manner of bringing theme, programme, voice and text together into one linear and symphonic structure. In contrast with Mahler's symphonies, vocal or purely instrumental, Britten's movements contribute to no real cumulative hyper-plot, apart from seasonal passage from late winter to early summer.[23] Accordingly, the *Spring Symphony* is also non-Mahlerian in the important fact that it is not end-directed. Mahler often connects his movements – especially first and last – with reminiscence themes, while Britten's finale concentrates on tying off the material of its own ternary form. The *Spring Symphony* also differs from *Das Lied von der Erde* and Mahler's vocal Second, Third, Fourth, and Eighth Symphonies – and from Mahler's own exemplars in Beethoven's Ninth, Mendelssohn's Second and Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, not to mention such twentieth-century

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

examples as Scriabin's First and Shostakovich's Second and Third – in that it builds no particular structural relationship between vocal music and purely instrumental music. Dahlhaus categorized these nineteenth-century works as 'symphony-cantatas', works in an intrinsically romantic sub-genre where the vocal section emerges as a kind of combined summary, apotheosis, and recapitulation of the instrumental.[24]

Britten owes the number and variety of texts in the *Spring Symphony*, and therefore the large-scale, cumulative structure of the work itself, less to Mahler's influence than Auden's – and specifically, to Auden's love for the literary anthology.[25] For his twelve songs Britten collated more texts than Mahler did in any one symphony, and culled them from far-flung sources – but on the other hand he did not do this in a purposefully provocative way, as Mahler did in his Eighth when he juxtaposed a ninth-century Pentecost hymn with the final scene from *Faust*. Britten fashioned his twelve songs into what he called 'the traditional four movement shape of the symphony',[26] yet the remarkable differences of colour and affect between the individual songs tend to de-emphasize or detract from that larger symphonic shape. Passing from one song of the *Spring Symphony* to the next is much like emerging from the string-dominated chiaroscuro of the fourth movement of Mahler's Third (his setting of Nietzsche's 'Midnight Song') to the brightly lit, percussive, and more strictly metrical world of Mahler's fifth movement (colours more appropriate to the child-folkish Christianity of the *Wunderhorn* text 'Es sungen drei Engel'). Britten's fusion of instrumental colour and vocal style for each individual text becomes delightfully obvious in 'The driving boy', for example, where tambourine rolls and cross-accented roulades in the woodwinds echo the changing metres and relentless consonants of George Peele's 'When as the rye reach to the chin, And chopcherry, chopcherry ripe within'.

If the *Spring Symphony* owes its anthologistic structure to Auden, should not the choral aspect also point to British influences rather than more distant Austro-German traditions? The *Spring Symphony* was preceded by two works that struck common ground between British symphonic and choral traditions, and which Britten would undoubtedly have known: Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* (1903–9) and Holst's *Choral Symphony* (1923–4). But Britten's vocal–orchestral relationships and the operatic immediacy of his vocal writing relate more readily to early Mahler. The Vaughan Williams and Holst, diametrically opposed in the intercessions they propose between choral and symphonic music, are both resolutely non-operatic. Holst's orchestra either gives the most tentative of accompaniments or simply doubles the voices, his vocal writing itself is highly improvisatory and often – as in the striking opening pages

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

– monotonal, and the work owes much of its failure in the concert hall to its lack of drama and non-symphonic lack of structural or dynamic development. Vaughan Williams, on the other hand, justified his frequent repetition of Walt Whitman's words and phrases in *A Sea Symphony* by describing this work as 'symphonic rather than narrative or dramatic . . . the orchestra [also] has an equal share with the chorus and soloists in carrying out the musical ideas'. Holst's orchestra is often dispensable, while Vaughan Williams's textures are grand and colourful enough, and his four-movement design sufficiently symphonic, that his work would suffer relatively little if one replaced the voices with instruments. Either measure would utterly defeat the *Spring Symphony*, just as it would Mahler's vocal symphonies.

The *Spring Symphony* effects operatic tableaux and the localized, moment-to-moment references and pitch relations of the song-cycle more than it does the thematic relations and latent harmonic narrative that spread across the larger whole in the classical symphonic repertory (and in the Vaughan Williams just mentioned). In this, the *Spring Symphony* is less symphonic than the *Serenade*, *Nocturne*, *Les illuminations*, or the 'symphonic song-cycle' *Our Hunting Fathers*. But the constructive principles of the song-cycle are known for ranging wide between the intuitive and the rigorous, and in the *Spring Symphony* Britten does not devise local relations at the expense of the larger structure. The capstone-like length of Britten's first and last songs also serves to underline any linear and symphonic qualities heard in the *Spring Symphony* as a whole. Despite the fact that Britten moves consistently along a series of fluid pitch-entries, one could hear the C major of the finale as the logical, long-range result of the G proposed cumulatively by the opening three songs – with the A centre of the first two immediately re-interpreted at the opening of the third as secondary dominant of a new, tentatively tonicized G major.

The finale, the longest song of the twelve, ends the *Spring Symphony* on a note of summation but leaves open-ended the thematic and harmonic structure of the work. When the boys come in at the close with 'Sumer is icumen in' in an almost glaring C major (in the *Nocturne* and elsewhere the concluding key of transcendent purity, beyond consciousness, time, or place), it becomes clear that Britten's work is not dialectic in the classic symphonic manner – a paradigm still audible in the interrupted I–V–I background of the first movement of the *Sinfonia da Requiem*. Instead, the new tune symbolizes a kind of formal accomplishment that is different from the accustomed 'symphonic' kinds of teleological harmonic accomplishment. Britten leaves his large-scale harmonic motion purposefully open-ended to suggest arrival at new spiritual states and

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

instrumental colours, much as Mahler did when he ended his Fourth, Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Symphonies in keys different from those in which they started. Britten's ongoing play between sharp and flat key-centres, and – at the very end – his using the original key-centre A as an added-sixth to a close on C major, might even recall the structural tactics of the nineteenth-century *Liederkreis*.

While the title of the *Spring Symphony* originally caused debate among Britten's critics, no one has questioned his use of the word 'symphony' for the Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, his final large-scale orchestral work. Indeed, writers have embraced this title and singled out this score as a kind of vindication of Britten's seriousness as a symphonic composer, a final refutation of the adroit but superficial cleverness he was accused of earlier in his career (see p. 2). Evans, for one, declared the Cello Symphony 'Britten's most considerable achievement in the field of purely instrumental music'.[27] We owe such a verdict in part to the fact that this is seemingly Britten's most abstruse essay for the orchestra, and one that apparently carries no extra-musical allusions. But the air of summation and mastery that surrounds the work can also be attributed to Britten's much-discussed classicism of structure. There is a particular classical symmetry to the sonata-allegro design of the first movement: exposition and development are precisely the same length (95 bars each), and the recapitulation in conjunction with the coda is not much longer (total of 113 bars). The second subject is recognizably 'thematic' because of its periodic phrase-structure, and is also centred primarily on A major, a fifth above the D minor key centre for the opening theme. In the recapitulation, this second subject returns to the tonic D (major, this time), as one would expect in classic examples of sonata-allegro form. The development section is also quite straightforwardly developmental with its imitative textures, stretti of inverted motifs from the opening two pages, and truncated reworkings of the opening subject. It even ends with nine bars of dominant preparation.

Between them, the third and fourth movements of the Cello Symphony also suggest a classical sonata-allegro structure by relating contrasting themes to a calculated return of the tonic. The Adagio actually introduces the theme of the following passacaglia movement as its own second subject, in A major, and then restates its own first theme in A (at Fig. 57) before leading into the cello's cadenza. Immediately stating the passacaglia theme in the tonic D, the passacaglia movement thereby acts as a consequence, even a completion, of the Adagio.

Britten's democratic sharing of material between orchestra and soloist is often cited as evidence of the classic-symphonic bearing of the Cello Symphony – and here we approach the question of why this work is a sym-

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

phony with soloist and not a concerto. To cite but one example, the roles of solo and orchestra are reversed when the theme that opened the first movement returns in the recapitulation (Fig. 17): in the recapitulation it is the soloist who states the ground while the orchestra provides the upper rhythmic-harmonic pattern. When Evans contrasts the Cello Symphony with a hypothetical, highly soloistic counter-example, something more akin to the 'bravura Concerto with orchestral accompaniment' that Britten essayed in his earlier Piano Concerto,[28] he seems to compare this work to the Brahms concertos. In Evans's estimation, Britten transcends any concerto-like conflicts between individual roles of orchestra and solo instrument or any structural confrontations of timbre. With the Cello Symphony, Evans seems to say, Britten wrote a Bach-like piece of 'pure' music or perhaps something like the 'symphony with solo obbligato' that Hanslick heard in Brahms's Second Piano Concerto.

There are many things wrong with such a classical reading of the Cello Symphony, and by extension the view that this composition represents a stepping-back from the world of vocal music into something necessarily more 'absolute' and instrumental in conception.[29] For the Cello Symphony is powered and enriched by the colouristic, narrative and cognitive devices of the experienced opera composer – and is therefore one of Britten's most profoundly Mahlerian compositions. The Cello Symphony offers a feast of new and unique timbres despite its only moderate orchestra of seventeen players plus the strings – and despite Britten's unusually modest use of percussion and violins. The very first sound – a roll on the bass drum with the tonic D doubled at the unison in tuba and double-bass – presents an unforgettable colour, one as far from the world of absolute music and as much a promise of dramatic, stage-worthy event as any opening in Mahler. Like Mahler and Shostakovich, Britten also deploys textures so varied and unbalanced as to pull work and listener out of the timbral-semiotic world of the absolute-symphonic and into the realm of narrative and theatre: note the bottom-heavy opening of the first movement, the interplay of spiccato strings against muted brass in the second, or the 'hole-in-the-middle' texture where contrabassoon appears with higher registers of the B♭ clarinet and oboe (first movement, Fig. 13).

The opening pages, where Britten immediately creates and exploits expectations of 'symphonic' and 'non-symphonic' sounds, are too conflicted to create the sense of structural downbeat appropriate to the beginning of a thirty-minute symphonic work: the tonic emphasis and element of rhetoric are fairly strong, but more important are irrational, just-beyond-earshot qualities of rhythm and timbre. The *style-brisé* entrance of the cello is inevitably an exercise in rhythmic irrationality, especially when the ear comes across the high-string-to-low-string

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

direction for the sixth chord. Britten also gives the scalar bass figure (bars 4, 8, and 14) to the contrabassoon with selective doubling in tremolo *piano* double-basses, creating a highly indistinct sound – one that is virtually inaudible in some halls. By the recapitulation these timbral and rhythmic qualities are 'corrected', made more concrete and resolute. (The exchange of solo and orchestral material that transpires between exposition and recapitulation in one sense marks a 'symphonization' of the first movement – an agent of linearity working in tandem with the composer's holding off on a restatement of the first theme in the tonic D minor until the coda at Fig. 24.) But the process is gradual, and – significantly for the Cello Symphony's classicism of structure – is enacted over the development section (Figs. 8–17). By the beginning of the development, the original *style-brisé* chords have been given – now unbroken and in strict rhythm – to the winds. The scalar figure, however, emerges only slowly as something more distinct and more obviously thematic than it was at the opening: an inversion rises in register and clarity through the voices of bassoon, clarinet, and finally the solo cello itself. The figure appears uninverted in the recapitulation, sounded precisely and prominently by the soloist. By the recapitulation the chordal idea and the scalar idea have not become self-actualized – at least in the sense that the main theme of the first movement of the *Eroica* eventually finds harmonic closure – but have revealed themselves only gradually in a way that is more auditory than inherently musical.

The second aspect of the Cello Symphony that removes it from the realm of the absolute-symphonic is its vocabulary of gestures borrowed from vocal music – some of the same gestures, surely inspired by the cello's particular brilliance as it approaches the higher 'A-string' registers of Britten's favoured tenor voice, that are also to be heard in the Cello Sonata and Cello Suites. These gestures would seem out of place in an organically conceived piece of absolute music. But they are perhaps closer to the baroque concept of cognitive-semiotic rhetorical figures than to the suggestions of standard lyric styles and vocal phrase structures that Joseph Kerman found in the late Beethoven quartets.[30] Britten's 'tranquillo' second subject is a particular lode of cognitive-semiotic gestures (see Ex. 11.4). The falling two-note phrases seem to enact the classical 'sigh' topos. But the repetitious – even obsessive – interest in the rising semitones C♯–D, B–C, and G–A♭ suggests cadences in the recitation tones of ecclesiastical vocal music, thereby invoking the unspoken presence of both extra-musical import and worded 'text'. A revealing link can be established between Britten's second theme and the archaic ecclesiastical gestures of *Curlew River*, written the following year under the influence of plainsong. In a passage from *Curlew River* very similar to that in question

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.015 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Example 11.4

from the Cello Symphony, the Madwoman recounts her son's disappearance ('Near the Black Mountains there I dwelt . . . Far, far in the West') in abbreviated and formulaic phrase-fragments so full of cadential motion through seconds that the larger disjunctions *between* phrases can seem extreme. The cello line takes on a comparatively specific, recitative-like scansion – a series of understressed and end-accented lines that, punctuated by trochaic two-note phrases, seem to comprise a continually disrupted monologue. Especially when the interrogative phrases begin to spin farther and farther away from their consequent 'replies', rending the line with multi-octave breaks, our 'singing' character takes on a surreal, pathetic, even mad character. Britten had created a similar quality through incantatory pitch repetition in the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, establishing a link between that work and Messalina's pathetic homilies in *Our Hunting Fathers*.

The 'vocal', allusive elements in the Cello Symphony force us to reconsider a persistent refrain in Britten reception: that the composer found his true métier with *Peter Grimes* and quit the world of symphonically conceived instrumental composition for the more appropriate and fulfilling worlds of opera and vocal music. Keller spoke of Britten's non-symphonic 'naïvety' and allergy toward development as though they were inborn qualities, and Whittall concluded from Britten's instrumental works of the late 1930s that 'it was becoming increasingly clear – and, with hindsight, it was inescapable – that he could give a more natural melodic articulation to his instincts about harmonic structure when setting words'.[31] But exclusively 'vocal' and exclusively 'instrumental' or 'symphonic' forms and techniques, for that matter, become painfully artificial constructs when one tries to turn them on Britten's music. (Or on that of his friend and fellow Mahler-disciple, Shostakovich. As Eric Roseberry

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has observed, 'with Britten the term "symphonic" is as applicable to his operas as the term "operatic" is frequently applicable to Shostakovich in his symphonies. The fact is – and this is part of their innovatory conservatism – that both gave new meaning to the established generic forms through their very mixing of genres within them.'[32]) The non-Mahlerian abstractions of the *Spring Symphony* and the vocal allusions of the Cello Symphony suggest that Britten conceived his texted vocal music and his symphonic works with few assumptions and few givens: in the former, we find harmonic relations that are at the same time simple and symphonic in scope, and in the latter he created vocality and extra-musical reference in his most restrained and classical orchestral structure, without words or a singing voice.

The question as to why Britten did not write more 'symphonies' then begins to sound like the old question of why Mahler wrote no operas. If there is an answer to both queries, it can be found in Britten's indebtedness to Mahler and Mahler's conciliation of a symphonic posture with an operatic inclusiveness. After the Viennese composer's late expansion of symphonic structures and styles, useful divisions between symphony and opera begin to break down: the symphony, and Britten's examples in particular, came to represent a style posing as a form.

Cambridge Companions Online © Cambridge University Press, 2011
https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521573849.015 Published online by Cambridge University Press