BRITTEN’S OP. 47, FIVE FLOWER SONGS: BREAKING TRENDS IN ANALYSIS

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Benjamin Britten’s life and music have been the subject of study from early in his musical career. Current trends in psychological analysis of Britten’s music tend to focus on common themes, such as homosexuality, pacifism, the sense of the outsider, and the loss of innocence. Similarly, theoretical analyses tend either to provide general categorizations of the technical elements in Britten’s music or to apply a singular preconceived concept as a tool for understanding his compositions. These approaches have yielded significant information but leave aspects of Britten’s personality and music unilluminated.

Britten’s Op. 47, *Five Flower Songs*, are a collection of five part songs for a cappella chorus that are often included within the canon of 20th century choral literature. This paper examines a new perspective on Britten’s music by examining the relationship between Britten’s friendships and their influence on his compositions. Through the examination of these relationships information is revealed that allows for a new method of analysis that is particularly relevant to the *Five Flower Songs*. The opus was dedicated to two botanists for the occasion of their 25th wedding anniversary. Contained within specific movements are extra-musical references to scientific characteristics of the flowers that are the subjects of the texts. By examining this work and important connections between other friendships and his compositional output this paper demonstrates the validity of this perspective in analyzing Britten’s life and music.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 CURRENT TRENDS IN RESEARCH AND INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 THE ROLE OF FRIENDSHIP IN BRITTEN’S LIFE</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W.H. Auden</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Pears</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mstislav Rostropovich and Dmitri Shostakovich</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 THE FIVE FLOWER SONGS</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;To Daffodils&quot;</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Evening Primrose&quot;</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The Ballad of the Green Broom&quot;</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Marsh Flowers&quot; and “The Succession of the Four Sweet Months”</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Text to which Britten sets the DSCH motive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Selection from <em>Rejoice in the Lamb</em> demonstrating how Britten sets the DSCH motive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Page 1 of “To Daffodils” exhibiting rhythmically displaced text and melodic inversion and/or parallel motion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Page 1 of “To Daffodils” demonstrating the scientific references to the daffodil in the score.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>B section of “To Daffodils” demonstrating the echo in the bass part.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Selected measures demonstrating Britten’s use of double sharps in “The Evening Primrose”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Demonstration of the four note imitative pattern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Measure 18 demonstrating another “X” shape through voice crossing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Page 1 “The Ballad of the Green Broom” demonstrating Britten’s depiction of Broom bursting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Page 9 of “The Ballad of the Green Broom”. Britten repeats the text to further the mimicry of the sound of Broom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
CURRENT TRENDS IN RESEARCH AND INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Britten’s (1913-1976) compositional style was the subject of analytical study early in his musical life. Peter Evens writes in his book, The Music of Benjamin Britten, “At an unusually early stage in his career he was paid the compliment of a comprehensive symposium. This appeared in 1952, one year before the composer’s fortieth birthday, and… discussed almost every work written in the twenty years since the Opus 1 Sinfonietta had appeared.”¹ After Britten’s death in 1976, research on his life and music became even more prominent. Analysis of Britten’s music can be classified into two main categories: theoretical analyses which focus attention on melodic, harmonic, poetic, and formal structures, and psychological analyses which focus on common conceptual, textual, or emotional themes.

The methods scholars have used to perform theoretical analyses of Britten’s music are quite varied. This is due to the broad range of genres in which he composed as well as the composer’s eclectic style of composition. A wide variety of writing exists dedicated to offering a limited theoretical analysis, either because the author’s intent is to provide a surface-level understanding of basic theoretical concepts or because the author focuses solely on one theoretical feature. A primary example of the former exists in Peter Evans’ book, The Music of Benjamin Britten, in which the author examines nearly the entirety of Britten’s compositional output highlighting relevant biographical information and broad compositional tendencies as well as briefly mentioning formal and theoretical peculiarities unique to each opus.² Even in literature that specifically targets Britten’s choral music such as The Choral Music of Benjamin Britten: A Conductor’s Guide by Richard Cox and Larry Corse’s dissertation The A Cappella

¹ Peter Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 1.
² Ibid.
Choral Music of Benjamin Britten, the information provided amounts to little more than brief or generalized descriptions and charts which demonstrate melodic, harmonic, or formal tendencies. The Five Flower Songs is just one opus among many that has been given the same general analysis that has been applied to many of his works of a smaller scale.

Even literature that focuses on specific theoretical topics has left the Five Flower Songs, and other works like it, unilluminated. Common ideas discussed include thematic repetition and the use of leitmotifs, such as in Eric Walter White’s Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas. Other topics include melodic and harmonic tendencies, how and when complex formal structures are utilized, and the relationship between text and music in his compositions. David Forrest’s article, “Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten”, utilizes Schenkerian ideas of tonal prolongation to analyze three selected choral works. Forrest, like many others, applies a broad preconceived theoretical concept to analyze Britten’s music. Chester Alwes, in his article “Words and Music: Benjamin Britten’s Evening Primrose”, provides an example of a more specific type of analysis by demonstrating how Britten uses text in one movement of the Five Flower Songs to shape harmonic design. Alwes’ article is the only example in the literature on Britten to specifically target the Five Flower Songs and primarily addresses only the issue of how text influenced the composition. Scholars have attempted to use these overarching concepts as one potential method of understanding Britten’s unique sound. While this research has

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provided us with many invaluable ways to deconstruct and understand general theoretical principles in Britten’s music, there are other approaches that remain unexplored which might better serve scholars in analyzing his music on a case-by-case basis.

Psychological analyses of his music have concentrated almost exclusively on the themes of homosexuality (suggested or suppressed), the perspective of the outsider, pacifism, and loss of innocence. It certainly cannot be denied that these themes are vital to our understanding of Britten’s musical output. In fact, given the frequency of the appearance of such themes in his music and what we know about Britten’s personal life from his own letters and interviews with those close to him, it is no surprise that they represent the bulk of the writing on Britten’s music. It is problematic, however, to utilize only these types of analyses. Britten was aware of critics’ and researchers’ fixation on these elements of his music while he was still living and, as one might expect from someone as private as Britten, he warned against performances of his works that attempted to emphasize these perceived psychological undercurrents. “One learns I think that to make sense of an opera we should examine it closely – it’s notes and words, and the hints given as to production in the stage directions – and forget preconceived theories. If the work has overtones or undercurrents, let them appear by themselves and do not emphasize them; that is sure to put the work out of joint. Having found what is actually in a piece, let us perform it with skill, energy, discipline and humility.”

7 Peter Hodgson’s *Benjamin Britten: A Guide to Research* is a helpful guide for writings on Britten and his music, although it is at this time nearly 16 years old. Some examples of the types of research on the topics of homosexuality, pacifism, and loss of innocence are as follows: Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, Clifford Hindley, “Not the Marrying Kind: Britten’s ‘Albert Herring’”, Stephen McClatchie, “Benjamin Britten, ‘Owen Wingrave’ and the Politics of the Closet: Or, ‘He Shall Be Straightened out at Paramore’”, Annabelle Paetsch, “Aspects of Narrativity and Temporality in Britten’s ‘Winter Words’”, Lloyd Whitesell, “Britten’s Dubious Trysts.”

works from doing just that, and it is not necessarily negative to use such an approach. The problem which we continue to face, as Graham Elliot states in *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*, is that, “There is a danger that concentration on this area of Britten’s persona will allow other equally important motivations to be ignored.”\(^9\) Unfortunately, too few authors in the field of Britten scholarship share Britten’s own sentiments or Elliot’s sense of awareness, and again other potentially important motivations other than those discussed above exist which could better serve us in analyzing works such as the *Five Flower Songs*.

The scholarship described thus far represents many important contributions to the greater understanding of Britten and his music. There are many works, however, that cannot be examined by those means alone. Britten’s Op. 47, *Five Flower Songs* are a seemingly simple collection of five part-songs for unaccompanied chorus that are standard repertoire in 20\(^{th}\) century choral music. Applying current trends in research and analysis of Britten’s music provides a general compositional understanding of the *Five Flower Songs* but lacks specific knowledge necessary for a thorough understanding does not place this work into a broader picture of Britten’s persona. One alternative approach to analysis of these works lies in addressing the profound degree of influence that Britten’s relationships had on his life and compositional output and, more specifically, in the role that the dedicatees of the *Five Flower Songs*, and their unique knowledge, played in Britten’s compositional choices throughout the work.

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CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF FRIENDSHIP IN BRITTEN’S LIFE

Background

Benjamin Britten was often identified as an eclectic, both in compositional style and in character. Those who knew him remarked on a variety of curious contradictions such as his fear and apprehension of live performance despite his marvelous skill as a pianist and conductor. He achieved a great deal of notoriety, yet preferred to return to his country home in Aldeburgh and the comfort of his close friends as often as he could manage, shying away from the spotlight and complicated living. He also harbored a constant doubt as to his abilities and contributions as a composer. Despite these quirks, or perhaps because of them, Britten maintained and cherished a large variety of friendships and acquaintances. Wystan Hugh Auden, famous poet and one of his closest friends during the first half of Britten’s career, often suggested to him that he sought the adoration, comfort, and protection of friends as a crutch; a way to stifle his own criticisms and those he perceived from others, real or not.\(^{10}\) He wrote a great many letters to those in his inner circle, which included a vast array of personalities ranging from musical associates and old neighbors to the artistic elite. Britten’s letters reveal how tenderly he treated these communications. Those who knew Britten often remarked about his warm and loving nature towards others. It seems clear, perhaps because of his gentle caring nature or his self-doubt, that these friendships were of vital importance both to him and to his musical creativity.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Interestingly, in Ronald Duncan’s *Working with Britten*, another, and somewhat more complex point of view, is presented. Duncan asserts that many of Britten’s close friends felt used and often discarded after he had gone to them for inspiration or work, choosing to spend more time with those who would further his compositional purposes more directly at that given time.
Britten is quoted as saying, “Our job is to be useful, and to the living.”\textsuperscript{12} Undoubtedly Britten was so, as indicated by the sheer number of works dedicated and written specifically for the people in his world. Peter Evans suggests, “the stimulus of a particular soloist’s performing style was needed to release a flow of ideas in instrumental terms.”\textsuperscript{13} Throughout his 95 opus numbers and many works without opus numbers (including individual songs and movements) the total amount of dedicatees, of which nearly all were good friends or correspondents, is 149. Put more simply, there are more dedications in Britten’s total output than there are opus numbers. The ratio of opuses to dedications points to the importance of his relationships not only to his personal life but also to his compositions. The idea becomes clearer by examining specific relationships from different, yet important, parts of his life.

School Years

Among his earliest and most influential friendships were those he made as a young student of piano and composition. Arthur Benjamin and particularly Frank Bridge are known to have impacted Britten profoundly and as such it is not coincidental that both men were the recipients of dedications from the young composer. In 1930 Britten was admitted to the Royal Conservatory of Music, studying composition under John Ireland and piano with Arthur Benjamin. Although he learned to refine his writing under Ireland, their relationship was strained at times and the lessons were not nearly as influential as his work with Bridge or Benjamin. In fact, “It is as a pianist that he (Britten) seems to have gained most from his RCM years, studying with Arthur Benjamin. Benjamin’s own compositional style can be detected in Britten’s only early piano composition, Holiday Diary, and the lucid detail of Britten’s piano playing, whether as a song accompanist (one of the greatest of his time), in chamber music or (all too rarely after

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Benjamin Britten and Paul Francis Kildea, \textit{Britten on music} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 294.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Peter Evans, \textit{The Music of Benjamin Britten} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 335.}
the early years) as a soloist, is impressive testimony to Benjamin’s teaching.”

Holiday Diary was dedicated to Arthur Benjamin and exhibits many of his teacher’s compositional characteristics. This demonstrates further the degree of influence those important to Britten had on his music.

Britten’s lessons with Frank Bridge began nearly five years earlier than his studies at the RCM. Bridge was reluctant to hear the works of a 14 year old, and he in fact had no other students in composition, but after the two spent a morning together looking at and discussing Britten’s compositions he was convinced that the young composer should receive lessons. Britten thought very highly of Bridge both as a composer and as a teacher, and though the lessons he received over the next four years were very difficult and often resulted in visible fatigue, Britten clearly trusted and valued the older composer. During his time with Bridge, he was immersed in a culture where he encountered many ideas that would help shape his unique identity as a person and composer. Graham Elliot writes, “During his time as a student at the Royal College of Music, Britten was a regular guest at the Bridges’ weekend cottage in Sussex… Other friends would also be present and conversation tended to focus on ‘the latest poems, and the latest trends in painting and sculpture’… Without doubt Britten was also influenced by Bridge’s expression of his deeply felt pacifist sympathies. Through their relationship some fundamental aspects of Britten’s personality and compositional style began to take shape.

The two began to butt heads as the younger composer grew more musically independent and as his influences extended to Auden’s younger intellectual circle. They remained on good terms, however, and kept in contact with one another regularly. Bridge was the subject and dedicatee of one the works that launched Britten’s young career in 1937. Variations on a Theme

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of Frank Bridge, op. 10, became one of his most often performed works during his lifetime. The composition undoubtedly was heavily influenced by their personal relationship. “On the composition sketch and in his own copy of the published score he (Britten) indicated that each movement was meant to portray some characteristic of Bridge, ‘His integrity… energy… charm… with… gaiety,’ and so on. Bridge himself responded warmly to the work. ‘I don’t know how to express my appreciation in adequate terms,’ he wrote to Britten. ‘It is one of the few lovely things that has ever happened to me.’”\(^{16}\) It is clear even early in his compositional output that Britten’s personal relationships gave him the material, techniques, or inspiration with which he would construct his compositions. This trend continued to strengthen as he aged and found new sources of inspiration.

W.H. Auden

The first and, without question, one of the most important creative partnerships he formed outside the confines of his education was with the poet W. H. Auden. Britten and Auden first met while under mutual employment by the General Post Office Film Unit in Blackhearth, where Britten was to receive his first salaried position as a composer of music for films and documentaries. Their first official collaboration was on the film Coal Face in which Auden had written a text representing the wives of the miners on which the film was based. “When he (Auden) heard Britten’s setting of these and other lines he had provided for the Film Unit, Auden was struck by the young composer’s ‘extraordinary sensitivity in relation to the English language. One had always been told the English was an impossible tongue to set or sing… Here at last was a composer who set the language without undue distortion.’”\(^{17}\) Britten’s initial impression of Auden and his work was also favorable. In a letter to a friend he wrote, “I know

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\(^{17}\) Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, 68.
you would like W.H.A. very much. He is a very startling personality— but absolutely sincere and very brilliant. He has a very wide knowledge, not only of course of literature, but of every branch of art, and especially of politics; this last in the direction that I can’t help feeling every serious person, and artists especially, must have. Strong opposition in every direction to Fascism, which of course restricts all freedom of thought.”¹⁸ Britten’s interests in these subjects, which were cultivated in his youth, continued to form through his connection to Auden.

Not long after their initial collaborations began, Auden informally inducted Britten into his bohemian group of writers and artists where Britten was to meet a number of influential intellectuals. Auden’s extreme interest in politics and the effect his circle of intellectuals had on Britten was profound. “It was through the promptings of Auden’s example that Britten first tested his music’s ability to carry a powerfully-committed social, even political, message, and sowed the seeds from which so much of his later music was to spring.”¹⁹ The first example of this increase in political and social interest is found in Britten’s symphonic cycle for high voice and orchestra and with texts written and compiled by Auden, Op. 8, Our Hunting Fathers. “The idea for the piece was that the contemporary international political situation should be portrayed through a parable of man’s relations to the animal kingdom.”²⁰ For reasons perhaps both musical and political Britten felt that this composition was his true Op. 1.²¹ Their future collaborations continued to be fruitful for the duo. Auden embarked with Britten on the first attempt of perhaps his most beloved musical form, opera, by providing the libretto to Paul Bunyan. Britten set 17 different texts by Auden; nearly double those of any other poet throughout Britten’s body of

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¹⁸ Carpenter, Benjamin Britten: A Biography, 70.
¹⁹ Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 9.
²⁰ Carpenter, Benjamin Britten: A Biography, 79.
work. Even after a cooling in their relationship, Britten still spoke glowingly of the poet and his impact on his life.

The influence of Auden on Britten’s compositions cannot be overstated. From their initial collaboration in Op. 8 and onward, Britten produced many works in which the composer’s personal, social and political ideologies form the basis, or at the very least, play a strong role. Two of Britten’s most successful and remarkable works share this ideological stamp. The War Requiem is perhaps the most blatant musical statement of the composer’s vehement belief in pacifism. Peter Grimes, a work in which the main character is treated as an outsider in his own community, draws parallels with Britten’s life upon his return to England where he felt like an outsider because of his homosexuality and his choice to leave England as a conscientious objector to World War II. Auden’s encouragement was arguably one of the most prominent factors in Britten and Britten’s long-time partner, Peter Pears, choosing to leave England for the United States shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. Throughout their friendship Britten was quick to follow Auden’s advice and insights, as Auden seemed to have a keen understanding of Britten’s sexuality, tendency towards shyness, and feelings of inferiority. Britten set to music three separate poems, “Underneath the abject willow”, “Night covers up the rigid land”, and “Ode to St. Cecilia’s Day”, each written specifically to Britten and addressing these tendencies in gentle, understanding, and somewhat romantic tones. It is impossible to imagine the Benjamin Britten that we now know emerging from a life without the friendship of Auden.

Peter Pears

Similarly, there is no doubt that his long romantic and musical partnership with Peter Pears profoundly impacted his writing. It is interesting to note that although Auden and Pears
were also friends, they each were wary of the impact the other had on their shared friend. Letters written by both men express concern for the influence that the other was having on Britten’s life: Pears noticing Auden’s tendency to intellectually “bully” the composer and Auden worrying that Britten was settling into a less politically and artistically challenging life. Britten and Auden, by the late 1940’s, were no longer in collaboration. Britten and Pears, however, were in the midst of a long collaboration that greatly impacted the composer’s output. They began making music together in the summer of 1937 and in their first collaboration, a setting of the Emily Bronte poem “A thousand gleaming fires”, both were impressed by the other’s musicianship. Pears was a new and relatively untrained singer. However, Britten felt that, “He makes it sound charming. He is a good singer and a first-rate musician.”22 Pears was taken with Britten’s skill at the piano during this collaboration. “He describes him as having ‘an extraordinary connection between his brain and his heart and the tips of his fingers.’”23

Soon after their initial collaboration, Pears traveled to Salzburg to, “hear the premier of Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, he commented that all the other English composers represented in the concert lacked life, ‘and that, the Almighty be praised, is what you have, Benjie…”24 By February of the next year, the two were living together, although their relationship was still only a friendship. As the two departed from England together to escape the threat of World War II, their relationship developed into more than a collaborative friendship, with Britten admitting his love for the already struck Pears. It is clear that from their first meeting the impact of Pears on Britten’s life and compositions was profound. The two toured together countless times throughout the remainder of their lives, with Britten accompanying and

22 Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*, 112.
23 Ibid.
often playing his own works while Pears sang. The number of pieces that are dedicated to Pears, ten, is nearly double that of anyone else in Britten’s life and it is a safe assumption to say that all the works and major opera roles for tenor voice were conceived with Pears in mind, as were many of the works listed as being for high voice. Pears helped stage, premier, or record Britten’s works an innumerable amount of times throughout their partnership, which in many ways is one of the most productive and fruitful collaborations between lovers in the 20th century.

Mstislav Rostropovich and Dmitri Shostakovich

The personal influences on Britten’s compositions were not limited to only the most major biographical figures in his life. John Culshaw writes, “He liked to write with specific people in mind, not just because of their professional skills but because of their qualities as human beings: Peter Pears, Kathleen Ferrier, Joan Cross, Owen Brannigan, Janet Baker, Dietrich Fischer-Diskau, Mstislav Rostropovich and a host others. Owen Wingrave was cast before it was written, because he wanted to think about human beings rather than dramatic abstractions.” This tendency revealed itself in Britten’s earliest compositions and continued to influence his music until the end of his life. His connections to the Russian musical giants Mstislav Rostropovich and Dmitri Shostakovich show a particularly profound influence on his work. Peter Evans writes, “So the artistry of Soviet cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich… was subordinate only to that of Peter Pears in the degree of influence it exercised on the composer’s choice of medium. Beginning with the Cello Sonata of 1961, Britten wrote five works for Rostropovich, and in the Cello Symphony he produced his biggest ‘absolute’ instrumental score.” Similarly, Rostropovich’s wife and internationally renowned singer, Galina

Vishnevskaya, was the inspiration and intended performer for the soprano solos throughout the *War Requiem* and the song cycle of Pushkin texts, *The Poet’s Echo*, Op. 76.

Britten’s connection to Shostakovich has been remarked upon often by prominent scholars of both composers’ works and, moreover, this connection is of much more significant compositional influence than the aforementioned persons. The two share a number of compositional traits such as parody, satire, interest in old forms, and social-political relevance. They also were inspired by many of the same composers; Mahler and Berg, to name two.  

Shostakovich’s opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, had a noticeable impact on the young Britten in 1936. Britten revealed the depth of its impact in a letter to the Russian composer in 1963 saying, “You know how much I love this opera myself, and rejoice that it has made so many friends here… I would have loved to have been able again publicly to show you I, personally, admire and cherish your work. For years now your work and life have been an example to me – of courage, integrity, and human sympathy, and of wonderful invention and clear vision. I must say that there is no one composing today who has an equal influence on me.”  

The influence of *Lady Macbeth* is traceable in Britten’s use of instrumental interludes throughout *Peter Grimes*, and particularly in his use of a passacaglia, just as in Shostakovich’s opera, as an emotional focal point in the composition.  

Indeed, there are a number of other instances where scholars have found links or allusions to Shostakovich’s music to which Britten would have had access to or heard in public performance.

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Perhaps even more remarkable are the number of occurrences in which Britten directly quotes or paraphrases Shostakovich’s music. Shostakovich’s musical cryptogram, which he used as a means of self-representation, D-S-C-H in the German system (D-Eb-C-B) or Dmitri Schostakovich, makes a number of notable appearances in Britten’s music. These could be coincidental in some cases, but given what we know about Britten and his compositional tendency to reference other composers and their works it is important to give them some attention. The latest, and perhaps most obvious, example occurs in the opening movement of his Third Suite for Cello, Op. 87, which was dedicated to their mutual friend Rostropovich and played for Shostakovich in 1971. Eric Roseberry, in his writings on the chamber music of Britten, points out that the DSCH motive is encountered in a transposed permutation as early as third bar of the Introduzione. Roseberry highlights this motive and other Shostakovichian characteristics within the opus to suggest that Britten intended the work as a double dedication to both Rostropovich and Shostakovich.  

Other earlier examples of the DSCH motive have been identified at moments in Britten’s choral cantata, Rejoice in the Lamb, and opera, The Rape of Lucretia, which may suggest that Britten was sympathetic with Shostakovich’s struggles against the oppressive Soviet regime of the time. In the case of Rejoice in the Lamb the motive (in permutation) is set in an almost obsessive fashion to a portion of the text that would hold special significance to one, such as Shostakovich, who felt persecuted by their own government (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). This was especially the case for Britten in 1943 while writing the piece during his return to England from the United States as a conscientious objector to World War II.

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Figure 1. Text to which Britten sets the DSCH motive.

For I am under the same accusation
With my Savior,
For they said,
He is besides himself.
For the officers of the peace
Are at variance with me,
And the watchman smites me
With his staff.

For silly fellow, silly fellow,
Is against me,
And belongeth neither to me
Nor to my family.
For I am in twelve hardships,
But he that was born of a virgin
Shall deliver me out of all,
Shall deliver me out of all.

Figure 2. Selection from *Rejoice in the Lamb* demonstrating how Britten sets the DSCH motive.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{32}\) Copyright 1943 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.
While patterns of inter-locking minor thirds such as we find in this motive are not uncharacteristic in Britten’s harmonic language, the rate at which he employs them in this instance is intensely noticeable. As Roseberry points out, in the case of *Lucretia*, the same minor
thirds seem to form the leitmotif associated with the character of Lucretia and is used there in a similarly obsessive way.33 Roseberry, however, is highly skeptical as to whether Britten’s use of the motive carries any special significance beyond his normal compositional vocabulary. It is impossible to prove whether Britten intentionally embedded Shostakovich’s motive into these earlier pieces. What this evidence does demonstrate, however, is that there was a certain degree of influence that Shostakovich’s music, and their personal relationship, had on the composer over the course of his life.

CHAPTER 3

THE *FIVE FLOWER SONGS*

Introduction

Given the large amount of evidence that demonstrates the degree to which Britten’s personal interactions influenced his compositional life, choosing to analyze his music by examining these relationships reveals new perspectives and a wealth of previously undiscovered information. This is especially the case in Op. 47, *Five Flower Songs*, a work that has largely gone unanalyzed. Going back to Britten’s earlier quotation where he states that in order to make sense of his works you should examine its notes, words, and directions closely and forget preconceived theories – it is in doing just that, forgetting preconceived notions, and analyzing the Flower Songs based on what is within them - that we are able to discover compositional details which reveal the degree of inspiration his personal relationships may have had on this composition and others. Furthermore, this method of analysis does not serve to attach a psychological meaning to Britten’s compositions, but instead serves as one of many possible techniques that allow us to better understand his work.

The *Five Flower Songs* are fittingly dedicated to a pair of botanists, “To Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst on the occasion of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary: 3rd April 1950.”34 The amount of correspondence between this family and Britten was relatively limited. On one occasion, the family donated a significant amount of money to help Britten stage Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*. A number of interesting realizations can be made, however, by considering to whom Britten dedicated this work and his propensity to include a high degree of intellectual concepts in his compositions.

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The first piece in the set, “To Daffodils,” is remarkable in the way that Britten approaches the poem by Robert Herrick. His setting in this case is vastly different from most of...
his other a cappella choral works. The text is difficult to understand from the listener’s perspective, a rarity in Britten’s choral music, because the alto and tenor parts sing precisely the same text as the bass and soprano only rhythmically displaced. The effect obscures the text in a way that diminishes the clarity of the poem. Additionally, the character of the poem, which compares the dying of the flower to the fleeting aspects of human life, is overshadowed by the heavy and near exclusive use of major tonalities. Questions are also raised by the extraordinarily consistent use of parallel motion and melodic inversion between the voices (See Figure 3). These characteristics are noteworthy enough to warrant more research regarding why Britten chose to utilize them.

The scientific name for the daffodil is Narcissus; the character in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (a book that Britten was familiar with) who tragically falls in love with his own reflection at the side of a pond and, after realizing his love could not be acted upon, dies there and is transformed into a daffodil. If a line representing the surface of the pond is drawn in between the alto and tenor parts running parallel to the text (see Figure 4) it creates a relatively mirrored image, first between the soprano and bass voices and then between the alto and tenor. Although the reflection is not perfect, it seems as if this was written to suggest the character of Narcissus. Another aspect of Narcissus’ story from Metamorphoses is represented through the echo effect mentioned above. Prior to falling in love with his own reflection, Narcissus encounters a nymph in the woods who is stricken with love for him. This nymph’s name was Echo and she was cursed to repeat only what others had said before her. This story perfectly explains Britten’s abnormally high amount of textual displacement that is so uncharacteristic of the majority of his choral music. He is depicting Echo’s role in the story. The echo lasts through nearly the entirety of the
piece, with the bass part continuing to repeat short thematic and textual motives even in the slightly different B section (See Figure 5).

Figure 4. Page 1 of “To Daffodils” demonstrating the scientific references to the daffodil in the score.36

36 Ibid., 1.
Britten makes one final link to the character of Narcissus through his careful selection of tempo and expressive markings at the beginning of the movement. The instruction, *allegro impetuoso*, is a direct reference to rash and impassioned nature Narcissus, who instantly desires himself upon seeing his own visage.

Figure 5. B section of “To Daffodils” demonstrating the echo in the bass part.  

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37 Ibid., 6.
It is possible that this is coincidental. However, the opus was written for a pair of botanists who would have known, without any need for reference, the scientific name of the daffodil. Secondly, Britten composed another work, *Six Metamorphoses After Ovid*, Op. 49 (that bears a dedication to oboist Joy Boughton), which includes a movement titled “Narcissus”, at approximately the same time as he was working on the *Five Flower Songs*. In this movement it is easy to spot the same type of reflective writing present in “To Daffodils”. Britten also includes references to the unique physical characteristics of the flower, which lends further proof that these traits are more than coincidental. The number three has a special significance to the daffodil. All species of daffodil have six floral leaves that make up the perianth of the plant. These are divided into three petals and three sepals based on whether they are the inner or outer leaves. Looking again at the opening of the piece (Figure 4) this physical characteristic of the daffodil is clearly suggested in Britten’s music. Each voice part is given the triplet figure on the word “daffodil” which, when it is combined with the idea of reflection, creates the requisite three outer sepals and three inner petals on both sides of the reflection.

“The Evening Primrose”

Other remarkable references to the physical traits of flowers can be found in the fourth part-song of the opus, “The Evening Primrose”. The number four figures prominently in the discussion of the primrose itself and this movement, where it appears in a variety of curious ways. Two distinguishing physical characters of the primrose are its “X” shaped stigma, one of the plant’s reproductive parts, which is composed of four small branches, and its four petals. Although number symbolism in Britten’s music is rarely spoken of, the number four makes a multitude of appearances in this movement. The most obvious possible reference to this number is that “The Evening Primrose” is the fourth movement of the opus. Additionally, there are four
double sharps in the piece. The symbol for the double sharp has remarkable importance in this instance, as it is precisely the same shape as the stigma of the plant. The first double sharp used by Britten in the movement is on the word “primrose”, and in order to conjure his fourth desired double sharp Britten spells the chord at measure 14 two different ways: enharmonically in the voice parts but not in the piano reduction (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. Selected measures demonstrating Britten’s use of double sharps in “The Evening Primrose” 38

One last reference to the number four occurs in the imitative material present throughout the piece. Each entrance spells a 7th chord with either a four note pattern up or a four note pattern down (See Figure 7). Coincidentally, if the two halves of the pattern are superimposed onto one another it would form an “X” shape. The idea of the “X” shape is highlighted further by the curious and seemingly ornamental voice crossing at measure 18 (See Figure 8).

38 Copyright 1951 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.
Britten makes one last potential reference to the flower. The daily cycle of the Evening Primrose’s blooming is potentially highlighted through his use of key structure. The piece opens in B major with the text depicting the setting of the sun and the opening of the flower. The final lines of the text describe the flower’s withering as the light of dawn hits it. Britten chooses to end the piece with an open fifth on F# and C#, or dominant of the opening key of B major. If one interprets the final chord as an incomplete half cadence of B major it is easy to imagine the piece, and the cycle of the Primrose, beginning again at the next evening’s sunset.

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39 Ibid., 7.
40 Ibid, 5.
“The Ballad of the Green Broom”

Of the three remaining movements there is only one further reference to the physical characteristics of flowers. “The Ballad of the Green Broom” is a setting of an anonymous country ballad that has survived in a variety of forms in different collections of ballads throughout England. Britten’s setting of the folk tune predominantly features the melody against an ostinato-like rhythmic accompaniment in the choral parts which some scholars have likened to the strumming of a guitar. A unique quality of the species of Green Broom that grows in England and Western Europe is that it bursts to disperse its pollen creating a soft, yet audible, pop. In this movement Britten found yet another way to demonstrate the physical characteristics of the flower through the use of this accompaniment that “pops” along to the melody mimicking the sound of the plant as its pods burst. Britten, much the same as in “To Daffodils”, also includes instructions at the beginning of the work that hint at the flower’s outstanding physical feature. Comminciando hesitando, or “begin hesitating”, might be an instruction to further help simulate the random popping of the green broom (See Figure 9). Britten’s repetitive setting of the text “cutting broom”, with its explosive consonants, adds further credence to this thought (See Figure 10).
Figure 9. Page 1 “The Ballad of the Green Broom” demonstrating Britten’s depiction of Broom bursting.41

41 Copyright 1951 by Boosey & Co. Ltd. Reprinted by permission.
Figure 10. Page 9 of “The Ballad of the Green Broom”. Britten repeats the text to further the mimicry of the sound of Broom.42

42 Ibid., 9.
“Marsh Flowers” and “The Succession of the Four Sweet Months”

“Marsh Flowers” and “The Succession of the Four Sweet Months” have been examined in an identical method to the other movements, but due to their own unique circumstances they yielded different results than those described earlier. The text to “Marsh Flowers” mentions a wide variety of different flowers by name, too many perhaps for Britten to choose a single flower around which to build the piece. Although his setting of the poem is remarkable in this way it does not possess the same type of extra-musical references to the scientific characteristics of the flowers as shown in earlier examples. Instead of referencing a flower’s scientific name or physical traits, he decides on a menagerie, representing each of the various flowers briefly through text-painting or other compositional devices. Larry Corse writes,

The melodic line in measure 1, with its accents and syncopations, is suggestive of the “strong mallow.” The henbane’s “faded green” is described by a four-note melisma covering the interval of a minor third. The salt lavender’s “rigid bloom” comes forth in the music in a rigid pattern of dotted eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes. This flower’s lack of perfume is aptly shown by a dissonance (C sharp against D sharp) moving to a unison on D, and then fading away to a pianissimo. The “spring” of the nettle is set on an octave leap upward in all voices, and the setting for the nettles “fierce poison” is the complex contrapuntal section… A double canon creates the “fenney bed” of the fern. The “rolling” motion of the seaweed is depicted by rolling triplets in all voices.”

43Corse, The A Cappella Choral Music of Benjamin Britten, 77-78.

The text comes from the same large poem that formed the libretto of Peter Grimes, George Crabbe’s The Borough. A comparison of the material in “Marsh Flowers” to that of Peter Grimes might yield some interesting results.

“The Succession of the Four Sweet Months” is different from the other pieces in the set. The poem is by Robert Herrick, one of Britten’s favorite poets based on the number of times he set Herrick’s words to music. What makes the poem different from the others in the set is that within it there is not a single mention of a specific flower. The piece is a type of fughetta,
although not a very strict one. Each voice part is confined to its own unique two lines of text that describe a particular month: the soprano, April; the alto, May; the tenor, June; and the bass, July.

In the exposition of the fughetta Britten allows each new entry to carry the piece gently into another tonal area with the other parts providing not a counter-subject, but episodic material, as harmonic support. At measure 21, Britten takes the piece back to G major by introducing the theme in stretto with the same order of entry he presented at the beginning of the piece. He ends the piece by closing with a small, but beautiful, coda in G major. Again, the voices enter in order aptly expressing the succession in the title of the poem.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Benjamin Britten’s interpersonal relationships had a significant impact on his life and musical output. By examining the relationships between Britten, the variety of people who interacted with him, and the music that was inspired by their presence in his life it is possible to arrive at a method of analysis that provides a more complete picture of the composer and his works. The biographical and musical examples shown demonstrate that two primary aspects of his motivation for writing were his inspiration by those close to him coupled with his desire to create music that was simultaneously interesting and useful. Current trends in analysis have provided many insights into Britten’s creative and personal life, but most of these analyses can only be applied to the larger texted works, leaving many instrumental pieces and works such as the *Five Flower Songs* without a necessary framework of interpretation. More importantly, by applying an analysis that is rooted in the understanding of how his relationships affected his compositions we can come to a greater understanding of why Britten was inspired to compose.

An analysis that synthesizes the deep connection between Britten’s artistry and intellect with the sources of his motivation provides for a richer and more thorough understanding of his music. For performers and scholars understanding, for example, that the superb artistry of Rostropovich was what inspired most of his great cello works becomes a critical point. It would only then make sense to study Rostropovich’s playing to gain a greater sense of Britten’s intent. Likewise, knowing that Britten dedicated *The Five Flower Songs* to friends that were botanists by profession encourages one to analyze the music in a different way. This method of analysis can be used to understand a larger spectrum of Britten’s works and on a much more consistent basis than psychological concepts such as his homosexuality or pacifism. In the case of the *Five
*Flower Songs* it yielded significant results and should encourage those who interact with Britten’s music to strongly consider this perspective as a resource for understanding his life and music.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


