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Music and Psychology

Interactions between music and text in Peter Grimes

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Lokaritgerð til B.Mus prófs

Tónlistardeild

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Abstract

Benjamin Britten was a British composer who composed a large number of operas in Post-war England. *Peter Grimes* was his big breakthrough, achieving potency through its intensive focus on the relation between text and music. This essay seeks to clarify some of the methods used by Britten in composing *Peter Grimes*. I have examined literature analysing Britten's compositional practice, and thereafter analysed sections from every act of *Peter Grimes* myself, both by listening and looking at scores. I analysed the scenes from a music theoretical perspective, focusing on rhythm, harmony, melodic motifs, expressive markings, structures and how they relate to the text. I divided my findings into four categories; Tone Painting, Contrast, Psychological Counterpoint and Structural Correspondence. Tone Painting is a sympathetic relation between the music and the text. Contrast is an antithetical relation between the music and the text. Psychological Counterpoint is the portrayal of several distinct psychological perspectives in the music simultaneously. Structural Correspondence is when a musical element with symbolic significance is repurposed without altering its significance.

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Introduction

When the discussion arises about which opera is the most fit for introducing a newcomer to the world of opera, *Peter Grimes* is rarely, if ever, mentioned. There's a wealth of operas to choose from that come closer to capturing the essence of the operatic medium, or its stereotypes if you will. But as far removed from the zenith of opera's cultural ubiquity as we currently find ourselves, are the convoluted dramedies of Mozart or the vocal theatrics of the bel canto era really the most viable entry points into the art form?

Since this piece was performed to great success in Bergen's Grieg Hall in 2017, I've been convinced that if ever asked the question myself, I would offer *Peter Grimes* as my entry point of choice. Where most operas struggle to lose the public's perception of the genre as an elitist artform, this particular opera seems to invite newcomers into its folds. The humble harbour town on the coast of England feels awfully real, and so do its characters. Where the stylized and fabricated excess of earlier operas sometimes creates a certain distance between scene and audience, *Peter Grimes* gets rid of the archetypal characters and rather forces you to form an empathetic relation with a lead character who might not be deserving of it.

And how do you get the public to sympathize with a coarse, cruel, weather-beaten fisherman? The answer lies -as it almost always does when dealing with narrative music- in the relation between music and text. Evolving from the mythical parables of the baroque prototypes, opera has gone through many phases, all with different approaches to the textual contents of its pieces. After reaching a logical end point with the Freudian case-examination of Berg's *Wozzeck*, the journey from mythical fantasy to modern realism was realized. *Peter Grimes* approaches realism in opera from a different vantage point than *Wozzeck*. Instead of being based on true events like Berg's masterwork, the opera aspires to *feel* like it could have been.

Everything is tailored for maximum realism in *Peter Grimes*. The costumes and the stage design from the original performance were based on local fishing villages from the English east coast. The libretto was extracted from and inspired by a poem collection about the peculiarities of the English borough. Most importantly, the characters feel real on account of their multifaceted and complicated nature. Their psychologies as individuals and groups

are explored heavily throughout the verbal and musical contents of the opera, becoming the seed from which the drama unfolds.

But if psychology is the factor that keeps *Peter Grimes* rooted in a reality we can all recognize, how does Britten achieve it? Through this thesis I seek to discover the various methods Britten used to write psychology into the bedrock of this opera. Through analysis of key points in the narrative, I intend to see how the framework of western music theory can disclose his strategies in setting text to music. Be it through harmony, rhythm, use of motifs or grander forms, Britten bends a familiar musical language to describe the inner nature, intention and temperaments of his characters.

My findings will be organized under four separate categories that each will describe various compositional choices made to support an overarching purpose. The purpose can be to strengthen the sentiment of a text through musical affirmation, or to complicate it through a musical treatment that seemingly opposes the sentiment. The purpose can be to support multiple trains of thought at once, to paint a difficult situation in a suitable layer of ambiguity. As analysis of emotional content will always be subject to personal variance in interpretation, the findings of this thesis can never assume the form of objective truth. But I believe that through revealing some of the machinations that make up the inner structure of

Introduction to the Methods of Britten

Britten's frameworks for describing psychology through music can be gathered under four terms: Word painting, contrast, psychological counterpoint and structural correspondence. Word painting is used to affirm the sentiments of the text through affirmation. In this case the musical structures mirror the sentiments of the text. Contrast is used to challenge or alter the sentiments of the text. In this case the musical structures opposes or differs from the sentiments of the text. Psychological counterpoint is used to describe several simultaneous, sometimes differing sentiments. In this case, differing processes and elements in the musical structure can hint at multiple possible interpretations of the text. Structural correspondence

is used to transport and reframe sentiments of the text. Taking sentiments out of their original context and inserting them into a different set of references can reveal different meanings or connect separate parts of the text thematically.

Tone Painting

The simplest to explain of the four basic means of connecting music and lyrics might be called tone painting. Tone painting is when the music enhances the sentiment presented in the text by various means. Sometimes the sentiment is clearly stated in the text, like in a declaration of love or hatred. Other times the composer needs to clarify or create the emotional context of a statement. The phrase “Go there” can be interpreted as an angry command, a passive instruction, or something else entirely. Tonality, harmony, motifs and expressive marking are all tools wielded by composers that wish to strengthen the message, or enhance the mood of their chosen text.

To get a more precise understanding of the practice of tone painting, it can be helpful to separate it into three subcategories: depiction, harmonization and underlining. The first category describes a mode of tone painting that deliberately try to mimick a recognisable gesture or sound, like laughter, birdcalls or thunder. The second category describes the practice of using harmonies and tonalities to paint details of the interior or exterior world. A major chord could signify joy, a minor chord could signify sadness, and an augmented 5th could signify mystery. This also includes more extensive treatments like giving items, events or characters their own tonal characteristics. The last category describes treatments not instantly recognizable as imitative depictions or harmonically derived characterisations, but which still belongs under the umbrella of tone painting. Tempo as well as dynamic and expressive markings are frequently used to reveal or strengthen emotional states, like a furious **ff**, a depressed *pesante* or an urgent *vivace*.

The dramatic medium of opera lends itself especially well to colourful and expressive compositional choices, and *Peter Grimes* displays a wide variety of the communicative possibilities of the art form. Act II scene II opens with a big passacaglia I will later argue represents the escalating rage and frustration of Peter Grimes as he mulls over his recent conflict. This orchestral build up achieves its release when Grimes makes his entrance with

an aggressive command: “Go there!” Beginning in the upper reaches of the tenor voice and descending to the bottom, the phrase is an enormous single-syllable melisma spanning almost two octaves. By letting the phrase explode out of the preceding orchestral build-up, Britten uses his music to underline the irrepressible anger of Grimes.

A few bars later, the mood switches from anger to inward contemplation in an instant. As Peter is handing the working clothes to his apprentice, he comes across the jersey knitted by his prospective lover Ellen: “There’s the jersey that she knitted, with the anchor that she patterned.” The formerly irritated woodwind staccatos are replaced with a harmonically static drone in the strings. The lower strings and harp rests on a placid chord made from stacked fourths, creating a calm and directionless harmonic environment. Meanwhile, the upper strings go on an imitative journey. The lines imitated by the upper strings are shaped like waves slowly sequencing downwards, offering up a sonic equivalent to sinking into a daydream. These phrases are adopted by Grimes during his reminiscing, tying his words to the daydream. As Grimes remembers his recent conflict with Ellen, the jersey changes from an object of affection to a token of failure, and he once again flares up. A dramatic upwards sweep in the high strings and woodwinds depicts Peter snapping out of his dreaming: “I’ll tear the collar off your neck!”

The following orchestral fragment is as potent a description of Peter’s mental landscape as any outright verbal statement. From the dark surroundings of his hut where he and his apprentice’s troubled circumstances are expressed through doleful brass swells, Peter emerges to find the sea boiling with activity. The bright string tremolo that accompanies this observation paints a hopeful excitement almost never experienced by Peter elsewhere in the opera. It is clear from this brief segment that the fisherman considers his profession the only way out of his struggles: “Look! Now’s our chance! The whole sea’s boiling! Get the nets!” In this sequence, the tone painting is harmonic and descriptive in nature. The string tremolo is played on a D Major 7th chord, creating a hopeful yet mirage-like atmosphere. By its rapid, bustling movement, it can also depict the fishes’ activity under the bubbling surface of the sea.

Later in the scene Peter falls even further into his daydreams than previously. In the aria “In dreams I’ve built myself some kindlier home” he dreams about an imagined future with Ellen. Britten uses harmony first and foremost to paint the emotional states of Peter throughout the aria. The introduction is stark and tonally ambiguous, featuring just the strings as accompaniment. As Peter sings the word “home”, the strings land on an incomplete

C major triad, suggesting a tonality without committing. Further instabilities pop up in the next bar as Peter sings “Warm in my heart and in a golden calm.” While the strings play a D major, Grimes’ phrase clashes with the chord by way of his F natural. The impression is that Grimes is struggling to let himself sink into the daydream, well aware that they might be impossible to realize. In this scene, reluctance is mainly communicated through harmonic relations.

Tonal ambiguities in the prologue to Peter’s Aria. P. 275, second and third system.¹

60] *Lento tranquillo* (♩ ≈ approx. 48)
pp con espansione
 In dreams I've built my - self some kind - lier home Warm in my
ppp
mf espressivo

heart and in a gol - den calm..... Where there'll be no more fear and no more
pp *p cresc.*
pp *cresc.*

The aria proper shows Grimes’ gradual descent into the bliss of his imagined future. The bright sound of the A Lydian tonality supports him through the first verse, his musings accompanied by spare woodwinds and a tonic pedal in the cellos. The effect is floaty and meditative, but grounded enough by the clear tonality as to not drift away, as accurate a description of domestic bliss as any. The ensemble grows from verse to verse as Peter falls deeper into revelry, the steady eighth notes of his phrases turning to sixteenths, and then sixteenth-quintuplets. Muted harmonics in the strings as well as the high and bright tessitura of the ensemble contributes to the dreamy character as Grimes’ singing turns gradually more florid and expressive.

¹ All notational examples are taken from Stein, Erwin. (1945) *Peter Grimes: Vocal Score*. Aldwych, London. Boosey & Hawkes.

A sudden *accelerando* return of the introduction's tonal uncertainty signifies the return of doubt to the mind of Peter. "But dreaming builds what dreaming can disown", he sings as the strings and woodwinds return to the incomplete C major triad of the introduction. As Peter starts to voice his doubts, a string figure appears in the basses, characterised by the upwards jump of a sixth followed with a downward scalar motion. This figure moves from the basses through the string ensemble to the first violins in a wave-like motion. These "waves" grow bigger with each iteration, before swelling into a heavily altered chord on the word "alone". The "waves" are tied to Peter's doubts, growing steadily before becoming unmanageable.

Waves of doubt in the strings. P. 278, first and second system.

The image shows a musical score for Peter's aria on page 278, consisting of two systems. Each system includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The first system is marked *con forza* and the second system is marked *sempre f*. The lyrics are: "..... there is no stone In earth's thick - ness..... to make a home, That you can build with..... and re - main a - lone." The piano accompaniment features a prominent string figure in the basses, characterized by an upward jump of a sixth followed by a downward scalar motion, which moves through the string ensemble to the first violins in a wave-like motion.

As the final wave breaks, Peter loses his grip on reality. As he starts to talk about seeing his dead apprentice appear as a ghost, the accompaniment from his dreamy aria reappears in the woodwinds and brass. The once tonal music has now turned crooked and sinister, dissonant lines with conflicting tonalities buttressing a piercing piccolo line. This is the first moment of the opera where Grimes' sanity seems compromised, and Britten strengthens this impression with the haunted ghostliness of the woodwind arrangement.

As can be gleaned from the last paragraph, one of the major strategies Britten utilizes to paint the inner lives of his characters is the repurposing of musical material. One of the reasons why this approach might be preferential to writing a new and specialized slice of

music for every single scene is the ready-made set of references it unlocks. When you repurpose a piece of music, the circumstances of its original iteration are made available through the memory of the listener. Instead of painstakingly introducing every element needed for the scene to be successfully communicated, you can bring back a piece of music to communicate it for you. When Britten brings back the dream-music for Grimes' nightmarish vision, it tells us that the ghostly apparition is just as much a figment of Peter's imagination as the daydream. But it can also mean that these two figments are related in some less obvious way, an assumption I will explore in the chapter on psychological counterpoint.

Examples of Tone Painting

Page number and system	Musical effect	Psychological outcome
p. 270, 1st and 2nd system	Dramatic tone painting. Ff phrase from top to bottom of soloist register, highly melismatic.	Anger, exasperation
p. 271, 1st and 2nd system	Harmonic tone painting. Static chord with placid movement.	Calm, introspection
p. 271, 3rd and 4th system	Dramatic/ depicting tone painting. Crescendoing "tear" upwards in the woodwinds.	Anger, fury
p. 272, 3rd and 4th system	Harmonic/ depicting tone painting. Bright major 7th tremolo chord in strings	Hope, excitement
p. 275, 2nd and 3rd system	Harmonic tone painting. Ambiguous tonal relations	Uncertainty, reluctance

	between soloist and ensemble, incomplete chords.	
pp. 275-277	Harmonic/ dramatic tone painting. Lydian tonality, bright instrumentation, drifting textures	Happiness, bliss
pp. 277-278	Harmonic/ dramatic tone painting. Wave-like swells in strings, altered chords	Doubt
pp. 278-279	Harmonic/ dramatic tone painting. Chromatic corruption of formerly tonal material, needling textures in high woodwinds.	Terror

Contrast

The term contrast as it pertains to the analysis of musico-textual relations could be filed as a subcategory under tone painting. Where tone painting is used to strengthen the message of a text by music, contrast is used to oppose or complicate the message by letting the music communicate something different than the sentiment of the text. For example, a text portraying a lovely day on the meadows could be accompanied by a stormy and dissonant ensemble. Contrast can also mean the opposition of two different musical characteristics to clarify a relation. If you want to show the personal differences between two characters in an opera, you could do it by giving them contrasting musical accompaniments, harmonic foundations or rhythmic profiles.

In *Peter Grimes*, Britten uses custom-tailored music not only to differentiate between characters, but also intentions. Throughout the opera he builds a set of musical characteristics around each character, making them easier to recognize the further into the opera you get. These characteristics go beyond the choice of voice type and the contents of their performed lines, into the realm of musical theory by way of phrases, rhythm and harmony. The familiarity of the musical language of the different characters makes it easier for Britten to effectively communicate conflicts of interest, since he needs only put two characters in the same rooms to make visible the friction between them.

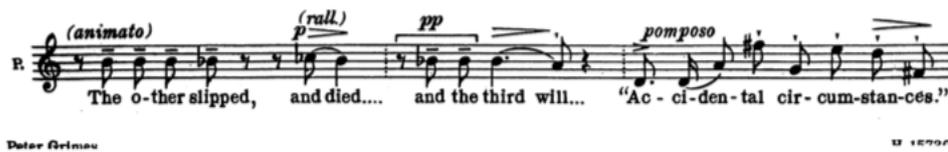
In the first act, we witness Balstrode trying to get Grimes to move his business away from the town that despises him. Already through the first two sentences they speak to one another, the difference of temperament between them is revealed. Balstrode's first question to Grimes is a light-hearted one: "And do you prefer the storm to Auntie's parlour and the rum?" His phrase is full of movement, moving around the register in a syncopated fashion. His markings are *marcato* and *leggiere*, making the question assertive and precise, but also jesting and playful. His accompaniment affirms this light-heartedness, consisting only of some *pizzicato* string chords and clarinet accents. Grimes remains unmoved by Balstrode's jesting tone, answering in a *sostenuto* monotone: "I live alone. The habit grows." This answer is all sung on the note D, revealing an unsociable and stoic Grimes. The orchestra reveals the turbulence stirring below his unmoving surface, the strings reprising textures from the storm of the previous scene. The contrast between the temperaments of the characters is striking; Balstrode upbeat and sociable, Grimes stoic and unsociable.

Throughout this scene Balstrode switches between subtlety and bluntness to get Grimes to find business elsewhere. Britten clarifies the contrast between these two approaches by treating similar musical material in contrasting ways. Balstrode's first move is a simple suggestion: "Why not try the wider sea, with merchantman or privateer?" This question is performed in an innocent and playful *piano* accompanied by string *pizzicato* on the upbeats, making it almost dance-like. When he lets his temper get the best of him, the music changes: "You'd slip these moorings if you had the mind... You'll find no comfort there!" These lines are performed *forte*, leaving the casual friendliness behind in favour of confrontational bluntness. The contrast is heightened by the crass dissonances in the woodwinds accompanying the second line. These dissonances are call-backs to the previous storm scene, revealing that it's not only Grimes that has a temper brewing underneath his seemingly calm veneer. These two examples show the malleability of Britten's treatment of musical material, able to describe both fundamental characteristics, changes in temperament, as well as intentions.

Another scene that has to be explored with regards to its use of contrasts is the "Mad scene" at the end of the last act. In this scene, the death of his second apprentice has reduced Grimes to an incoherent madman, unable to uphold his train of thought. One of the main ways in which Britten communicates this schizophrenic incoherence is through his use of contrast, changing the music at the pace of Grimes mental wanderings. What is special about this scene is its narrative preciseness despite the sparseness of the orchestration, with just an off-stage choir and a distant foghorn providing backdrop.

The scene starts with Grimes wandering deliriously around the beachfront, musing about the loss of his apprentice. His first two phrases are characterized by a gradual chromatic descent, showing us a Grimes broken beyond repair. The first contrast appears when Grimes considers what would happen if he were to ever get a third apprentice: "The first one died, just died. The other slipped and died. And the third will... Accidental circumstances!" This line is a quotation of lawyer Swallow's verdict from the prologue, and the phrase that accompanies it is likewise lifted from the lawyer's music. This abrupt conjuring of a moment from earlier in the opera tells us that Grimes is calling upon memories to try to make sense of the situation.

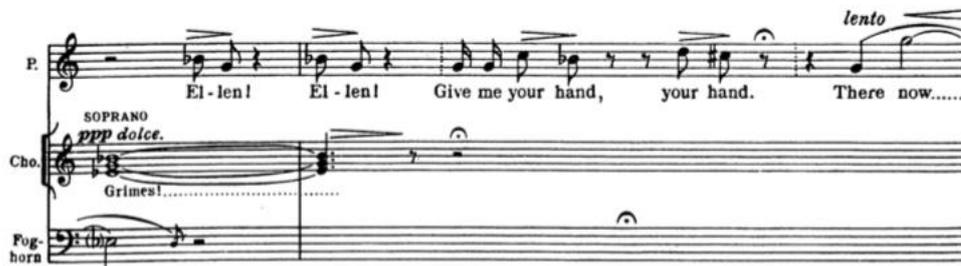
Peter quotes Lawyer Swallow. P. 363, fifth system.



After returning to his descending phrases, Grimes swiftly changes his tone again, this time prompted by outside influences. As the borough calls out his name in search for him, Grimes absorbs their music and their lines to challenge them, turning the focus outwards instead of inwards. The D, Eb, F# from the choir's search party on the words "Peter Grimes" is quoted instantly by Grimes, who then turns their own material against them: "Now is gossip put on trial, bring the branding iron and knife for what's done now is done for life. Come on! Land me!" Though the challenge at first feels like a defiant gesture, it quickly becomes clear that Grimes is aware of the inevitability of his capture. His challenge to the townspeople is again interrupted by a musical quotation, this time from his introspective aria "The Great Bear": "Turn the skies back and begin again". The contrast between the challenge and the wish to erase the past reveals the battle between cold realism and unrealistic hope being fought in Grimes' head.

Up until this point, the conflicted state of Grimes' mind has been communicated musically through changes of tempo and dynamics primarily. But in the monologue's sole moment of peace, the change is communicated through harmony. Up until this point, the relation between the choir harmonies and Peter's phrases has been tenuous at best. But when Peter envisions Ellen, they suddenly join in a fleeting moment of consonance. Over an Eb Major in the female voices, Grimes sings to Ellen in an unambiguous Eb tonality. The peace conveyed by this moment is a stark contrast to the surrounding scene, strengthened by the **ppp** in the female voices and the *dolcissimo* mark. True to the nature of the scene, the stability of this moment doesn't last long. Grimes' transition into a despairing *forte* is swift, and soon enough he goes back to clashing with the choir's Eb Major chord through his phrases in Eb Minor.

Harmonic unity between Grimes and the off-stage chorus, Eb Major. P. 365, third system.



Peter Grimes shows how contrast can be applied effectively to every scale of orchestration, from full orchestral engagement to the spartan choir/ foghorn/ soloist configuration of the “Mad Scene”. The orchestral forces allow more grand-scale use of contrast, through a bigger spectrum of dynamic levels as well as textural possibilities. The “Mad Scene” shows that smaller forces usually open up a possibility to be subtler and more precise about it. But as witnessed by Grimes’ sudden swerve from peaceful **ppp** to despairing **ff** from one barline to the other, the smallest ensemble can still be the home of the biggest gestures.

Examples of Contrast

Page number and system	Musical effect	Psychological outcome
p. 87, 2nd and 3rd system	Contrast between Balstrode’s swift phrases and Peter’s monotone responses.	Clarified differences in mental temperament between the two characters
pp. 89-90	Contrast between Balstrode’s mild and lighthearted melodies with his latter forceful variant of the same musical material.	Mounting frustration and anger in Balstrode
p. 363, 5th system	Contrast between <i>Lento</i> phrasing and <i>pomposo</i> quotation in solo voice	Grimes’ fractured psyche, incoherent thought process

p. 364, 5th system	Contrast between ff phrases and <i>dolce</i> quotation from “Now the Great Bear” aria	Grimes’ fractured psyche, incoherent thought process
p. 365, 3rd system	Contrast between unharmonious relation between soloist and chorus and harmonious relation between soloist and chorus	Calm, fondness

Psychological Counterpoint

The term psychological counterpoint is a repurposing of a concept originating in renaissance and baroque compositional practices. Traditional counterpoint is “the combination of two or more independent melodies into a single harmonic texture in which each retains its linear character”, as per the Merriam-Webster dictionary². In its psycho-musical analytical version, it will mean the coexistence of different emotional threads inferable from the musical setting of a text. Initially this term might seem a bit superfluous, since emotions are rarely experienced in an isolated state. Statements can rarely be reduced to the expression of a single emotion, but are rather often a complex tangle of multiple emotions. In analysing a piece of narrative music like *Peter Grimes*, the term still has clear uses. When setting text to music, the composer has the power to focus on the emotional aspects of the piece he finds most interesting and suitable to his vision. In Britten’s *Peter Grimes* there are multiple instances where the coexistence of different emotional threads is clearly communicated. Paradoxically, this is often achieved through the ambiguousness of the music.

When Peter is asked by Balstrode what keeps him from leaving the hostile boroughs, he answers by listing up some characteristics of the landscape and its inhabitants. The music supporting Grimes’ statements shows a tender and conflicted relation between him and the town he grew up in. His phrases all end with a variant of the musical “sigh”, and are sung *espressivo*. It comes across as both a passionate ode to the qualities of the place, and a lamentation for the struggles he has found while living there. The orchestra largely matches this conflicted atmosphere, tender *pianissimo legato* lines in the cellos and solo “sighs” in obo and violin offset by a tonality bristling with chromaticism. The *pesante* trudges in the basses and timpani also paints a picture of tiresome toil in an unforgiving marshland, completing the picture of a treasured but harsh environment.

² *The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “Counterpoint (n.),”

“sighs” and chromaticism in Peter’s ode to his borough. P. 88, fourth system.

38 PETER *espr.*
By fami-liar fields, Marsh and sand, or-di-na-ry

Ve. Solo Vln. Ob.
pp legatissimo *pp dolce*

Peter Grimes H 15720

A previously visited segment of the opera also features psychological counterpoint through the prism of ambiguity. The introduction before the Peter’s aria proper in the third act finds him struggling to settle into his daydreams. The text “In dreams I’ve built myself some kindlier home” is sung on a phrase that seems hopeful, being sung in a clear C Major tonality. But the accompanying strings refuse to adhere to that tonality, starting off with the notes G# and B, suggesting the tonality of G# Minor instead. This two-directional strain continues into the next phrase where Grimes keeps his C Major tonality, while the strings struggle to adhere, throwing both a D Major and an E Major at him. This segment clearly shows a simultaneous duality to Peter’s mentality, a wish to settle into his comforting daydreams as well as a wary admittance that the dreams might be unrealistic and impossible to achieve.

I shall turn for a moment to the act III aria of Ellen Orford, “Embroidery in Childhood”, since it also is a clear example of the existence of multiple psychological threads in a single piece of music. Ellen sings this aria when she sees the jersey she knitted to Peter’s apprentice washed up on the shore, giving her the suspicion that the boy might have drowned at sea. What follows is an aria where Ellen considers her newly complicated relation to this piece of embroidery.

The duality present in this aria is largely communicated through harmonic shifts, and can be considered an example of both psychological counterpoint and contrast. Rooted in a firm B Minor tonality, the mood of the piece is bittersweet. Ellen’s phrases are languid, jumping large intervals and relaxing into long melismas on choice words like “luxury”, evoking the escape embroidering afforded her as a child. The time signature switches between 5/8 and 6/8, which along with the harp and high strings make for a fleeting and hazy soundscape. The minor tonality is what gives this section its undertone of melancholy, produced by the discovery of the jersey at sea. The contrast appears about a minute into the aria when all of

the strings drop out, exchanged with big, muffled **ppp** chords in the wind instruments. This is the moment where Ellen realizes what formerly gave her escape from reality now reveals the horrible reality of the situation she now finds herself in: “Now my broidery affords the clue whose meaning we avoid.” The transformation of her relation to the embroidery is dramatized by the distance travelled by the wind chords, all first and second degree mediant. Even though the complicated relation Ellen has to her embroidery is communicated clearly with this use of contrast, it is also hinted at through psychological counterpoint in the nostalgic 5/8 reverie of the main body.

The dialogue between Balstrode and Ellen immediately following her aria is also a good example of the communication of conflicted emotions available through psychological counterpoint. After the realisation that Peter might have accidentally killed another apprentice, the music accompanying their dialogue is quite bleak. They find out that the best thing they can do for him is to be there with him as it all unfolds, and this realization is met with a startling example of psychological counterpoint. A sustained B Major chord in the horns is a comforting presence after all of the preceding dissonance and chromaticism. Over this chord, the pair reassures themselves of the correctness of their choice to support their friend by repeating their phrases in an imitative fashion. A few of their notes clashes with the B Major chord, creating an uncertain atmosphere. A brief look at the theme they’re singing explains why. As I will explain in the next chapter, “The Prayer Theme” is a theme uttered first by Peter as an anguished expression of his plight, and is later used in inverted fashion by the borough as an accusation. This is the theme being sung by Ellen and Balstrode in this moment, in both original and inverted form. This to me separates the psychological terrain of this exchange into three layers: The original form shows that they’re sharing in Peter’s anguish over the hopelessness of the situation, the inverted form shows that they can’t help but sympathize with the accusations the borough is directing at him. Their effort expended in trying to help their friend shows that their compassion for their friend still remains, and in the context is conveyed through the major sonority undergirding this whole sequence.

The “Prayer Theme” in original form (Balstrode) and inverted form (Ellen). P. 325, third system.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Prayer Theme" in Adagio. It features three staves: a vocal line for Ellen, a vocal line for Balstrode, and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Adagio". The key signature has one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics for Ellen are "We shall be there with him, we shall be there with him, we". The lyrics for Balstrode are "We... shall be there...with him, We shall be there...with him, we". The piano accompaniment includes the instruction "4 Hrs. ppp dolciss." and a note "They slowly walk out together" at the bottom. The score includes dynamic markings such as "pp" and "dim.".

The flexibility afforded by the compositional practices of Britten’s time made these kinds of simultaneous meaning easier to achieve. Through the gradual dissolution of the strict tenets of western tonal composition, single gestures could be split up or accompanied by additional layers of meaning, creating a complex and detailed set of references not necessarily picked up by the listener, but revealed through analysis. During the early days of tone painting in the baroque era, common gestures like a downward step were eventually bound to one meaning, in this case lamentation. The strictness of the language made it difficult to conjure a single meaning through multiple different treatments, resulting in a library of symbolical gestures you could probably gather in a database. In Britten’s days, the wealth of harmonic, rhythmical and motivic material was basically limitless, widening the possibilities significantly. Add to that Britten’s proclivity for multiple simultaneous tonalities, and the communication becomes incredibly dense.

The splitting of psychological terrain into separate threads can be done almost indefinitely, as every single compositional element of a thematically laden piece like *Peter Grimes* can be given meaning through interpretation. This means that many of the results you may get from this sort of analysis might be subjective and speculative in nature. With that in mind, the examples I have included in trying to demonstrate the workings of this musico-textual tool are the ones I feel most easily can be proven to hold multiple interpretations.

Examples of Psychological Counterpoint

Page number and system	Musical effect	Psychological outcome
pp. 88-89	Combination of expressive musical “sighs” and chromaticism	Simultaneous expression of fondness and pain
p. 275, 2nd and 3rd system	Ambiguous tonal relations between soloist and ensemble, incomplete chords,	Simultaneous expression of hopefulness and reluctance
pp. 321-324	Hazy “dreamlike” textures, melismatic vocal phrases, minor tonality and tonal unrest.	Simultaneous expression of fond nostalgia and grief
p. 325, 3rd and 4th system	“Prayer Theme” in original and inverted form, major chord drone	Simultaneous expression of compassion and accusation

Structural Correspondence

One of the most ubiquitous characteristics of the operas of Britten is his use of the leitmotif. This form of musical symbolism where a theme or sonic element becomes tied to certain characters, places, emotions or actions are present in all of Britten's operas in some shape or form. The leitmotif can be introduced via a verbal exclamation, thereby acquiring the contents of the exclamation as reference for the rest of the opera. They can also remain ambiguous; a structural phenomenon open to interpretation. Sometimes an important vocal utterance becomes subject to later treatment by the orchestra, retaining its original meaning while simultaneously being part of some new development. This is what can be called structural correspondence, when a theme can travel across an orchestral landscape without changing its original connotation. The appliance structural correspondence can be explicit or untraceable to the listening audience. The recurring motifs can occur at a big dramatic moment, thereby enhancing the significance of the transpiring action. They can also be hidden deep in a complex musical structure, unbeknownst to anyone but the composer and the analyst. In this segment, a theme will keep popping up that's a clear example of structural correspondence; The "Prayer Theme."

The "Prayer Theme" p. 205, third system.

The image shows a musical score for the "Prayer Theme" from Britten's opera. It consists of three systems of music. The top system is a vocal line in G major, marked "largamente". The lyrics are "God have mer - cy u - pon me!". The middle system is the piano accompaniment, marked "p.". The bottom system is the trumpet accompaniment, marked "Trpts.". The music is in 4/4 time and features a prominent bassline in the piano and trumpet parts.

The opening of Act II scene II is preceded by a Passacaglia that shows Grimes' inner struggle and mental process through an example of structural correspondence. The passacaglia is a musical form from the Baroque era, featuring a repeated bassline over which a series of variations take place. The bassline at the root of Britten's passacaglia is a musical phrase first uttered by Grimes in a moment of despair during the first scene of the second

act. The phrase has come to be known as the “Prayer Theme”³ in analytical spheres because of its verbal content: “And God have mercy upon me!” The phrase has the span of an octave, beginning in the higher reaches of the tenor voice before gradually descending the span of an octave over a cadential motion in the orchestra. This closed cadence gives the theme an air of fateful resignation, as Grimes realizes the unattainability of his dreams. The fact that the foundation of the entire interlude in act II scene II is built upon this musical idea makes it a prime example of structural correspondence. The passacaglia can in this case be interpreted as a compulsive mulling of thoughts inside the mind of Peter. Since the “Prayer Theme” has come to signify an anguished acknowledgement of failure, the repeating bassline seem to be the sonic equivalent of Peter obsessing over his recent falling-out with Ellen. This is reinforced by the nature of the interlude. Beginning sparsely before gradually accruing volume and intensity before finally concluding with a big orchestral fortissimo, the interlude alludes to a gradually mounting anger.

This same scene later features a different approach to the same idea. In the first scene of act II, after Grimes’ first utterance of the “Prayer Theme”, the conspiratorial townsfolk pick up the theme and distort it until it becomes a vessel for their own message.

Turning Peter’s desperate cry against him, the borough folk exclaim a variety of threats and accusations set to his prayer, both in regular and inverted form. The inversion turns a formerly descending motion of resignation and desperation into an ascending motion full of energy and intent. The inverted theme retains its accusatory function when it returns towards the end of the second scene in act II. It appears in the woodwinds and the solo voice of Grimes as he accuses his apprentice of telling lies to the townspeople, angering and turning them against him.

An example less fundamentally important to the plot, but still a striking one, is the theme that appears towards the beginning of the third act. It is played by the off-stage barn-band during a conversation between two of the lesser characters; Ned Keene and Mrs. Sedley. While the band plays a tip-toeing waltz, the two characters discuss the theory that Grimes might have killed his new apprentice. In this instance the theme is detached from the event taking place on stage, rather being an accompaniment to the merriment taking place behind the curtain.

³ Rupprecht, Philip. (2001) *Britten’s Musical Language*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. Pp 48-50

This is not the case with its return towards the end of the opera. At the end of the act III scene I the borough has come to the conclusion that Grimes did indeed kill his new apprentice, this being conveyed through a particularly wrathful ensemble scene. Mostly consisting of new material in a fugato form, the climactic end of the scene features the waltz from the party scene blown up to enormous proportions. As the majority of the choir breaks out into malicious laughter over the waltz theme, the basses declare their intent to make Grimes "...pay for his crimes" in an ascending chromatic line that cuts against the rest of the ensemble. This dissonance between the threat of the basses and the laughter of the ensemble seems to be revealing something sinister about the intentions and psychology of the townsfolk. While the basses tie their manhunt to the unassailable foundation of law and justice, the waltzing laugh of the ensemble reveal that the hunt is really driven by their resentment towards Grimes. The borough seems to find pleasure in taking down Grimes, in finally being able to hunt him down without having to make up a false pretence. This is then also an example of psychological counterpoint. Despite their contrasting sentiments, the basses and the rest of the ensemble are still expressing themselves as one entity: the borough. That this compounded sentiment is expressed both on a textual and musical plane points to the effectiveness and malleability of the tools wielded by Britten in his quest for intertextual unity.

Examples of Structural Correspondence

Page number and system	Musical effect	Psychological outcome
pp. 259-269	Passacaglia using the “Prayer Theme” as bassline	Compulsive thoughts, mounting anger and despair
pp. 282-283	Inverted “Prayer theme” in solo voice	Accusation, blame
pp. 353-355	Dance theme in full ensemble, Largamente and ff	Expression of joyous vengefulness

Conclusion

There is no dearth of pre- or post-war composers working with extensive collections of references in their operatic works. But as is made apparent by analytical literature such as Rupprecht's *Britten's Musical Language* and this thesis itself, symbolism and gesture is present at every stratum of his compositions. If communication of textual or subliminal sentiments can be divided into the four categories outlined in this text, then Britten is a good representative of the art of musical narration across the whole field. In *Peter Grimes* alone, there are examples of every category, and a myriad of different approaches to each.

Where Tonal Painting and Contrasts have been used extensively throughout the operatic canon, the last two categories are present in Britten's music to a greater extent than in most other operatic composers' work. Psychological counterpoint is facilitated to a greater extent than earlier because of the looser and encompassing theoretical framework of the postwar composers, giving them a bigger set of tools to work with. Structural correspondence also has a bigger presence in Britten's music than in much of the classic literature, like Verdi, Donizetti or Mozart. Where most older composers did feature recurring motifs in their music, almost none construed entire movements based on repurposed material such as in the *Peter Grimes* passacaglia. Based on his holistic approach to operatic composition, one of the composers whose views on composition seems to line up to Britten's most conspicuously is Richard Wagner with his Gesamtkunstwerk.

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Discography

Jon Vickers (Peter), Heather Harper (Ellen), Jonathan Summers (Balstrode), Orchestra & Chorus of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden/Sir Colin Davis. Recorded at All Saints Church Tooting April 1978. {Amsterdam:} Philips, 1978.