Essays on Benjamin Britten from a Centenary Symposium

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Edited by

David Forrest, Quinn Patrick Ankrum,
Stacey Jocoy and Emily Ahrens Yates

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INTRODUCTION

DAVID FORREST

Trying to describe [Britten's] music is like trying to trap sunlight
in a string bag…*
—Bishop Leslie Brown, officiant at Britten's funeral, 7 December 1976

Coming to terms with Britten's music is no easy task. A survey of historical accounts reveals a trend among authors for dualistic and seemingly self-contradictory descriptors. Richard Taruskin and Christopher Gibbs describe Britten's musical style as a "juxtaposition of 'exotic' and 'normal' elements."[1] J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Grout, and Claude Palisca describe how Britten "tempered modernism with simplicity."[2] Britten himself invoked a double term, "the serious popular or the popular serious," when attempting to define his music's place in the complex cultural hierarchy of the 20th century.[3] Whittall explains it is exactly the tension between conservatism and progressiveness that describes Britten's aesthetic. In his description of the opening of Act I of *Peter Grimes*, a moment he promotes as representative of Britten's style, Whittall asserts, "the music's originality lies in the way its tensions and contrasts… move between 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox,' with an overall coherence that results from bridging such extremes."[4] While double terms such as "serious popular," "simple modern," or "exotic normal" may be accurate, each label fails to capture Britten's musical aesthetic in a broadly useful way.

Beyond simple, oxymoronic labels, the literature is rife with conceptual contradictions, whether one focuses on his musical topics, his popular or

* The epigraph is quoted from Kennedy 1993, 109.
[1] Taruskin and Gibbs 2013, 1003.
[2] Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 2006, 912.
[3] Kildea, ed. 2003, 184. For an insightful exegesis of this remark, see Rupprecht 2013, xv-xvi.
[4] Whittall 2004, 381.

critical reception, or his compositional technique. Consider, for example, these two accounts of the tonal structure of *War Requiem*:

> The tonal structures on which the music of the *Requiem* is based are clearly defined… Highly chromatic passages… remain isolated incidents, decorating rather than subverting an overall tonal framework solidly founded on clear tonal centres.[5]

> In the [*War Requiem*] tonalities are perpetually collapsing, harmonic resolutions are continually postponed, and the rare moments of unambiguous diatonicism tend to represent fear or grief rather than repose.[6]

In the category of broadly applicable, single-word terms, Britten scholars have found useful currency with "ambiguity" and "conflict." In most contexts, ambiguity refers to a scenario with insufficient information for determining a governing principle—an *under*determined norm—while conflict refers to a saturation of information to the point that a governing principle is clouded—an *over*determined norm. Britten scholars have applied these terms to describe everything from tonality to poetic meaning to character development.[7] However, use of these terms should come with a warning. For the casual reader, both terms can carry a negative connotation since they imply that a single, clear definition is Britten's unachieved goal.

To the contrary, the complex, often contradictory language associated with Britten's style likely stems from his double interest in progressive composition and immediate connection with a broad, popular audience—an apparent paradox in the splintered musical culture of the 20th century—as well as from complicated truths in his own life such as his love for a country that accepted neither his sexuality nor his politics. At every level of Britten's reality, from his most intimate relationships and self-definition to the geo-political climate in which he lived, Britten's life featured few, if any, points of simple consonance. When it came to composition, Britten insisted on being both true to himself and clear in his communication, even

[5] Cooke 1996, 55.
[6] Whittall 1963, 201.
[7] Kildea 2013 takes on interpretive ambiguity while Mark 1994 and Forrest 2010 examine tonal ambiguity. Brett 2006 delves into both ambiguity and conflict in the operas. References to conflict are abundant. Popular examples include Evans 1996, 547 who cites a "symbolism of conflict" in the operas (Clare Sher Ling Eng expounds upon Evans' comment in Chapter 6); on *Billy Budd*, Whittall 1982, 125 declares that the "essence of the opera is in the conflict;" Rupprecht 1996 examines conflict between textural strata.

if the message featured internal contradictions.[8] For instance, while his first public confession of love for Pears, the *Michelangelo Sonnets*, may have been masked behind antiquated Italian poetry, he did not compromise the purity of its message. If we are to see Britten's music from his perspective, we should divorce ourselves from the expectation of simple, unified clarity, be it tonal, narrative, or otherwise. His music stands as an exploration of irreconcilable truths in his own life and in the world around him. He represented life as he saw it—full of contradictions that often coexist within the same society or event, or even within the same person.

Contradictions in Britten's life and music force us to reconsider the very nature of our investigations. By seeking to understand Britten's tonal structure, Philip Rupprecht's tonal stratification model expands our understanding of Schenkerian analysis and throws important distinctions between tonality and bitonality into sharper relief.[9] Philip Brett's reading of ambiguities in the operas forces us to reconsider our attitudes toward homosexual love, specifically, and social acceptance of marginalized groups in general.[10] Heather Wiebe's analysis of Britten's simultaneous fascination with the past and abhorrence of cliché draws attention to some of our basic assumptions about the relationships between past and present traditions.[11]

Put simply, in studying Britten, we learn about ourselves. The attempt to describe his music can tell us as much about our own biases and the inadequacies of our analytic tools as it does about the music itself. Such audits of our scholarly language and strategies are vital in light of the still-murky view we have of twentieth century music, even from the perspective of the twenty-first century. This opportunity for academic self-reflection is the reason Britten studies are so important, and it is this journey of self-discovery that brought together the current collection of papers. The following essays challenge our assumptions about pitch, meter, formal design, relationships between text and music, and the influences of age, spirituality, and personal relationships on compositional technique.

On the hundredth anniversary of Britten's birth, we set out to host a symposium to recognize the composer's unique contributions to music. At every stage of planning and execution we deliberately questioned convention. Our planning committee comprised professors of voice,

[8] For a close look at Britten's struggle with Frank Bridge's instructions to be true to yourself and communicate clearly, see Kildea 2013a, 5.
[9] Rupprecht 1996.
[10] Brett 2006.
[11] Wiebe 2012.

musicology, and theory. The events of the symposium touched on all activities available in academic music—performances from guest artists, host faculty, college students, and over 300 local children engaged all the major genres including song, instrumental chamber works, choral works, and opera; academic-paper presenters included performers, musicologists, and theorists; lecture recitals addressed his film music, chamber works, and duets written specifically for Britten and Pears. The symposium concluded with a round-table discussion in which presenters and performers were invited to comment on connections between each other's work.

In the present manuscript, readers will find a taste of the variety that governed the symposium. The job titles of our authors exhaust the categories in a modern school of music; this is a book *by* all sorts of musicians, *for* all sorts of musicians. The book divides into two parts. Part One presents a collection of papers from the symposium. The deliberate reconciliation of lines of inquiry and the four years of incubation between symposium and publication have yielded a more balanced and unified collection of works than typically found in a simple record of proceedings. Furthermore, the chapters presented here benefit from the wealth of Britten research produced since the 2013 centenary. While the chapter topics were initially conceived in isolation from one another, the collaborative focus of the symposium created opportunities for authors to find points of intersection. As a result, the topics flow organically from chapter to chapter. Not only does the chapter order follow a roughly chronological path from Britten's early career to late, the topics overlap in meaningful ways providing readers a rewarding journey when taken in the order presented here.

The first three chapters examine early influences in Britten's work, the implications of which resonate in each of the following chapters. Building on his 2014 article, "Britten the Anthologist,"[12] Kevin Salfen's chapter, "Anthologizing Christmas: Britten's Literacy and *A Boy Was Born*," provides one of the most detailed examinations of Britten's Op. 3 to date. As Salfen reveals, the way Britten selects, interprets, and sets the poetry in his cycles simultaneously engages and challenges previous tradition. In "The Violin Suite, Op. 6, and the Road toward the *Variations on a Theme by Frank Bridge*," Stacey Jocoy traces Bridge's influence in Britten's only suite for violin. Through comparison with works by both composers as well as examination of Britten's revisions to the Suite late in life, Jocoy brings new focus to this lesser known work and marks its place in the

[12] Salfen 2014.

development of Britten's compositional voice. Not long after composing *A Boy was Born* and the Violin Suite, Britten found someone with whom he could collaborate on both text and music. In "For Peter: Britten's *Michelangelo Sonnets* and the Influence of Peter Pears," Anne Kissel takes an intimate look at the collaboration between Britten and Pears. Kissel charts how Britten's compositional style and Pears' vocal style grew and evolved symbiotically. By examining draft and performance scores of the song cycles, recordings, and correspondence between the two men and their closest acquaintances, Kissel tells the story of one musical career shared by two differently gifted musicians—the composer and the tenor.

The next three chapters focus primarily on Britten's vocal compositions of the mid-1940s. While these chapters engage a variety of pieces and analytical strategies, their common axis is one of Britten's most celebrated song cycles, *Serenade* for tenor, horn, and strings. Stuart Paul Duncan's "Priming Meter and Metric Conflict in Britten's Early Vocal Music 1943-1946," holds a unique place in Britten studies by focusing exclusively on meter as an expressive tool.[13] After brief introductions to Britten's metric complexity and current metric analysis tools, Duncan examines metric conflict in a variety of pieces including *Serenade*, *Festival Te Deum,* and *Peter Grimes*. Duncan's reading adds layers of interpretation unavailable to pitch-oriented analyses. The fifth and sixth chapters take a close look at how Britten interprets song-cycle texts through manipulation of intervals. Gordon Sly's essay, "Framing the Argument: The architecture of Britten's *Serenade* for tenor, horn, and strings," reveals how a contrast between semitones and perfect fifths characterizes the structure of *Serenade* at multiple levels, from motivic to movement-by-movement design. Further, Sly illuminates how manipulation of these intervals, paired with a close reading of the poetry, paints Britten's personal redemption over social pressures related to his sexuality, pacifism, and religious views. Along the way, Sly offers novel analyses of the tonal trajectory of one of Britten's most popular works. Building on Salfen's discussion of Britten's text selection, Clare Sher Ling Eng's study highlights how Britten employs half-step relationships to draw intertextual connections between previously unrelated poems. In "Britten's Slippery Semitone and Motivic Intertextuality in *The Poet's Echo,* Op. 76, and *Serenade,* Op. 31," Eng traces motivic transformations involving interval-class 1 and maps those transformations against textual connections.

[13] This essay was not part of the 2013 symposium. Some of the symposium presenters were unable to participate in this collection so the editors invited Stuart Paul Duncan to contribute his essay since it intersects with several others while also filling a unique role through metric analysis.

The final three chapters shift the book's focus to the end of Britten's career, using his final opera, *Death in Venice*, as a common thread. My chapter, "Britten and the Supernatural," takes four contrasting pieces from four different decades, *A Ceremony of Carols*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *War Requiem*, and *Death in Venice*, as case studies for how Britten musically describes interactions between human and supernatural characters and ideas. The analyses engage a range of strategies and find analogy with Richard Cohn's study of the uncanny. Chapters eight and nine take a much closer look at *Death in Venice*. In "Piano Recitatives and Late Style in Britten's *Death in Venice,*" Shersten Johnson considers the work through the lens of Joseph Straus's "disability style." However, unlike many critics of the opera who view the recitatives as empty shadows of a once-vibrant compositional voice, Johnson celebrates the recitatives as creative portrayals *of* a physically failing artist (Aschenbach) *by* a physically failing artist (Britten, and perhaps Pears). Echoing Kissel's study of Britten's and Pears' first piano-voice collaboration, Johnson highlights the piano recitatives as the final installment of the couple's personal platform of shared expression. Marianne Kielian-Gilbert's chapter, "Compassion with the Abyss": Sensory Estrangement in Britten's Late Works *Death in Venice* Op. 88 and *Phaedra* Op. 93," draws compelling, inter-opus comparisons between the internal struggles of the characters of Aschenbach and Phaedra. Kielian-Gilbert illustrates how Britten's careful management of tonal and intervallic development represents the wrestling of these characters with questions stemming from forbidden desire. She further probes the extent to which Britten is able to make the familiar sound strange. Reprising elements from earlier chapters, Kielian-Gilbert's chapter features close readings of the text, intertextual comparisons, motivic analysis, and Britten's own struggles with life, death, and sexuality.

The essays described above were also enriched and informed by the wide variety of concerts and lecture recitals performed at the centenary symposium. Part Two of the book provides an account of these performances, as well as brief program notes on the works. Symposium coordinator Quinn Patrick Ankrum introduces each program and describes its role in the effort to celebrate the depth and breadth of Britten's contributions. The editors feel that combining scholarship, performance, and even the mechanics of a multifaceted event is in keeping with Britten's approach to music. The reader will encounter fully the journey taken by symposium presenters, participants, and attendees by reviewing the concerts, lecture recitals, and papers in the context of the full symposium program.

PART ONE:

ESSAYS

CHAPTER ONE

ANTHOLOGIZING CHRISTMAS: BRITTEN'S LITERACY AND *A BOY WAS BORN*

KEVIN SALFEN

> Carol literature and music are rich in true folk-poetry and remain fresh and buoyant even when the subject is a grave one. But they vary a good deal: some are narrative, some dramatic, some personal, a few are secular; and there are some which do not possess all the typical characteristics.*
> —Percy Dearmer, *The Oxford Book of Carols*

Britten wrote three multi-movement Christmas-themed choral works: *Thy King's Birthday* (1931), *A Boy Was Born* (1932-3), and *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942). The first of these, despite its 1994 publication by Faber (as *Christ's Nativity: Christmas Suite for Chorus*), remains little known, infrequently studied, and seldom programmed. *A Ceremony of Carols* carries the opposite burden. It is one of Britten's greatest hits, much ink has been spilled over it, and it is widely performed. *A Boy Was Born* inhabits a third category; in Dearmer's phrase, it does not "possess all the typical characteristics." A thirty-minute work for double choir plus trebles, it is as difficult to sing as it apparently was for Britten to compose: he spent an uncharacteristically long six months writing it, from November 1932 to May 1933. Since its premiere, *A Boy Was Born* has had its advocates. Oxford University Press published it as Britten's Op. 3, though sales ended up being disappointingly slow. In his recent biography of the composer, Paul Kildea begins a discussion of the work with refreshingly blatant effusion: "*A Boy Was Born* is a terrific piece."[1] Kildea leaves the reader to infer that his enthusiasm stems in part from his sense that the work is too often unjustly ignored. Peter Evans concludes his remarks on it

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* The epigraph is from *The Oxford Book of Carols*, edited by Percy Dearmer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), v.

[1] Kildea 2013a, 84.

with, "We may well find a cosier response to the traditional joys of Christmas in *A Ceremony of Carols*, but *A Boy Was Born* presents the greater challenge to the musicianship of choirs and audiences." [2] Presumably one might add that, for Evans, such a challenge is good.[3]

But whatever the various merits of each, Britten's three Christmas-themed choral works share a great deal in that they participated in an important national conversation about the role of indigenous folksong and continental modernism in contemporary British composition, as well as a conversation about the audience for and performance level of choral music. That "conversation" was held first and foremost through music: some published, some performed in churches, some broadcast on the radio, though of course these distributive methods were not mutually exclusive. And, like so many conversations about music, the one that gave rise to these three choral works by Britten has been largely ignored in favor of dealing with the pieces as representative of the composer's style. This emphasis reflects the priorities of the first generation of Britten scholars, who were deeply concerned with positioning the composer as more than "just British," a stance that tended to isolate him from other British composers. Now, with a successful worldwide centenary celebration behind us, Britten scholars can afford to turn their attention to questions about how the composer's British identity is at the heart of his rich and unique idiom. For Britten's accomplishment was not diluted for his deep dependence on "home"; indeed, one of the remarkable things that emerges from a consideration of his work in its British context is the compelling way in which he synthesized local influences with those further afield (European and beyond) to create something both demonstrably engaged with the urgent musical conversations of his day *and* strikingly different from the work of his contemporaries. In this chapter I explore *A Boy Was Born* in just such terms, positioning it inside Britten's layered and literate musical world while providing a new hermeneutical reading of the work.

Books of Carols That Britten Owned

Stephen Sieck wrote the first extensive published analyses of *A Boy Was Born* in a pair of articles.[4] In the first of these, Sieck regrets that most

[2] Evans 1979, 68.

[3] Not every writer gushes over the work. In his recent biography, Neil Powell is only able to muster the following: "As Christmas works go, *A Boy Was Born* seems neither very devotional nor very festive, its focus firmly on emotional drama rather than on theology." Powell 2013, 76-7.

[4] Sieck 2004 and Sieck 2009.

writers "provide only a brief look [at] the work. . .and stop after discussing its theme and variations form, its distinct harmonies, and some unique features of the theme's construction." Sieck finds considerably more in Britten's Op. 3: "the ability to choose excellent and appropriate texts, edit and manipulate texts effectively, create musical characters that interact and, more than anything else, create drama by the combination of musical means."[5] His points about "musical characters" and the creation of drama are prefatory to an extended discussion of Variation 1, "Lullay, Jesu," in which the women's voices and trebles take the "roles" of Mary and Jesus, respectively. His point about choosing texts is more wide-ranging, and his comments on Britten's reshaping of poetry go further than any other source in exploring the impressive construction of the "libretto" of the work. Given his interest in Britten's approach to assembling texts for *A Boy Was Born*, it is surprising that Sieck does not emphasize Britten's use of multiple sources—different books—to find his poems. Other writers do sometimes note that Britten drew poems from two books for the work, but with few exceptions they treat this fishing around in multiple sources as an isolated phenomenon.

Britten had a habit, however, of creating his own miniature anthologies of poetry, culled from disparate sources, to serve as texts for cyclic vocal works. I refer to these works as "anthology cycles," and elsewhere I have explored them as a group and have suggested precedents for them: Edward Elgar's *Sea Pictures* (1897-9) and several works by British composers associated with the Royal College of Music in the 1930s—John Ireland, Herbert Howells, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Arthur Bliss.[6] The most obvious precedents for Britten's anthology cycles are other anthology cycles—those by Elgar, Ireland, Howells, Vaughan Williams, and Bliss—but even his first efforts differ markedly from theirs. Elgar set poets who were born within a quarter-century of him (including his wife, Caroline), and this behavior echoes the tendency in German Romantic song cycles to set contemporary poetry.[7] Ireland favored poets born in the nineteenth century, though he set William Blake and Shakespeare in his *Songs of a Wayfarer*.[8] Howells was more eclectic in his single anthology cycle, *In*

[5] Sieck 2004, 8.
[6] Salfen 2014.
[7] Leistra-Jones 2016 makes the argument in a recent article that Elgar's engagement with contemporaries, present in the selection of poetry for *Sea Pictures*, also extended to contemporary "scientific, literary, cultural, and bodily discourses" about the ocean.
[8] Ireland's anthology cycles are *Songs of a Wayfarer* (c. 1903-11), *Marigold* (1913), and *Songs Sacred and Profane* (1929-31).

Green Ways, setting Shakespeare and Goethe alongside his own contemporaries. Vaughan Williams matched eclecticism with a scholar's, or perhaps a poet's, thoughtfulness, selecting from different translations of the Book of Revelation for *Sancta civitas* and from various books of the Bible, Latin and English versions of the Mass, and the poetry of Walt Whitman for *Dona nobis pacem*.[9] Bliss, similarly eclectic, incorporated more classical texts (excerpts from *The Iliad*, from Theocritus) and Elizabethan verse, but also set several Whitman poems, contemporary Robert Nichols and, significantly for Britten, a poem by Wilfred Owen in his *Morning Heroes*.[10]

In these anthology cycles, by five different British composers, the poet or source of the text arguably shares authorial status with the composer. If the poet or source is part of a perceived canon—Shakespeare, the Bible—then a musical setting of a text by that poet or from that source invites consideration of the canonized material on its own terms, so that the musical work is not just in dialogue with the set text but is also in dialogue with an imagined writer or, in the case of the Bible or *The Iliad*, with a larger parent text. If, on the other hand, the poet is a contemporary of the composer, a musical setting might be characterized as collaboration. So, in the anthology cycles of Elgar, Ireland, Howells, Vaughan Williams, and Bliss, the composer, despite having acted as anthologist in binding together disparate parts into a new whole, does not entirely obscure the writer of the text or the parent source. In fact, the composer may rely on the poet or parent source to establish the cycle's theme. When Bliss gathered together Theocritus, the fifteenth-century Italian Poliziano, Elizabethan and Stuart-period poets Ben Jonson and John Fletcher and his own contemporary, Robert Nichols, he was creating an anthology of pastoral poetry through the ages, from its inception in ancient Greece right through early twentieth-century England, and simultaneously identifying important or characteristic writers of pastoral poetry.[11]

What is different and innovatory about Britten's approach is that he favored, from his earliest anthology cycles, anonymous and relatively obscure texts. Tables 1-1, 1-2, and 1-3 list all poems, poets, and sources of poetry for Britten's three Christmas anthology cycles.

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[9] Vaughan Williams's anthology cycles through the 1930s are *Sancta civitas* (1923-5), *Benedicite* (1929), and *Dona nobis pacem* (1936).

[10] Bliss's anthology cycles through the 1930s are *Pastoral: Lie Strewn the White Flocks* (1928), *Serenade* (1929), and *Morning Heroes* (1930). Wilfred Owen's poetry would, of course, be juxtaposed with the Latin text of the Requiem Mass in Britten's *War Requiem* (1962).

[11] See Salfen 2014, 107-8.

Table 1-1. Movements of *Thy King's Birthday* with poems, poets, and sources, see below for source abbreviations.

Movement's title	**Poem's title in original source**	**Poet (Dates)**	**Source (page)**
1. "Christ's Nativity"	same	Henry Vaughan (1621-95)	CCK (28)
2. "Sweet was the Song"	same	from William Ballet's Lute Book (17th-c.)	CCK (26)
3. "Preparations"	same	Christ Church M.S. (17th-c.)	CA (10)
4. "New Prince, New Pomp"	same	"Words from the Scriptures" and Robert Southwell (?1561-1595)	CCK (23)
5. "Carol of King Cnut"	same	Charles William Stubbs (1845-1912)	CCK (9)

Table 1-2. Movements of *A Boy Was Born* with poems, poets, and sources, see below for source abbreviations.

Movement's title	**Poem's title in original source**	**Poet (Dates)**	**Source (page)**
Theme: "A Boy Was Born"	"Puer natus"	Anon. (16th-c.)	OBC (179)
Var. I, "Lullay, Jesu"	"Lullay, Jesu"	Anon. (<1536)	AEC (74)
Var. II, "Herod"	"Worship we this holy day"	Anon. (<1529)	AEC (128)
Var. III, "Jesu as Thou art our Saviour"	"Jesu, as Thou art our Saviour"	Anon. (15th-c.)	AEC (176)
Var. IV, "The Three Kings"	"Now is Christmas ycome"	Anon. (15th-c.)	AEC (110)
Var. V, "In the Bleak Mid-Winter"	1. "A Christmas Carol" 2. "Lully, lulley, lully, lulley"	1. Christina Rossetti (1830-94) 2. Anon. (<1536)	1. AEC (293) 2. AEC (193)
Var. VI-Finale, "Noel!"	1. "Good Day, Good Day" 2. "Christmas" 3. "Welcome Yule" 4. "A Christmas Carol"	1. Anon. (15th-c.) 2. Thomas Tusser (1524?-80) 3. Anon. (15th-c.) 4. Francis Quarles (1592-1644)	1. AEC (219) 2. AEC (225) 3. OBC (369) 4. AEC (212)

Table 1-3. Movements of *A Ceremony of Carols* with poems, poets, and sources, see below for source abbreviations.

Movement's title	Poem's title in original source	Poet (Dates)	Source (page)
1. "Procession"	"Hodie Christus natus est"	Anon. chant	Alec Robertson
2. "Wolcum Yole!"	"Wolcum Yole"	Anon. (14th-c.)	~CH (229)
3. "There is no Rose"	"There is no rose"	Anon. (14th-c.)	GSP (5)
4a. "That yongë child"	"That yongë child"	Anon. (14th-c.)	unknown
4b. "Bululalow"	"Bululalow"	Wedderburn, James, John, and Robert (1548), 1561	OBC (395)
5. "As dew in Aprille"	"As dew in Aprille"	Anon. (c. 1400)	GSP (6)
6. "This little Babe"	"This little Babe"	Robert Southwell (?1561-1595)	GSP (115)
7. "Interlude"	n/a	n/a	n/a
8. "In Freezing Winter Night"	"In Freezing Winter Night"	Robert Southwell (1561?-1595)	GSP (113)
9. "Spring Carol"	"Spring Carol"	William Cornyshe (14? -1523)	~OBC (257) or ~CH (16)
10. "Deo Gracias"	"Deo Gracias"	Anon. (15th-c.)	GSP (4)
11. "Recession"	"Hodie Christus natus est"	same as 1.	same as 1.

Ancient Christmas Carols, MCCCC to MDCC. Collected and arranged by Edith Rickert. London: Chatto & Windus, 1928. Britten-Pears Foundation Archive [BPFA] 1-9202024 [AEC]

A Christmas Anthology. Edited by Edward Thompson. London: Ernest Benn, 1926. BPFA 1-9102247 [CA]

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Come Hither: A Collection of Rhymes & Poems for the Young of All Ages. Made by Walter de la Mare. New edition. London: Constable & Company, 1928. BPFA 1-9202019 [CH]

The English Galaxy of Short Poems. Chosen and edited by Gerald Bullett. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1939. BPFA 1-9300377 [GSP]

The Oxford Book of Carols. Edited by Percy Dearmer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1928. No BPFA record. [OBC]

Two texts in *Thy King's Birthday* are anonymous, and another, by C. W. Stubbs, might as well be for as widely known as that clergyman's poems are. Henry Vaughan and Robert Southwell are more familiar names, and their poems were anthologized frequently enough, although none of the earlier anthology cycles (by the RCM composers) featured either of them. But again, *Thy King's Birthday* remained unpublished and

unperformed (in its entirety) in Britten's lifetime, so it may not represent a form with which Britten was wholly pleased. Christopher Mark has suggested as much in a chapter on Britten's juvenilia, pointing out that the composer began but abandoned several other settings of Christmas poems, apparently for possible inclusion in *Thy King's Birthday*.

Mark goes further in calling *A Boy Was Born* "the second successful attempt at the realization of an ambitious idea," though he does not define the nature of that "ambitious idea."[12] The comparative success of *A Boy Was Born* might be gauged by its publication, already mentioned, and also by its broadcast premiere on a live BBC "Concert of Contemporary Music" in February 1934 under Leslie Woodgate with the BBC Wireless Chorus.[13] And for his first "successful" anthology cycle, Britten assembled eight anonymous carols, plus one each by Christina Rossetti, Thomas Tusser, and Francis Quarles. The poem by Rossetti, "In the bleak midwinter," is widely known through Gustav Holst's hymn, first included in the *English Hymnal* (1906), and through Harold Darke's beautiful anthem (1911), but Britten almost entirely obscures the text by using the words as sonic backdrop for a lyrical setting of the Corpus Christi Carol. Thomas Tusser's poem "Christmas" ("Get ivy and hull, woman, deck up thine house") is likely unfamiliar, but Britten obscures it, too, turning the text into rhythmic patter under expansive treble statements of text that does not appear in Tusser's poem. So, in his second anthology cycle, Britten confirmed two major departures from precedents by the RCM composers: first, an association between the anthology cycle and Christmas; second, a preference for anonymous poetry, which is to say, poetry in which authorship of texts is not asserted. He would renew this approach almost a decade later in his third and final Christmas-themed anthology cycle, *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942).

When writers discuss Britten's anthologizing, it is couched in terms of his interest in poetry, but Britten was also a great lover of books—not just the ideas and phrases contained in them, but the physical volumes themselves. The holdings of the Britten-Pears Foundation Archive attest to this love of beautiful books, and Britten grew up in a golden age of publishing during which handsome, often illustrated volumes were affordable enough to be collected in great numbers by anyone with a little spending money and an ambition to own them. Discussion of Britten's anthology cycles should not, then, only involve a discussion of poems, but of the books in which he found those poems. A review of Tables 1-1, 1-2,

[12] Mark 1999, 32.
[13] Mitchell and Reed 1991, 324-6.

and 1-3 reveals that Britten's anthologizing became a more complex act the longer he did it: *Thy King's Birthday* used mostly *Christmas Carols*, edited by Daniel Kelleher, with one poem from *A Christmas Anthology*, edited by Edward Thompson. Both Kelleher and Thompson's anthologies are examples of the "gift book," a genre that had come of age in Victorian England as the custom of giving gifts in the Christmas season became well established. Although many gift books were lavishly illustrated, the two volumes that Britten used for *Thy King's Birthday* were slim, plain, and cheap—put simply, they were bargain gift books. Britten received Kelleher's *Christmas Carols* in November 1930 as a gift from his eldest sister Barbara who, at 28 years old, was likely as strapped for cash as her brother, so the economics makes sense.[14]

Britten's approach changed significantly when he embarked on his second anthology cycle. Instead of relying on a gift book that he happened to have at hand, Britten sought out Rickert's *Ancient English Christmas Carols MCCCC to MDCC* [1400-1700]. He noted the purchase of the volume and his intentions for it in a diary entry for Saturday, November 12, 1932: "Go to Whiteley's in morning to have hair cut, & then on to St. Martin's Lane to Chatto & Windus to get a copy of Ancient English Carols. I am setting some in a work for Chorus soon, I expect."[15] Rickert's volume represents a sort of marriage between the Victorian gift book, complete with facsimiles of illustrations from medieval manuscripts, and a work of early twentieth-century scholarship, featuring an extensive introduction on the significance and history of the carol, notes on the poems throughout the volume, and lengthy appendices.

But as important as Rickert's *Ancient English Christmas Carols* was for *A Boy Was Born*, it was not the source of every poem in Britten's anthology, nor indeed the source for the poem that gave the work its title. In a work of remarkable musical integration—a theme and six variations—Britten started not with Rickert, but with another volume published in 1928, the *Oxford Book of Carols*.[16] In fact, Britten took two texts from the *Oxford Book*: "A Boy Was Born" for the work's "Theme" and "Welcome Yule" for its "Finale." If Britten's anthology cycles were inevitably conceived in response to those of composers working at the RCM in the early 1930s, by using the *Oxford Book of Carols* for *A Boy Was Born*, Britten amplified that response. The *Oxford Book* was edited by Percy

[14] Mitchell and Reed 1991, 153-4.
[15] Ibid., 285.
[16] For a facsimile of the first page of the "Theme" of *A Boy Was Born* in Britten's MS fair copy, including an attribution at the top "Anon. German. Trans. N. S. T. (Oxford Book of Carols)," see Mitchell and Reed 1991, 288-9.

Dearmer, Martin Shaw, and Vaughan Williams, and it includes four settings by Vaughan Williams and one by John Ireland. Ireland's setting in the *Oxford Book* is of "New Prince, New Pomp," a text Britten had set in *Thy King's Birthday*. One of Vaughan Williams's four settings in the *Oxford Book* is "The Golden Carol" (also called "Now is Christmas ycome"), a variant version of which Britten set in Variation IV of *A Boy Was Born*. Another is "Down in Yon Forest," a variant of which (the Corpus Christi Carol) Britten set in Variation V of *A Boy Was Born*. It is worth pointing out that under Vaughan Williams's setting of "The Golden Carol," the editor explains that Rickert's volume includes a variant—the very one that Britten would use in "The Three Kings." Similarly, in a note under "Down in Yon Forest," the editor gives the full text of the Corpus Christi Carol. It is tempting to speculate that it was Vaughan Williams's footnotes in the *Oxford Book* that sent the young Britten to Chatto & Windus in 1932 to purchase a copy of Rickert's book. But it is not speculative to deduce that Britten's second anthology cycle was more than a response to poems that he happened to take from two sources. Its anthology derived from the form of the Christmas gift book, exemplified by Rickert's volume, and was conceived in response to composers represented in the *Oxford Book of Carols*, whom he knew personally and whose anthology cycles and carol settings inevitably served as models, specific features of which he would adopt or reject.

A Book of Carols That Britten Wrote

Few enough writers have dealt at length with *A Boy Was Born* to allow integration of a fairly comprehensive literature review with my analysis. In broadest terms, commentary on the work tends to emphasize one of two things: its technical accomplishment, with special focus on the nature of Britten's melodic and harmonic language, or its general nature, be that dramatic/proto-operatic, Christian, etc., though in most instances these claims have been asserted rather than explained. Peter Evans (1979) and Stephen Sieck (2004; 2009) go furthest in combining descriptions of Britten's technical achievement with hermeneutic readings. Neither Evans nor Sieck nor any other writer considers specific precedents for *A Boy Was Born*, although Sieck explores "stylistic influences on the young Benjamin Britten" in his 2009 article. The goal of my analysis, therefore, will be to build on previous analytical findings to provide a new hermeneutic reading of *A Boy Was Born*: one that is chiefly informed by the work's immediate musical, literary, and institutional context and that therefore characterizes

the work itself as a kind of anthology representing various strands of Britten's cultural literacy.

Theme: "A Boy Was Born"...from the Oxford Book of Carols

The first movement, the "Theme," is the kernel from which *A Boy Was Born* grows, both providing the basic musical material for the piece, as one would expect in a theme and variations, and anticipating dramatic foci of later movements.[17] Arnold Whittall's explanation of Britten's variation technique is clear, and other writers have borrowed from or echoed his analysis. Describing *A Boy Was Born* as "a set of six variations on a theme which is itself a miniature set of variations," Whittall shows how the (025) trichord that opens the work is expanded into (027) for the "ultimate transformations at the end of stanzas 2 and 3 of the theme."[18] Whittall further calculates that there are only nine four-note sonorities in the movement, six derived from "the same basic tetrachord (0259)," two with "a harsher semitone clash" (0158), and one "fourth chord (0247)."[19] If this approach seems excessively removed from the words and their meaning, Whittall's opening comments provide justification: In *A Boy Was Born*, "Britten may not transcend all those elements of Englishry which he had perforce to employ until his own sharper, more purposeful harmonic idiom and well-focused extended tonality came to maturity. But the skills of the musical dramatist, blending various texts into satisfying formal schemes, are already startlingly assured. "[20] Whittall is concerned, then, with distancing Britten from "Englishry," with demonstrating the distinctiveness of his neotonal idiom, and, to a lesser extent, with issues of form. This amounts to a tacit argument for Britten's relevance, made by aligning Britten's compositional practice with continental modernists such as Stravinsky, Bartók, and Schoenberg.[21]

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[17] Evans 1996, 64 makes a similar point, proposing that "the entire work springs from, or around, th[e opening] four-note motive, and [. . .]all that follows can be regarded, verbally and musically, as exegesis of that one pithy text."

[18] Whittall 1990, 24.

[19] Ibid., 24. Woodward 1999, 260-1 echoes Whittall's explanation of how the Theme derives from a three-note cell. See also Stirling 2015, 20-5. Stirling demonstrates what Whittall claims about the limited number of sonorities, providing a figure with all of them lined up next to each other.

[20] Whittall 1990, 24.

[21] The use of the word "Englishry" in association with the piece echoes Mitchell 1952, 9-11. Mitchell's brief comments on *A Boy Was Born* are found in a section titled "Early Manifestation of Britten's Englishry," in which Mitchell concludes that "Britten's piece owes something to Vaughan Williams's clarifying spirit, but harmonically it was biased rather in favour of a mild cosmopolitanism reminiscent