

STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S THREE SUITES FOR  
SOLO CELLO

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Benjamin Britten's instrumental music has received relatively little attention in the music theory community compared to his operas and vocal music. This lecture document examines three of his instrumental works: the Suite for Cello, Op. 72, Second Suite for Cello, Op. 80, and Third Suite for Cello, Op. 87. An analysis of the First Suite will serve as the centerpiece of this document, while select movements from the other two Suites will reveal how Britten reinforces compositional methods established in the First Suite.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Britten's Three Suites for Cello have steadily been making their way into the standard cello repertoire since their premieres in 1965, 1968 and 1974. At the time they were written, Britten was already an internationally renowned composer, having landed on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1948 thanks to the success of his most famous opera, *Peter Grimes*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he was known far better for his operas than his instrumental works, and in the years leading up to the Cello Suites (and other works for cello, including the Sonata in C, Op. 65, the Cello Symphony, Op. 68) there was a large dearth in purely instrumental writing within his compositional output. According to Peter Evans,

During these years it became possible to believe that Britten had fallen victim to those critics who were ready to assure him that his purely instrumental designs had little beyond ingenuity of craft to compensate for the loss of imaginative precision with which he responded to verbal and dramatic stimuli. In retrospect, we can see that what he required was stimulus of another kind, that provided by a performing artist of compelling and individual musicianship. So the artistry of the Soviet cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, which eventually spurred Britten to a resumption of instrumental writing, was subordinate only to that of Peter

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<sup>1</sup>Philip Brett, "Britten, (Edward) Benjamin," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. IV (London: Macmillan, 2001), 365.

Pears in the degree of influence it exercised on the composer's choice of medium.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to a visiting performance by the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra at London's Royal Festival Hall in September 1960, Britten had the opportunity to witness Mstislav Rostropovich's performance of Dmitri Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1.<sup>3</sup> Shostakovich invited Britten to join him in his box in the audience, and Britten was absolutely astonished by Rostropovich's playing. Shostakovich later joked that he suffered from bruised ribs after Britten's many enthusiastic elbow jabs during the performance.<sup>4</sup> Britten and Rostropovich met backstage after the concert, and quickly decided on a dinner meeting the following day where Britten agreed to write a cello sonata for Rostropovich to perform at the 1961 Aldeburgh Festival.<sup>5</sup>

In an interview with John Warrack, Britten said the following about collaboration and Rostropovich's influence:

I've always had the advantage (or disadvantage, whichever it is) of needing occasions or performers to attract and inspire me—I mean inspire in the old sense; that is, the event or player blows enthusiasm into me. Nowadays I don't seem to lose confidence in writing vocal music, but I think I was getting a bit nervous about writing instrumental music. Rostropovich freed one of my inhibitions. He's such a gloriously uninhibited musician himself, with this enormous feeling of generosity

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Evans, *The music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 396.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 359.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Rostropovich: The Musical Life of the Great Cellist, Teacher and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 179.

<sup>5</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 361.

you get from the best Russian players, coming to meet you all the way. I'd heard about him, and rather unwillingly listened to the wireless. I immediately realized this was a new way of playing the cello, in fact, almost a new, vital way of playing music. I made arrangements to come to London and heard him again, and found him in the flesh even more than I expected. He took the bull by the horns and asked me to write a piece for him, which was my cello sonata written, "on condition he came to Aldeburgh!"<sup>6</sup>

Upon playing together for the first time while rehearsing the Cello Sonata in C, Op. 65, they were both extremely nervous. Rostropovich recalled of this rehearsal:

Ben said, 'Well, Slava, do you think we have time for a drink first?' He said 'Yes, yes,' so we both drank a large whisky. Then Ben said: 'Maybe we have time for another one?' 'Yes, yes' I said. Another large whisky. After four or five very large whiskies we finally sat down and played through the sonata. We played like pigs, but we were so happy.<sup>7</sup>

This rehearsal was the beginning of a longstanding friendship and fruitful collaboration that was incredibly influential for the artistic lives of both men. The Sonata, however, while interesting as an example of Britten's first foray into writing for the cello, is not the main focus of the present analysis. Instead, we look forward a few years to the Cello Suites, which were conceived of under equally charming circumstances during Rostropovich's visit to England in the summer of 1964.

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<sup>6</sup> John Warrack, "Benjamin Britten: Musician of the Year in Conversation with John Warrack," *Musical America* LXXXIV (1964): 272.

<sup>7</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 361.

Rostropovich and Britten, while travelling north for a recital at the Rosehill Theatre in Whitehaven, planned a stop at Harewood House to meet the Earl of Harewood's mother, Princess Mary.<sup>8</sup> Rostropovich, who had never met a princess before, practiced an elaborate curtsy to greet the elderly and easily offended Princess. Britten was absolutely horrified by this and begged Rostropovich not to do it, in exchange signing a contract to write "six major works for cello in recompense for which Slava Rostropovich will agree not to perform his pirouette in front of the Princess Mary."<sup>9</sup> While Britten only lived to complete three, the Three Suites for Cello, Op. 72, 80, and 87 are a deeply fascinating addition to the solo cello repertoire and are highly worthy of study. These works also clearly held a place close to Rostropovich's heart. Of the Third Suite, he said, "I could not play it without weeping," and since Britten's death, "has not felt able to play it at all."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the quality and emotional depth of these works, they are regarded in the cello community with a mixture of interest and trepidation. This is due not only to their technical difficulty, but to their intellectual difficulty as well. Although they possess all of the qualities that would attract performers to a large-scale solo piece—virtuosity, rigor, and expressive immediacy—there is also an aspect of strangeness and complexity that may leave a new listener feeling unable to "get it." A first listen indicates to the audience that while there is much to enjoy on the surface of this music, there is also much more to discover.

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<sup>8</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 391.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *Rostropovich: The Musical Life of the Great Cellist, Teacher and Legend*, 264.

I first had the pleasure of encountering these pieces at a chamber music festival in 2007. One of the faculty members, cellist David Russell, tackled the enormous feat of performing all three Suites in one recital. I was absolutely fascinated by the music's simultaneous immediacy and complexity, as well as David's impressive facility and endurance, and left the recital hall feeling both exhausted and inspired. During my first year at conservatory the following fall, when my cello professor assigned me the Second Suite, I was up for the challenge. Since then, I have learned and performed all three Suites, and although my intermittent studies span a period of nearly ten years, I still feel that there is more to learn about these works.

From a music theory perspective, my analytic interest in these pieces grew organically from my experience as a performer. I believe that a successful and informed performance of any work requires some level of analytical thinking, but this rings especially true for Britten's Cello Suites. With each of the Suites, at every step of the learning process, I have discovered that there is no such thing as note or rhythm without a purpose. Absolutely every gesture contributes to some aspect of the large-scale narrative. While many of Britten's compositional techniques for achieving musical coherence align with the traditional processes of tonal music, he often simultaneously undermines or alters these processes, planting one foot firmly in tradition while still facing forward towards innovation. Much of the literature analyzing Britten's music focuses on this dichotomy in his compositional style.

In my study of the Three Suites for Cello, I have discovered several of Britten's main methods for achieving large-scale coherence that are common among all three works:

1. **Normative tonal background structures across the work as a whole.** Although Britten does not designate a specific key in any of his titles, each Suite has a clear pitch center that the piece begins and ends with. Additionally, like a multi-movement work of the common practice era, the pitch centers of the inner movements follow a large-scale organization.
2. **Motivic development at multiple structural levels as a means of organizing surface pitch content.** While much of the note-to-note pitch content of the Suites is either atonal or chromatically altered diatonic material, it is highly motivically organized. In each of the Suites, Britten uses a handful of motives from one movement as a basis for the rest of the work. These motives recur and develop not only at the foreground, but at the middleground and background structural levels as well. Occasionally, motives even reappear from one Suite to the next.
3. **Traditional forms as a basis for individual movements.** Beyond Britten's decision to title his multi-movement solo cello pieces as Suites—an obvious homage to J.S. Bach's cello pieces by the same name—each individual movement has a title that is recognizable as an old form. These range from clearly identifiable formal structures (fugue) to more general indications of tempo and style (march). As such, Britten not only provides himself with compositional parameters for each movement, but also activates the audience's preconceived

notions of said forms, giving himself the opportunity to play with expectations.

He does this effectively, always invoking the spirit of the form he is trying to convey, but with his own unique spin.

In summary, Britten's conception of the solo instrumental Suite is both rooted in tradition and uniquely his own. While Bach's Cello Suites were certainly a source of inspiration, Britten conspicuously avoids the most defining factors of Bach's Baroque-era notion of the Suite, namely, specifically-ordered Baroque dance forms and a unified pitch center for every movement. Instead, Britten borrows more diverse and varied aspects of tonal music, alters them to his liking, and organizes them in such a way as to redefine the notion of the Suite. According to Donald Mitchell, "It [suite] was a form that Britten made peculiarly his own...he marvelously exploited the the capacity of the instrument or instruments to make the music appropriate to the title."<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin Britten's First Suite for Cello Op. 72, will serve as the centerpiece for the present analysis. The Second and Third Suites, Op. 80 and Op. 87, will provide evidence for how compositional methods established in the First Suite are reinforced and sometimes recontextualized in order to create a sense of both coherence and variety across the entire cycle.

Regarding analytical method, Britten's selective adherence to tonal constructs requires the analyst to think creatively. While the established methods for analyzing tonal music do not work perfectly, as is often the case with music that is interesting enough to be worthy of study, their application is useful inasmuch as it reveals the tension between

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Mitchell, *The Chamber Music*, in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 371.

tradition and innovation that is such an important hallmark of Britten's style, and provides insight into the expressive result of that tension.

Much of Britten's compositional language in the Cello Suites can be effectively explained with a combination of modified Schenkerian-style reductive analysis and motivic analysis. While motivic analysis has always been universally accepted among music theorists as a valid method for twentieth and twenty-first century music, the boundaries of how and when Schenkerian analysis can be used remains a subject of fierce debate. Arnold Whittall acknowledges precisely this idea in his article "The Study of Britten: Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure":

I propose in what follows to centrate on issues of tonal structure, even though interactions with thematic features will not be excluded. Much particularly valuable work on Britten has already been done in the motivic area. I also believe that Britten's use of tonal triadic harmony is still the central issue, even in vocal music, and the background against which his formal and motivic procedures are best considered."<sup>12</sup>

Although theorists have continually adapted Schenker's analytic methods to music beyond the scope of what he intended, most analysts doing so today would agree that this can still be contentious. Much of the debate lies not necessarily in whether or not this type of analysis can be done on music that is not functionally tonal, but rather in the interpretation of what the result says about a piece and how we experience it. A brief

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold Whittall, "The Study of Britten: Triadic Harmony and Tonal Structure," *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 106, no. 1 (1979): 27–41.

summary of some key contributions to this debate will be useful in situating the present analysis.

Some theorists have argued that reductive analysis is only valid for common practice era tonal music, while others believe that it can and should be modified to apply to atonal music and everything in between. In 1987, Joseph Straus published a controversial article arguing that “prolongation” does not occur in most music written after the turn of the century. Before this article was published, there had already been countless attempts at this type of analysis for post-tonal music, some more successful than others. Straus criticizes these analyses, asserting that prolongation is necessary, and goes on to explain four conditions of prolongation that must be present: 1) consonance/dissonance, 2) scale-degree hierarchy, 3) embellishment, and 4) clear horizontal and vertical dimension.<sup>13</sup> Straus instead suggests a more conservative associational model for the analysis of post-tonal music.

Although Straus’s article elicited many responses, Steven Larson offers the most thorough refutation.<sup>14</sup> He argues that Straus’s list of necessary conditions are already problematic, for they do not even consistently hold true for tonal music. Moreover, Larson explains that prolongation, by means of “contextual stability” is indeed possible in post-tonal music. For him, all stability is conditioned by contextuality, as there is no such thing as absolute stability or consonance. He views the concept of prolongation as a result of multiple levels of hierarchy via embellishment. Establishing which pitches are

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Straus, “The Problem of Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music,” *Journal of Music Theory* 31, no. 1 (1987): 1-21.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Larson, “The Problem of Prolongation in ‘Tonal’ Music: Terminology, Perception, and Expressive Meaning,” *Journal of Music Theory* 41, no. 1 (1997): 101-136.

more hierarchically structural than others is not a result of absolute consonance and dissonance. He proposes a list of transformations that may be heard as embellishment figures: 1) the addition of an affix or connective, 2) the registral shifting of a note, 3) the temporal shifting of a note, 4) the elision or overlap of shared pitches, 5) the suppression of an implied tone.<sup>15</sup> All of these transformations could apply successfully to both tonal and atonal music and everything in between. Larson then goes on to refute each of Straus's original conditions in great detail.

Another participant in the discussion of atonal prolongation whom Larson cites is Fred Lerdahl—"Atonal Prolongational Structure" (1989).<sup>16</sup> This article adapts part of a theory from an earlier book called *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*,<sup>17</sup> developed by Lerdahl and linguist Ray Jackendoff. Lerdahl agrees with Straus that prolongation in a strict sense cannot occur in atonal music. In order to apply GTTM to atonal music, he establishes different conditions to determine "salience," which are as follows: a) attack within the region, b) in a relatively strong metrical position, c) relatively loud, d) relatively prominent timbrally, e) in an extreme registral position, f) relatively dense, g) relatively long in duration, h) relatively important motivically, i) next to a relatively large grouping boundary, j) parallel to a choice made elsewhere in the analysis. Larson points out that although this method has interesting implications, the application of the aforementioned conditions to tonal music would sometimes produce bizarre results.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Larson, "The Problem of Prolongation in 'Tonal' Music," 101-136.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Lerdahl, "Atonal prolongational structure," *Contemporary Music Review* 4, no. 1 (1989): 65-87.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Larson, "The Problem of Prolongation in 'Tonal' Music," 101-136.

In his article “Harmonic Progressions and Prolongation in Post-Tonal music,”<sup>19</sup> Edward Pearsall also refutes Straus, arguing that prolongation is possible if one allows each piece to create its own context for what is stable and unstable, i.e. which intervals recur most frequently. Jack Boss’s article titled “Schoenberg on Ornamentation and Structural Levels”<sup>20</sup> provides an excellent summary of literature pertaining to structural levels in post-tonal music, synthesizing various theorists’ (including those mentioned above, among others) criteria for determining structural levels in the following table:

A pitch is more likely to be structural if it:

- 1) Begins or ends a phrase, motive, or other significant unit
- 2) Has a relatively long duration
- 3) Is repeated or returned to
- 4) Is relatively loud
- 5) Is metrically accented
- 6) Is relatively high or low
- 7) Is relatively prominent timbrally
- 8) Is relatively dense
- 9) Occurs in a location parallel to some other structural event<sup>21</sup>

While Boss’s article pertains specifically to Schoenberg’s notion of embellishment in his own music, it provides a useful set of criteria to consider in determining structural levels in the absence of tonal harmony. Boss ultimately concludes that “structural levels are generated in Schoenberg’s music through ornamentation *instead of* prolongation.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Edward Pearsall, “Harmonic Progressions and Prolongation in Post-Tonal Music,” *Music Analysis* 10, no. 3 (1991): 345-355.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Boss, “Schoenberg on Ornamentation and Structural Levels,” *Journal of Music Theory* 38, no. 2 (1994): 187-216.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> Boss, “Schoenberg on Ornamentation and Structural Levels,” 210.

As far as analyses of Benjamin Britten's music specifically, an article by David Forrest, "Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten,"<sup>23</sup> stands out as engaging with the argument over prolongation in post-tonal music, and gives excellent examples of how reductive analysis can be adapted to Britten's music. Forrest points out that theorists rarely draw upon music that is triadic but not tonal (as opposed to purely atonal) into their analytical debate. He argues that Britten's music presents special challenges for prolongational analysis: it often features a triadic surface organized around one central pitch, but its nonfunctional harmonic motion and free alterations of scalar material create tonal ambiguity. He examines three different choral pieces by Britten which employ surface-level triads to prolong middleground symmetrical interval cycles. These cycles, in turn, prolong background pitches and structures, which help establish centricity. Forrest uses Schenkerian-like reductive techniques to show these prolongations, but of course the middleground and background structures have nothing to do with a traditional Schenkerian *Urfinie*.

Philip Rupprecht has written extensively about Britten's music, mostly his operas, and in some cases has adapted reductive analysis to do so. In his article, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music,"<sup>24</sup> Rupprecht analyzes the opening of Britten's opera *Billy Budd*, arguing that there are two distinct tonal centers occurring simultaneously, and that "a prolongational hierarchy persists within the restricted registral space of each stratum."<sup>25</sup> He accounts for this by including both pitch centers in

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<sup>23</sup> David Forrest, "Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten," *Music Theory Spectrum* 32, no. 1 (2010): 1-25.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music," *Journal of Music Theory* 40, no. 2 (1996): 311-346.

<sup>25</sup> Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music," 319.

his reductive graph. In “Britten and the Circle of Fifths,”<sup>26</sup> Christopher Mark explores some of Britten’s early works, asserting that, “movement through the circle of fifths by collection may not...connote clarity of tonal centre and functional harmony, but it does necessitate diatonicism.”<sup>27</sup> He then concludes that Britten’s later music contains more “traditional, functional relationships...but also...an increase in chromaticism.”<sup>28</sup>

There are no published books or peer-reviewed journal articles specifically focusing on Britten’s cello music, but a number of graduate theses and dissertations do exist. The first, written in 1973 by David Low,<sup>29</sup> discusses the sonata with piano and the first two Suites, as the Third Suite had not yet been premiered at the time. The beginning of this thesis gives some promising historical background and a comprehensive general description of Britten’s compositional techniques, but the actual analysis does not go much further than a movement by movement chronological discussion of the salient features of each piece. The next dissertation on this subject was written in 1983 by Mark Allen Taggart’s 1983 dissertation is the next to tackle these pieces, and provides an analysis similar to Low’s in a descriptive, chronological format.<sup>30</sup> Taggart presents some motivic analysis, as well as reductive analysis only for a small section of one movement. While the above two documents are noteworthy as early analyses of Britten’s cello music, they do not apply the specific analytic techniques that I am interested in exploring.

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Mark “Britten and the Circle of Fifths,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 199, no. 2 (1994): 268-297.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>29</sup> David Low, “The Music for Solo Cello and Cello and Piano of Benjamin Britten” (DM thesis, Northwestern University, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Mark Alan Taggart, “An Analysis of Suite for Cello, op. 72, and Second Suite for Cello, Op. 80, by Benjamin Britten” (DMA diss., Cornell University, 1983).

Sophie Webber's DM document from 2009 provides a very interesting perspective on the First Cello Suite.<sup>31</sup> She traces the influence of the Far East on Britten's operas, particularly *Curlew River*, and how aspects of the opera appear in the First Suite. Analytically, she focuses mainly on the idea of musical topics. Stephen Reis also addresses *Curlew River* and the First Suite in his dissertation from 2004, in addition to the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*.<sup>32</sup> Webber's document is actually quite similar in intention to Reis's, which focuses on how Britten adapts his musical language for different genres and incorporates themes of pacifism and the corruption of innocence, as well as the influence of Japanese and Indonesian music. Hui-Ji Hsieh's dissertation from 2007, while specifically focusing on the Third Suite only, provides some rigorous reductive and motivic analysis and engages well with the existing literature on Britten's music.<sup>33</sup>

Peter Evans, who has written more prolifically on Britten's music than any other theorist, covers all three Cello Suites in some detail (as well as seemingly every other work in Britten's oeuvre!) in his book *The Music of Benjamin Britten*.<sup>34</sup> His concise and astute descriptions of both the expressive characteristics and compositional processes of the Suites will prove useful in situating the present analysis.

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<sup>31</sup> Sophie Webber, "Intertextuality in Britten's Suite for Solo Cello No. 1, Op. 72" (DM document, Indiana University, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Reis, "Benjamin Britten, Three Dramatic Analyses: Placing the First Cello Suite in Context" (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Hui-Ju Hsieh, "Britten's Most Russian tribute to Rostropovich: The Cello Suite No. 3, Op. 87" (DMA diss., Boston University, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

## CHAPTER TWO

### SUITE FOR CELLO, OP. 72

#### Introduction

The First Suite for Cello, Op. 72, was written in November and December of 1964, and was premiered by Rostropovich at the 1965 Aldeburgh Festival. Even upon a first hearing at the premiere, the critic William Mann called it “less harmless than it sounds,” and suspected that it had “discomforting harmonic implications.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there appears to be a general consensus among those who are familiar with the Suite that it embodies a dichotomy between tunefulness and levity, and harmonic difficulty and strangeness. Phillip Rupprecht asserts that:

With so much emphasis on rather brash display in this Suite, it might be felt that Britten risks characterizing his virtuoso exponent as brilliant but lacking in depth. Yet the pervasively high level of harmonic tension and tonal ambiguity helps to counter any impression of superficiality.<sup>36</sup>

The Suite runs a concise twenty-one minutes long with *attacca* transitions between the nine movements movement. It begins with a movement titled Canto Primo that returns in varying forms as a sort of ritornello in between numbered movements that could be described as character pieces. The movements proceed as follows: Canto Primo,

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<sup>35</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: a Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 448.

<sup>36</sup> Philip Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 198-9.

I Fuga, II Lamento, Canto Secondo, III Serenata, IV Marcia, Canto Terzo, V Bordone, VI Moto Perpetuo e Canto Quarto.

The recurring Canto movements serve as the backbone of the Suite and are treated as such in the present analysis.

Peter Evans describes the Canto as follows:

Memorable though the effect of this ‘song’ is, one scarcely recalls it simply as a tune: certain basic melodic shapes emerge from the peak notes on the opening presentation, but they are just as likely to reappear in the middle or at the bottom of the texture in later statements. As the parts alternate swiftly between melodic and harmonic functions, a very rich sonority is implied, even though no more than two notes are heard at once.

The sound of these diatonic sevenths and ninths recall the transfigured world on to which Act II of *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream* opens, and the Canto’s ritornello function is made as evocative as are the recurrent images which articulate that opera.”<sup>37</sup>

Phillip Rupprecht points out the Canto’s resemblance not to *A Midsummer-Night’s Dream*, but to the plainchant opening of another one of Britten’s operas, *Curlew River*:

It would have been only natural if the First Cello Suite should have reflected in Britten’s preoccupations, in *Curlew River* and its planned successors, with the thematic and harmonic potential of Monticello

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<sup>37</sup> Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 325.

plainsong...For Britten, the modality of the chant melody “Te Lucis ante terminum,” heard at the beginning of *Curlew River*, was inevitably inflected, and made ambiguous, by the modern listener’s instinctive sense of functional tonality, with its different intervallic priorities and textural implications. The first Suite also begins with chant...Yet the cello is characterized here not so much by single notes as by dyads; double stopping becomes the normal way of promoting a texture concerned not (yet!) with imitative contrapuntal dialogue between different voices, but with discourse among the post-tonal forces rooting invariance on the one hand and ambiguity on the other”<sup>38</sup>

Sophie Webber even dedicates an entire dissertation to intertextual connections between the First Suite and *Curlew River*.<sup>39</sup> I would go so far as to argue that the Third Suite is as much indebted to *Curlew River* as the First, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

### **Starting With the Big Picture: Background Bassline Graphs**

One immediately apparent way in which Britten alludes to tonal structures in the First Suite is his use of key signatures for each movement, and the resulting pitch centers that they imply. In a practical sense, key signatures typically aid the performer by providing a basis for what diatonic collection is being used and therefore reducing the

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<sup>38</sup> Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten*, 196.

<sup>39</sup> Webber, “Intertextuality in Britten’s Suite for Solo Cello.”

number of accidentals in the music. This is only useful if 1) the notes in the key signature occur often enough in their unaltered state (i.e. if there is an F-sharp in the key signature, more than half of the Fs in the piece should be sharp), and 2) if the piece is diatonic enough that an accomplished performer would be able to remember the key signature while playing. In the case of the piece at hand, neither of these criteria are met. Therefore, while the key signatures serve no utilitarian purpose whatsoever, they are more symbolic in nature and provide a glimpse into how Britten conceptualized the piece. They reveal that, at least in terms of large-scale organization, Britten was thinking tonally and had an intended pitch center in mind for each movement.

A background reductive bassline graph of the work as a whole (Example 1) serves as a logical first step in demonstrating how these pitch centers are organized and what this organization reveals about the shape of the piece. In all of the background graphs shown in Example 1, each notehead represents the pitch center of one movement. A brief explanation of each movement and its key signature will provide a basis for how pitch centers were selected to create this background graph.



Numbered movements background bassline



Canto movement background bassline



Combined background bassline

### Example 1

The first movement (Canto Primo) quite clearly has a pitch center of G, with one sharp in the key signature and a G bass pedal that both begins and ends the movement. Britten's nod to the opening of Bach's Suite No. 1 in G major is immediately apparent, establishing the correlation of his Suites' pitch centers with Bach's, as they were written, "half fulfilling a joke contract made with Rostropovich—drawn up on a table napkin and signed by the composer—for a body of works to match Bach's literature for solo cello."<sup>40</sup> We will see that this correlation of pitch centers with Bach's continues with the Second and Third Suites as well.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Kildea, *Britten on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 474.

The second movement of the Suite and first of the numbered movements (I Fuga) has two flats in the key signature, implying a pitch center of G or B-flat. The pitch material here is far less diatonic than the Canto Primo, yet the G Dorian scale in the first opening measure is persuasive enough to call the pitch center G. Additionally, the second entrance of the fugue subject in measure 10 begins on D, implying the tonic to dominant relationship of subject and answer in conventional fugue form. The third movement (II. Lamento) has one sharp and a descending E minor triad that reappears almost obsessively as a cadential gesture throughout the movement, effectively establishing the pitch center as E.

The fourth movement (Canto Secondo) continues the thread of the opening movement, and at first glance, its key signature and apparent pitch center seem to be at odds with one another. Because the Canto Secondo begins as an exact transposition of the Canto Primo a perfect fifth down, one would expect a key signature of C major. However, the Canto Secondo instead retains the same key signature as the Canto Primo: one sharp. This is a perfect example of how the key signatures in this work are symbolic rather than practical, as there are no F-sharps in the entire movement! The only F that appears is made natural with an accidental. A look at the resulting bassline graph that includes all of the movements provides a possible explanation (see Example 1). If we include one bass pitch per movement, the pitches prolonged up through the Canto Secondo are G, E and C. Through a reductive lense, this arpeggiation could be connected as a sort of continuation of the initial G, which creates a normative background bass structure. Thus it is reasonable to assume that this movement is intended as part of what

comes before it, which is reflected in the key signature. The C pedal throughout could even be loosely interpreted as a move to the subdominant.

The next movement (III Serenata) has one flat and is played entirely *pizzicato*. It has a distinctly Phrygian feel, establishing D as the pitch center. Due to the abundance of E-flats, Britten could have reasonably chosen two flats as the key signature in order to match the mode, yet he instead uses the tonal key signature of D minor. The following movement (IV Marcia) has the key signature of D major, but without this clue it would be difficult at first to discern that the pitch center is D. The first measure forms a high A major arpeggio, as do the last three measures, meaning that the movement both begins and ends “off-tonic.”

By the time we get to the sixth movement (Canto Terzo) the relationship between key signature and pitch center breaks down. In this movement there is no key signature, yet the underlying structural bass pitch is C-sharp, which is both a tritone away from our overall pitch center and also from the tenor voice above it. The seventh movement (V Bordone) has one sharp in the key signature and a D pedal sustained throughout the entire movement, implying a dominant function. The eighth and final movement (VI Moto Perpetuo e Canto Quarto) unifies the numbered and Canto sections and returns to G to bring the work to a close.

Britten’s choice to exclude the Canto sections from his numbering system of the movements implies three possible narratives across the duration of the piece: one for the Canto sections alone, one for the numbered movements alone, and one that includes all of the movements. Background bassline graphs for each of these possible narratives reveal

varying levels of harmonic normativity (Example 1). The Canto sections alone outline a tritone, while the numbered movements outline a completely normative I-V-I bassline progression. Combined, these backgrounds result in a progression that is still fairly normative, but with a strong tritone emphasis. This tension between harmonic motion at the perfect fifth and motion at the tritone is an important recurring characteristic of the piece that will continue to appear at varying structural levels.

### **Surface-Level Embellishment Figurations and Contextual Stability**

For a more detailed analysis of each individual Canto movement, it will be useful to return to Steve Larson's article "The Problem of Prolongation in 'Tonal' Music: Terminology, Perception, and Expressive Meaning," in which he argues that all stability is contextual and determined by prolongation. Larson defines contextual stability as follows:

To hear a note as unstable means to auralize a more stable pitch to which it tends to move and a path (usually involving stepwise motion) that would take it there, displacing its trace. This is the definition of "contextual stability"...Prolongation—and only prolongation—always determines which notes are heard as stable in a given context. This may be restated as a second definition of stability: To hear a note as unstable also means to

hear it as embellishing a more stable pitch—that is, to hear it as embellishing a pitch at a more remote level of pitch structure.<sup>41</sup>

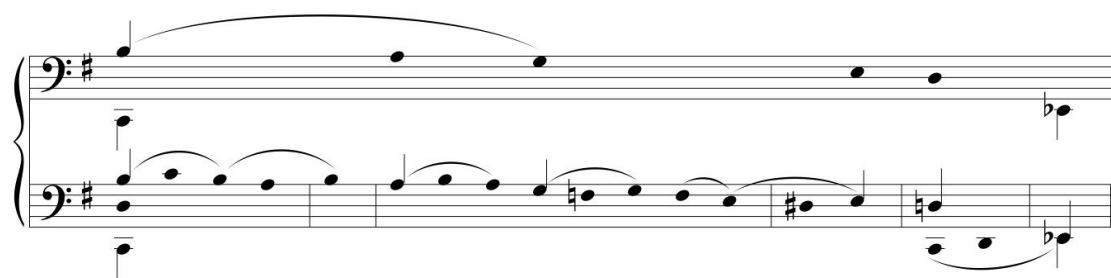
While I do not necessarily believe that prolongation is universally the mechanism by which structural levels in music can be determined, this does clearly occur in the First Suite's Canto movements with interesting harmonic implications. Britten prolongs certain pitches with surface-level embellishment figurations typically found in tonal music—specifically neighbor figures—to create a sense of stability where there would otherwise be none based on vertical harmony. This is most obviously apparent in the Canto Primo, in turn providing a context of relative stability for the other Canto movements to come away from and return to.

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<sup>41</sup> Larson, "The Problem of Prolongation in 'Tonal' Music," 106-112.



Canto Primo middleground reduction



Canto Secondo middleground reduction

## Example 2

The overall texture of the Canto Primo is very simple with only two pitches sounding at any time, combining to imply a three or four-note voicing. The motion in the soprano line is almost always stepwise, favoring complete and incomplete neighbors, only leaping up or down at specific expressive moments. In the context of tonal counterpoint, many of the dyads sounding at once (and the three and four-note sonorities they imply) are dissonant. Despite this, there is an overall feeling of stability and

openness at the beginning, which only moves towards tension during the middle section to provide affective contrast. Within this movement, Britten creates his own unique contextual hierarchy of consonance and dissonance, which he both elaborates upon and challenges in the following Canto movements.

The first four measures of the Canto Primo have a sense of declamatory openness, and their contour, both horizontally and vertically, is the material from which the rest of the movement is derived. Beginning in measure 5, there is a move towards tension, which reaches a local platform of stability in measures 9-10. Measure 11, marked *tranquillo*, resumes the tension, this time in a distant and mysterious manner. Measure 15 begins an earnest attempt at finding the stability of the beginning, which is finally achieved in an almost exact repetition of the first two measures.

If we cannot rely as listeners on the consonance and dissonance of the intervals Britten uses, how are we able to hear the this movement's journey away from and back to stability? The most obvious parameters we can look to are the regular rhythm, simple embellishment figurations, and the registral spacing of vertical sonorities. The harmony established in the first two beats of the first measure provides an excellent example of these parameters at work. It contains G, A and F-sharp, with a major ninth between the bottom G and middle A, a major sixth between the A and F-sharp, and a major seventh displaced by an octave between the G and F-sharp. Despite the dissonance of its intervals, the way Britten expresses this sonority allows the listener to hear it as relatively stable. The spacing of the notes supplies this stability, with the largest interval between the bass and middle voice, and a smaller interval between the middle voice and soprano voice.

Additionally, the interval between the top two voices is the most consonant while the most dissonant interval (the major seventh) is given the most distance and therefore does not clash as directly. The registral spacing established in the first measure continues as a factor of stability and instability throughout the movement and the other Canto movements. For example, in measures 15-16 where the music is affectively tense and searching, the middle voice begins closer to the bass than the soprano, then moves towards the soprano as it reaches stability in measure 17.

Embellishment figuration and rhythm are other parameters that Britten uses to establish stability, and in the case of this piece they generally go hand in hand. The rhythm is extremely regular and does not require much discussion; it is entirely quarter-notes and half notes, and always supports the shape of the embellishments, i.e. longer durations for relatively stable soprano pitches, except in certain cases of deliberate expressive tension. As far as the embellishing neighbor figures in the soprano, a middleground reduction shows which pitches are more structural (see Example 2). When the melody is taken by itself without the context of the supporting intervals, the simple neighbors make finding structural pitches quite obvious. For example, the most stable soprano pitch in the first two measures is undoubtedly F-sharp, but when combined with the bass note, it creates a major seventh. The pull of the double neighbor is so strong, however, that the major seventh between the bass and soprano becomes contextually stable, and the embellishing G in the soprano, which creates an octave, is not.

The Canto Secondo is only five measures long and begins as a direct transposition one fifth down from the Canto Primo. Because there is one sharp in the key signature,

one can infer that the structural bass motion to C is intended to resemble a move to the subdominant. Halfway through the second measure, the exact fifth transposition breaks down and becomes a transposition by a major seventh, which continues for the rest of the measure. This allows the bass to remain a C pedal, as opposed to moving up a major third to E. The consequence of the increased interval of transposition is that of heaviness and pulling downward. This is enhanced by the continued downward motion in the middle voice in measure five while the bass and soprano remain static. The concluding stepwise motion in the bass up to E-flat is at first puzzling, but a look to the following movement makes the purpose of this clear. As noted earlier, the *Serenata* is loosely in D Phrygian, which re-contextualizes the E-flat bass note of the *Canto Secondo* as a kind of half-cadence. When we reach the *Serenata*, it has already been prepared in the bass by a strong tendency tone leading to the new pitch center. This is a good example of the *Canto* sections not only relating closely to each other, but to the movements that surround them.

### **Canto Primo vs. Canto Terzo**

The *Canto Terzo* provides a fascinating opportunity for comparison with the *Canto Primo*. In many ways it functions as an inverted mirror of the first *Canto*, not necessarily in literal theoretical terms, but in its general contour and expressive journey. Just as the *Canto Primo* feels stable and open, conversely the *Canto Terzo* feels tense, closed, and unstable. Specifically, the most immediately apparent difference between these two movements lies in their interval content. In the *Canto Primo*, vertical tritones

only appear during measures 11-16, the exact sections of music that sound most unstable, searching for the stability of the opening measures. A tritone between the bass and middle voice in measure 11 of the first Canto foreshadows the opening of the Canto Terzo. In measure 13, Britten breaks his pattern of supporting a structural soprano note with a consonant middle voice, and instead supports it with a tritone. The effect is that of complete instability. The two rising gestures in measures 15-16 each begin with a tritone and then temporarily resolve to structural pitches on dissonant intervals—the soprano A in measure 15 and the soprano C-sharp in measure 16, are both supported by a major seventh. Although these two pitches feel like local points of arrival, the dissonant intervals beneath propel them forward in search of a more satisfying resolution. The final structural pitch of this section—the E at the end of measure 16—is supported by a minor sixth that pulls into a minor seventh in anticipation of the opening F-sharp, which finally returns in measure 17. After the tense journey of measures 11-16 by means of the tritone, the return of the opening gesture at the end of the movement feels even more satisfying and tuneful than it did when it was first introduced, showing that by the end of the movement, Britten has reoriented the listener to the individual context of this piece.



### Canto Terzo middleground reduction

#### Example 3

The Canto Terzo, by comparison, is the affective opposite of the Canto Primo. It begins tense and uncertain, strives towards some form of stability in the middle, and ultimately fails, returning to the uncertainty of the beginning. However, without the context provided by the Canto Primo, the Canto Terzo would perhaps not have such rich meaning. The listener's memory of the first movement gives weight to how the listener experiences the relative instability of the Canto Terzo. If this movement stood alone as a piece, or if it were the movement that opened the work, perhaps it would convey a different emotion, or serve a different expressive purpose. However, because the Canto Primo comes first, with the Canto Terzo as a contrasting pillar in the middle of the work,

the first Canto establishes the context that the third one interacts with, creating a dialogue between the two movements that traces a cohesive expressive arc across the whole piece.

The many similarities between these two movements allow the differences to be even more striking. They are exactly the same length, with the same implied three to four-note texture by means of dyads. Additionally, the rhythmic content is generally the same, as is the melodic contour, with held pedal notes in the bass and stepwise neighbor figures in the soprano. However, in the first Canto, the interval of the tritone is reserved for special expressive moments while in the Canto Terzo, the opening sonority, which acts as a kernel for the intervallic content of the rest of the movement, contains a tritone between the bass and middle voice. Because the tritone was established as relatively unstable in the Canto Primo, this opening tritone of the Canto Terzo immediately creates a feeling of uncertainty. Britten reverses his former principles of registral spacing, with the smallest intervals on the bottom, and the arpeggiation figure is also flipped, with the bass note sounding first, stacking upward to the soprano.

Because the Canto Terzo begins with relative intervallic instability, the journey of the middle section must be to strive towards stability if this movement is to continue its expressive inversion of the Canto Primo. Indeed this is the case. The structural melody moves as if it is trying to escape dissonance—specifically the interval of the tritone, yet never truly succeeds. The longest spans of music without a tritone are measures 11-12 for eight beats, and the last three measures of the movement. Unlike the Canto Primo, in which the most important structural motion is always in the outer voices, the Canto Terzo breaks up the linear motion between different voices, especially in the striving middle

section. Starting in measure five, Britten cycles incomplete neighbors from voice to voice in an almost frantic search for stability in upward stepwise motion. By measure 10, the music finally breaks into a leap, propelled by a quarter-note triplet in the previous measure, reaching a minor seventh which resembles a somewhat analogous moment in measure six of the Canto Primo. In the context of the Canto Terzo, this moment takes on a quality of desperateness, leaping away from dissonance only to reach yet another dissonance. Measure 12 provides a brief respite with its temporary lack of tritones, yet does not achieve stability. Foreshadowed by the quarter-note triplet in measure nine, Britten also begins a completely new motive that never appears in the Canto Primo. In the middle of measure 12, he breaks into a three-note linear figure that completely takes over in the following measure. It is as if the failure of the recurring incomplete neighbor necessitated the expansion of its motion into three notes instead of two. Britten again breaks up the structural linear motion between different voices, finally landing on a unison D in measure 14. The last three measures return partially to the beginning, but unlike the end of the Canto Primo, the exact pitch content is not repeated. On the most basic level, this inexact repetition undermines the perfect cyclic shape that had been established in the first movement. However, it is clear that the purpose of the last three measures is that of continuation, not closure.

## Different Levels of Tritones

An examination of the structural bass pitches of the Canto sections alone (Example 1) reveals the great importance of the tritone. The main bass motion is from G to C-sharp back to G, with a brief C-natural in-between, acting as a sort of predominant. A structural bassline graph that includes the numbered movements reveals a more tonally normative progression. In this sense the Canto movements alone, the numbered movements alone, and the entire piece combined each have slightly different complementary journeys, creating an intricately nuanced yet cohesive listening experience. The problem of the tritone, however, and its conflict with a more normative dominant, does not limit itself to the background structure. It occurs at every level of structure, both vertically and horizontally. For example, vertical tritones are introduced as contextually unstable in the Canto Primo during measure 11-16. This problem is solved on a middleground level by the return of the opening in the last two measures, but is yet to be explored at the background. On an even more local level, discrete tritones are introduced and resolved at the surface, sometimes only lasting a beat (measure 15), sometimes an entire measure (measure 11). In other words, there are constantly different levels of tritone prolongation occurring at any given time during the piece. The Canto Primo contains only local tritone prolongation, because the background bass has not yet moved, resulting in overall stability with moments of local instability. The Canto Terzo on the other hand, contains background, middleground, and foreground tritone prolongation, making it the most tense moment of the piece—the opposing affective pole

to the Canto Primo. The resolutions of these tritones are just as complex as their introductions, occurring and capturing the listener's attention at different times and different levels of focus. For example, the end of the Canto Terzo resolves the tritone problem of the movement, yet can be heard as embellishing the tritone of the background. The effect is that of incomplete resolution—an only partially satisfying ending that for some intangible reason must continue into the next movement. Even the resolution of the background tritone occurs at different times depending on what lens one looks through, delaying the true feeling of resolution until the Moto Perpetuo and Canto Quarto combine in the last movement. With the background bassline of all of the movements as our criteria, the background C# is merely a neighbor to the D, and has resolved by the start of the Bordone. However, this resolution is undermined by the fact that the Canto sections have their own separate sense of continuity between them, meaning that the tritone problem is not universally resolved until the Canto Quarto happens and mingles with the Moto Perpetuo. Even at the local level, the tension between different resolution points of the background C-sharp is explored; the entire Moto Perpetuo section of the last movement is built on the neighboring oscillation between C-sharp and D.

### **Motives and Prolongation**

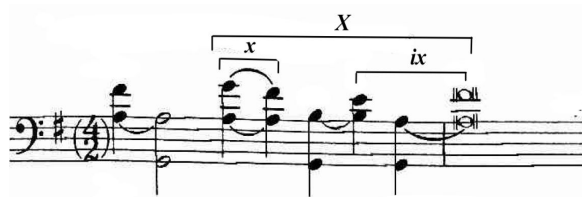
Britten's First Suite for Cello possesses an incredible cyclic organization with many different layers. Nothing is placed arbitrarily, with each note serving some sort of motivic, harmonic, and/or formal purpose. Middleground or background prolongational spans and sections of motivic development often go hand in hand. Although the Canto

movements alone serve as a source of continuity across the piece as a whole, the numbered movements are also highly related to them. A few simple melodic motives and their variants recur almost obsessively throughout every movement of the piece, and different iterations of these motives usually serve to prolong a certain pitch or harmony.

Britten displays the work's important motivic and harmonic material most clearly in the opening Canto Primo (as well as the other recurring Canto movements) and the final Moto Perpetuo. This construction suggests that he may have composed these movements first, with the intervening movements serving as explorations on the main material in different contexts. Britten's system of setting apart the Canto movements by not numbering them supports this hypothesis. The numbered movements (I Fuga, II Lamento, III Serenata, IV Marcia, V Bordone, VI Moto Perpetuo e Canto Quarto) each evoke a specific genre, utilizing motivic material from the first movement to appropriately yet refreshingly compose out the forms and characters that their titles imply. The way the main motives are constructed allows for this formal versatility and also provides a reliable framework for prolongational hierarchies.

Every melodic motive in this piece can be derived from a simple neighbor figure, which happens to be the first horizontal event that occurs. This is ingenious on Britten's part for two reasons: 1) different types of neighbor figures can be arranged and combined in a vast number of ways, allowing the composer to incorporate a satisfying balance of repetition and variety, and 2) neighbor tones are a norm of embellishment in tonal music that is so ingrained into our way of listening that it allows us to experience prolongational hierarchies even in the absence of functional tonality.

The first three notes in the highest voice of the Canto Primo (Example 4) trace an upper neighbor from F-sharp up to G and back. All upper neighbors such as this, both complete and incomplete, will be labeled as motive *x*. I have chosen not to differentiate in labeling between half-step and whole-step neighbors, as this is usually dependent on the harmony or implied pitch center. The upper neighbor in the first measure is then immediately followed by a lower neighbor (its inversion), which will subsequently be labeled as *ix*. These two neighbors in succession form a larger, four-note motive which is labeled as *X* (upper case). The motives in these first two measures along with their vertical harmonic support embody the underlying organization of the entire piece: despite the lack of functionally tonal harmonies, melodic neighbor figures establish an audible sense of hierarchy.



Canto Primo mm. 1-2 motives



Canto Primo mm. 4-6 motives

### Example 4

Another important motive that occurs frequently throughout the work is a double neighbor in which the resolution note only appears at the end, appearing for the first time in measure six. Although this motive appears to be a variant of motive *X* with the middle resolution note missing, it is treated distinctly throughout the work and therefore necessitates a separate label as *y* or *iy* in the case of its inversion. Motive *y* does, however, function similarly to *X* in that it establishes the relative stability of the resolution note.

In addition to horizontal melodic fragments, certain vertical sonorities introduced at the beginning recur throughout the piece at varying levels of structure both vertically and horizontally. For example, the first verticality of the Canto Primo (F#-A-G) returns in many different contexts, both in its original form and inverted or transposed, occasionally even including other harmonies near it (such as E-B-G) from the first measure. Additionally, the top interval of this sonority (a major sixth) returns prominently both at the surface and deeper structural levels, creating a sense of cyclic familiarity every time it appears.

Although the Moto Perpetuo movement occurs chronologically last within the piece, it contains a clarity of motivic development that informs all of the movements preceding it. Not only motivically, but harmonically and formally as well, it represents a synthesis and resolution of ideas introduced throughout the rest of the work. However, many of these ideas are initially presented so obliquely that they do not come fully into the listener's awareness until hearing the last movement. In this way, Britten ingeniously alters the sense of musical time in a way that is reminiscent of late Beethoven, shifting

the center of gravity as close to the end as possible. Neil Powell has noted “Britten's familiar principle of delayed gratification,”<sup>42</sup> and indeed this is a characteristic shared by all three Suites. Developments of the last movement occur before we have even heard it, resulting in the postponement of full understanding until the piece comes to a close. Analytically, it is therefore logical to spend some time discussing the last movement before moving forward with the rest of the piece.

### **Moto Perpetuo: The Motivic Peak of the Suite**

The Moto Perpetuo section of the final movement of the Suite develops motives introduced in the Canto Primo with an astounding thoroughness and skill. Moto perpetuo as a form is defined as “a piece in which rapid figuration is persistently maintained...exhibit[ing] a performer’s digital agility,”<sup>43</sup> and the movement at hand fully embodies the “rather brash display”<sup>44</sup> that Phillip Rupprecht notes as characteristic of the piece. In performance, it would present as a concise and cerebral exploration in neighbor tones if it were not for the blisteringly fast tempo and extreme dynamic changes, which instead conjure dramatic images ranging from an excited whisper to a swarm of angry bees. Approximately halfway through the movement, this intense activity is interrupted by an exact statement of the first two measures of the Canto Primo. A dialogue ensues, beginning with separate fragments and eventually combining into a hybrid of the two.

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<sup>42</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 415.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Tilmouth, "Moto perpetuo," *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deanne Root, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

<sup>44</sup> Rupprecht, *Rethinking Britten*, 199.

The end of the movement presents the Canto Primo in its entirety, but through the texture and excitement of the Moto Perpetuo, as if the Moto Perpetuo had swallowed the Canto whole.

In many ways, the Moto Perpetuo pares away extraneous musical material and develops only the essentials with utmost clarity. The first five measures present our main neighbor motives but in reverse order—first *ix*, then *x*, which combine to form *IX*. It is worth noting that Britten uses exclusively half-step neighbors in this movement, with the exception of a contrasting section from measures 69-82. This eliminates the singing quality inherent in mixed diatonic intervals and instead evokes a mathematical angularity that renders the Canto Primo's final return even more surprising and satisfying. Pervasive half-steps in combination with the quick tempo also create a halo of buzzing instability in pitch. This impacts the mechanisms of prolongation in this movement and its resulting middleground and background structures.



Moto Perpetuo mm. 1-5 motives

### Example 5

Measure five presents yet another composite motive that can be conceived of in two different ways. It is both an intervallic expansion of *IX* in which the two neighbors are separated and therefore no longer resolve to the same pitch, as well as overlapping

iterations of *ix* and *y*. This demonstrates just one of many instances of Britten's precise economy of motivic construction in this movement. I have labeled the composite motive described above as *Y* because it is the most concise instance of a figure that has already appeared in previous movements. Measures 7-9 repeat the previous three measures in literal inversion, reflecting symmetrically across C-sharp/D-flat. Although these three measures are an inversion of what comes directly before, the motives more closely resemble their original forms in the Canto Primo, as if we must observe the first phrase of the Moto Perpetuo in a mirror before seeing it head on. In measures 10-11, Britten then repeats *ix* in a cycle of minor thirds in order to transfer to the next register. This sets a precedent for how the rest of the Moto Perpetuo is organized: interval cycles continue to function transitionally and travel directly from one prolonged middleground pitch to the next. David Forrest notes similar mechanisms at work in three of Britten's choral pieces in his article "Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten," in which he argues that surface-level triads prolong middleground symmetrical interval cycles, which in turn prolong pitches that help establish centricity.<sup>45</sup> While symmetrical interval cycles play a prominent role in the Moto Perpetuo as well, they serve more as a link between prolongational spans which are achieved instead through motivic development.

Although each formal section of the Moto Perpetuo generally centers around a single pitch, there are a few portions that imply a multi-voiced texture. Each time this texture occurs, an additional voice is added until the last repetition contains four voices—one hovering around each open string of the cello. Measures 17-18 contain two

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<sup>45</sup> Forrest, "Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten," 1.

distinct voices that together form an expansion of motive *Y*, with the interval between *ix* and *x* expanded from a minor third to a major sixth—the top voice momentarily becomes its own entity—a fragmented form of composite motive *IX*, while the bottom voice lingers on *ix*. This section as a whole and others like it are labeled as *Z* in Example 6 in order to differentiate when Britten moves from one voice to multiple voices. By the time *Z* returns a fourth time, it has expanded considerably in length and scope, lasting from measures 93-104. The bottom voice yet again remains stationary on motive *ix*, while the other voices each follow their own pattern of repetitions of *x* and *ix*. Although four voices implies four different lines of prolongation, the lowest voice always fits most logically with the background structure of the piece while the others harmonize it.

While detecting the motivic structure of this movement was quite straightforward, determining the best method for reductive analysis initially posed a challenge. Because pitches always occur in pairs as incomplete neighbors, sometimes ascending and sometimes descending, it is ambiguous at first glance which of the two pitches is more structural. Depending on which pitch is selected during the reduction process, different middleground structures are possible. For example, one could always select the first pitch of each neighbor, the second, the lower, or the upper—and proceed from there. Each of these methods would produce a slightly different, yet equally organized structure through which to view the movement. Middleground reductions based on the lower pitch of each neighbor vs. the upper pitch would be a half step apart from each other. The quick tempo for the movement contributes to the possibility of multiple types of prolongation

happening simultaneously, as the half-step neighbors come across nearly as dyads to the listener.

measure	motive	prolonged pitch
m. 1-4	IX (ix+x)	D
m. 5-8	Y (ix+y)	D
m. 7-9	I(IX+Y)	C
m. 10-11	cycle (ix)	
m. 12-13	Y	A
m. 14-16	cycle (Y)	
m. 17-20	Z (2 voices)	Eb
m. 21-22	cycle (x)	
m. 23-26	Z (2 voices)	D
m. 27-28	cycle (IX')	
m. 29-32	ix	G
m. 33-50	Z (3 voices)	Ab
m. 51-52	cycle (ix)	
m. 53-55	I(IX+Y)	G
m. 56-58	I(IX+Y)	F
m. 59	cycle (ix)	
m. 60-62	I(IX+Y)	C
m. 63-65	I(IX+Y)	A#/Bb
m. 66-68	cycle (IY)	
m. 69-82	contrasting	D
m. 83-85	cycle (x)	
m. 87-92	IX	Db
m. 93-104	Z (4 voices)	Db
m. 105-107	I(IX+Y)	G
m. 108-110	I(IX+Y)	F

Moto Perpetuo motive chart

### Example 6

Nonetheless, motivic patterns established earlier in the piece provide a reliable basis for selecting a more structural pitch from each dyad. In the opening phrase of the

Canto Primo, *x* and *ix* occur as complete neighbors that resolve to the stabler pitch. The first few measures of the Moto Perpetuo behave similarly, and although the neighbors are sometimes incomplete, it seems obvious that measures 1-6 prolong D, which always occurs as the second note of each pair of pitches. Because the rest of the Moto Perpetuo is also based on *x* and *ix*, it is reasonable to assume that the second note is always the resolution note of the incomplete neighbor and therefore more structural.

A full reduction of the Moto Perpetuo using this method reveals middleground and background structures that reinforce prolongational patterns that occur throughout the piece as a whole—specifically, bassline motion in perfect fifths and tritones. The entire movement, including the Canto Quarto, contains a background resolution from D to G. The Moto Perpetuo centers around D, while the Canto Quarto, which is harmonically identical to the Canto Primo, centers around G. At the background level, this resembles a resolution from dominant to tonic. Within the Moto Perpetuo, patterns of fifths coincide with different motivic sections, all serving to prolong D. Single-voiced sections based on motives *X*, *IX*, *Y* and *IY*, always center around the same pitch as one of the open strings of the cello—A, D, G or C. Multi-voiced sections (*Z*), however, contain bass notes that are always a tritone away from one of the cello's open strings—Eb, Ab, and Db. The result is two simultaneous background structures, each outlining a pattern of descending fifths, but occurring a tritone away from each other.

## I FUGA

The remaining numbered movements of the First Suite explore materials presented in the Canto sections in the context of other well-known forms. Robert Saxton, a composer who began corresponding with Britten in 1963 at the age of nine, recounts:

He was always going on at me to write ‘character’ pieces, waltzes, marches’ things that *other* composers have done’; in other words, don’t try and write noises or be original, but try and become a craftsman. One of the great sentences in his letters to me is, “Sounding right is all that matters.”

46

Here we have confirmation from a composer who worked with Britten directly that engaging with existing forms was of the utmost importance to him. He was not interested in starting from scratch, but instead sought innovation within a set of parameters. Fugue, a genre associated with learned craftsmanship and of course with J.S. Bach, is the only form that Britten includes in all three Cello Suites.

Although the Fuga of the First Suite bears no resemblance to anything around it at first glance, it is full of motivic references to the Canto Primo. The opening dorian scale of the fugue subject spans a major 6th—a horizontalized iteration of the first interval of the piece. The scale then lands on an incomplete form of motive *X*, which instead of

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<sup>46</sup> Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: a Biography*, 40.

resolving to its last note leaps up another major sixth, followed by yet another major sixth starting a whole step lower. The incomplete *X* motive returns on B-flat—a tritone away from the first instance on E—followed by another chain of rising major sixths. The fugue subject acts almost like an encyclopedia of important material, containing the opening composite motive, the opening vertical interval, and a horizontal middleground tritone. The subject is then followed by a long bridge that develops motive *X* both at the surface and middleground.



Fuga mm. 1-10

### Example 7

As expected, the answer comes in measure 10 at the fifth. The countersubject is an exact inversion of the rising sixths from the subject, trailing behind by one eighth-note. After an even longer bridge section from measures 19-26, the subject and countersubject both return in their inverted forms. The descending sixth that the inverted subject lands on in measure 28 is a tritone away from the first rising sixth in measure 2, creating another instance of horizontal middleground tritone prolongation. A climax of overlapping major sixths gives way to an episode that lasts from measures 37-64.

Although the texture of the episode is very different than what comes before it, with straight sixteenth notes and the addition of droning open strings, its basic materials are essentially the same as the subject. Another entrance of the subject begins in measure 66, this time exactly a tritone away from the first entrance. Fragments of the subject combine and overlap climatically from measures 74-84, but the energy is then dissipated by a long rising and falling extension of the opening scale. This leads into another episode of the same texture as the first from measures 91-107. The movement closes with an exact repetition of the subject and answer at the same transpositions as the beginning, with the addition of a countersubject in harmonics. Although the Fuga mostly behaves like a traditional fugue, Britten took special care to incorporate important surface motives, as well as plenty of instances of horizontal middleground tritone motion.

## II LAMENTO

The second numbered movement of the Suite, II Lamento, is a melancholy expression of grief. Britten even adds the instruction “*piangendo*” to the beginning, which means crying or plaintive. Lamento as a musical form is defined as “a vocal piece based on a mournful text, often built over a descending tetrachord ostinato,”<sup>47</sup> and typical of cantatas and operas of the Baroque Era. While Britten’s interpretation of this genre of course uses a wordless, single-line instrument, the mournful affect is clear. This movement is rhythmically very slow and simple, allowing the pitch content to carry the

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<sup>47</sup> Ellen Rosand, “Lamento,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deanne Root, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

majority of the expressive meaning. Britten choose not to include a time signature, instead placing bar lines at irregular rhythmic intervals that correspond with the divisions between phrases. The first measure could be considered a 5/4 bar, and instead of fitting the following phrases into this rhythmic parameter, Britten allows the bar lengths to grow (as long as 11 beats) and shrink as the phrases do. A recurring E minor triad is used as an important cadential figure at the end of each phrase.

Formally, this movement fits quite easily into a rounded binary form. The first six measures expand and develop the phrase introduced in the first measure, with the longest phrase occurring in measure four and a lone E minor triad closing out the section in measure six. The following B section follows a similar pattern of phrase expansion, starting with new material introduced in measure seven. This new material is related to measure one in that it has the same rhythmic shape, yet the intervals are larger in the first half and all of them move in the opposite direction. The cadential E minor triad is retained but flipped into an ascending arpeggio, changing its affective significance during this section of the piece. The A' section begins in measure 14, repeating measures one and two almost exactly but an octave lower and with slightly different rhythm. The final measure reiterates the returning E minor cadential gesture, this time extending it with a D-sharp minor triad stacked on top.

All of the above characteristics combine to create the intensely mournful affect of this piece. Overall, there is a journey of pushing against grief—an attempt at breaking away from it—yet a failure at ever escaping it. The E minor triad, always descending in the A and A' sections, serves to pull the melody downward, rendering any attempts at

escaping it futile. During the B section, there is an even stronger attempt at pushing upwards in register, temporarily turning the E minor triad into an upward arpeggio. However the downward gravitational pull of E minor is too strong to escape, and the A' section returns into its depths, even an octave lower than before.

Each phrase of this movement is constructed with motives from the Moto Perpetuo and Canto Primo. The first four notes outline motive *Y* in a slightly different arrangement, followed by an E minor triad as a cadence. Subsequent phrases resemble outgrowths of this first measure.



Lamento mm. 1-2 motives

### Example 8

## III SERENATA

The Serenata is a song-like movement that is played *pizzicato* throughout, with broken chords, double stops, and ostinato drone effects that imply a multi-voice texture. The serenade as a genre “originally signified a musical greeting, usually performed out of

doors in the evening, to a beloved or a person of rank,”<sup>48</sup> and indeed Britten’s interpretation evokes a singer accompanying him/herself on a plucked instrument. Sophie Webber notes that combined left-hand and right-hand *pizzicati*, as well as the phrygian and pentatonic pitch material additionally evoke the Japanese shamisen.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV MARCIA

The opening of the First Suite’s charming and quirky march evokes Scottish fife and drums with its high arpeggiated harmonics and percussive, *col legno* open strings.<sup>50</sup> These two voices emphasize perfect fifths moving in opposing directions, coinciding with the open strings of the cello. In this movement, the perfect fifth motion created by the open strings brings to mind Christopher Mark’s analysis of Britten’s earlier instrumental works in which fifths govern the background in a non-functionally harmonic fashion.<sup>51</sup>

The main body of the movement, which begins in measure ten, explores a slightly off-kilter march rhythm in brassy double-stops which are directly derived from harmonies in the opening Canto (Example 9).



<sup>48</sup> Hubert Unverricht and Cliff Eisen, "Serenade," *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deanne Root, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

<sup>49</sup> Webber, "Intertextuality in Britten's Suite for Solo Cello no. 1, op. 72," 126.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> Mark, "Britten and the Circle of Fifths," 268-297.

**Example 9**

**V BORDONE**

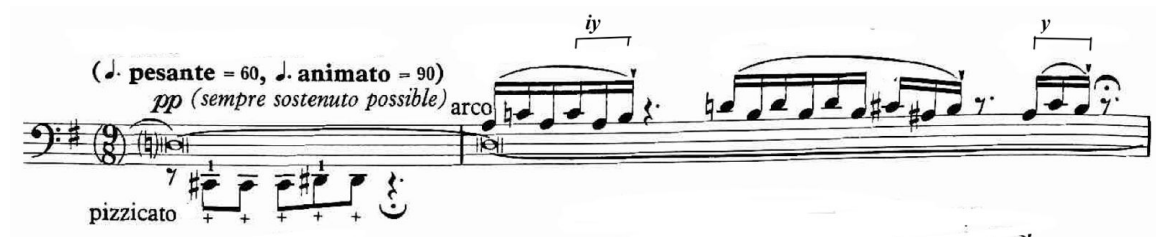
The fifth movement's title literally translates as drone, accurately describing the sustained open D string throughout the entire movement. However, Britten was likely also referencing the viola di bordone. This instrument, more widely known as the baryton, is a hybrid based on the Baroque bass viol that is simultaneously bowed from above and plucked from behind.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the three-voiced texture of this movement with low left-hand *pizzicati* mimics the sound of this instrument.

The top voice of the first half of the movement is a development of motive *y* (Example 10) while the second half, according to Neil Powell, contains a “disconcerting surprise when a ghostly reminiscence of the Elgar concerto appears”<sup>53</sup> in measure 16. I find this comparison dubious, but the passages in question are nonetheless shown in Example 10.

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<sup>52</sup> Deanne Root, ed., “Viola di bardone,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

<sup>53</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 391.



First Suite, V Bordone, mm. 1-2



V Bordone, mm. 14-18



Elgar Cello Concerto, mm. 15-18

### Example 10

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **SECOND SUITE FOR CELLO, OP. 80**

#### **Introduction**

Benjamin Britten's Second Suite for Cello, Op. 80 was written in the summer of 1967. Rostropovich gave the premiere performance the following year at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 17th, 1968, followed by the Suite's publication in 1969. Neil Powell notes that "the whole work has an unsettled quality which makes it hugely challenging for any lesser performer,"<sup>54</sup> echoing critics' reception of the First Suite. Indeed, even a brief comparison of this work with the First Suite reveals that it functions as the second installment in a larger cycle of related pieces. Many of their shared characteristics, which will be traced through the Third Suite as well, are unique and specific not only to Britten's compositional style, but to this particular body of works.

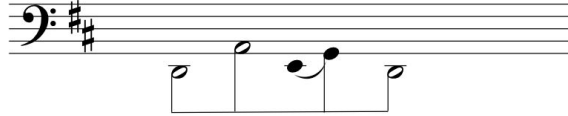
#### **Starting with the Big Picture: Background Bassline Graphs**

Like the First Suite, Britten's choice of pitch centers for individual movements creates a cohesive plan for the harmonic journey of the piece as a whole. While the surface-level pitch material is rarely diatonic enough to establish a key, Britten uses key signatures and starting and ending pitches to signal the intended pitch center of each

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<sup>54</sup>Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 415.

movement. These centers are organized across the entire work in such a way as to reference tonal harmonic progression.



Full Suite background bassline

### Example 11

The first movement, I. Declamato (Largo) has a key signature of two sharps and both begins and ends with cadential figures on D. The rising half-step in the final measure of the movement will continue to reappear throughout the work not only as a cadence, but as an important recurring motive. However, apart from these signals at the beginning and end of the movement, it would otherwise be difficult to discern a key area within the body of the movement. Similarly to the First Suite, the key signature's function is symbolic rather than practical, as there are too many accidentals for it to be actually useful for the performer. As we will see with the final movement, the pitch center returns to D at the end of the piece, placing the suite as a whole loosely in D. This maintains the parallel between Britten's chosen pitch centers and the keys of Bach's solo cello suites.

The following movement, II Fuga (Andante), has no key signature for the bulk of the movement, with a switch to three sharps in the last five measures. The movement begins and ends on A, implying a key of A minor with an end in A major. While the

surface pitch material is largely atonal, fugal subject entrances reinforce important pitches in the key of A. Movement III Scherzo (*Allegro molto*) has a key signature of one sharp and begins and ends on E, implying a key of E minor. At the end of this movement, the rising half-step motive that closed the first movement reappears, not only serving as a cadence on E, but also as a phrase ending on various pitches throughout the movement.

The fourth movement is unique within the Second Suite for two reasons: it lacks a title beyond a tempo marking (*Andante lento*), and the apparent pitch center and key signature do not match. This brings to mind the Canto Terzo from the First Suite, which also signals a moment of breakdown between key signatures and pitch centers. In the case of the *Andante Lento* from the Second Suite, it appears as the penultimate movement and marks the greatest moment of tonal uncertainty within the entire piece. The lack of key signature and tonal ambiguity carries over into the first eight measures of the last movement, V Ciaccona (*Allegro*), serving as a short introduction to the actual body of the movement. In measure 9, the key signature changes to two sharps, with a clear pitch center of D. This movement is decidedly the most functionally tonal of the entire work. It begins as a traditional ground bass-style chaconne in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. At first, the accompanying soprano line follows the ground bass in exact octaves except for the last few notes. However, each time the bassline repeats, the accompanying voice becomes more and more elaborate, with altered textures and proportions in each repetition. After a contrasting middle section with an inverted version of the ground bass starting on A, the movement returns to a triumphant ending in D major.

Considering the harmonic narrative created by the progression of pitch centers from one movement to the next, there is a journey towards uncertainty until the last movement serves as a moment of sudden clarity and brightness. Similarly to the First Suite, Britten's use of key signatures implies that there are tonal underpinnings that govern the background structure of the work. A deep background reduction of the entire piece (Example 11) reveals a perfectly normative harmonic progression in reverse. Instead of I-IV-ii-V-I, the movement proceed in the opposite direction: I-V-ii-IV-I. By hinting at a functionally tonal progression at the deep background level but reversing it into an exact retrogression, Britten removes its traditional functionality and alters the listener's experience.

## **I DECLAMATO**

A number of theorists have pointed out that the opening theme of the first movement, I Declamato, greatly resembles the opening of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5. Alex Ross goes so far as to write that Britten quotes Shostakovich "almost note for note."<sup>55</sup> Example 12 shows a comparison of the first four measures of each piece. While the intervals and rhythms are not identical, the resemblance of the two themes is indeed striking. In light of the circumstances under which Britten and Rostropovich met—at the premiere of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto—Britten's choice to quote Shostakovich so clearly at the opening of the piece comes across as a sweet gesture of admiration and

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<sup>55</sup>Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2013), 438.

friendship. Ross even asserts that Britten's indebtedness to Shostakovich reaches beyond quotation into the style of the work as well, which "echo[es] the taut language of Shostakovich's quartets while also honoring Bach."<sup>56</sup>



Second Suite, I Declamato, mm. 1-2



Shostakovich Symphony No. 5, mm. 1-2

### Example 12

Beyond stylistic characteristics, the compositional procedures which Britten employs throughout the rest of the work render his choice of quotation even more significant, as the opening theme serves not only as the motivic basis for the rest of the first movement, but for the entire piece. While the bulk of the first movement appears quite improvisatory in nature, Britten develops the motives introduced in the opening phrase to an exhaustive degree. Peter Evans writes,

The second suite, Op. 80, in D, opens with a Declamato, an eloquent line that suggests improvisatory abandon but is subtly organized both in its

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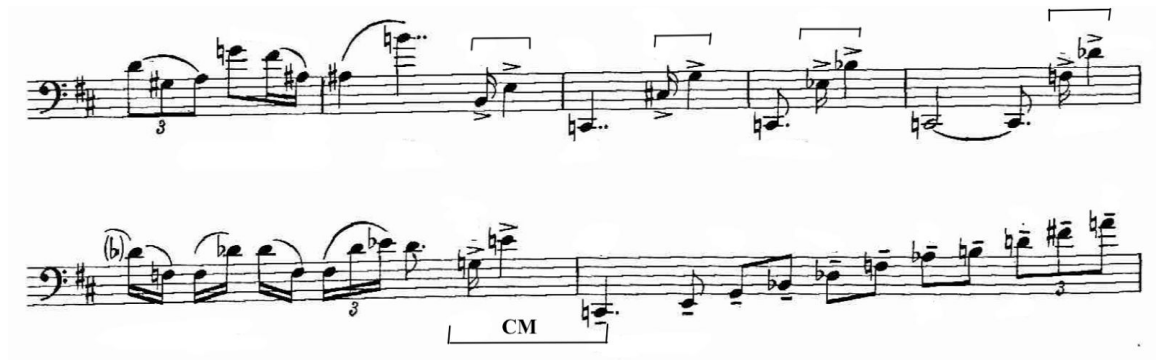
<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

incorporation of apparent asides into the main argument and in the unification of its melodic spans by very systematic widening and contraction of the constituent intervals. Such a movement shows very clearly one of the ways in which in his later style Britten can achieve a strong sense of logic without depending on progressive harmony.”<sup>57</sup>

For example, the very first two notes of the movement, a rising perfect fourth, become a recurring gesture at varying intervals. Example 13 shows how in measures 9-13 Britten alternates between a low C pedal and continually expanding repetitions of the opening motive, repeatedly transposed up to form a minor third cycle. At the culmination of this rising gesture, Britten expands the motive to a major sixth, which arrives on a C major triad in combination with the C pedal. While I would agree with Evans that this passage and others like it do not depend on progressive harmony for their sense of logic, there is indeed a chord progression embedded within. The bottom notes of each repetition of the perfect fourth motive form a B diminished seventh chord, which resolves to C major in measure 13. While this progression is not necessarily audible on the surface, it does assist the sense of arrival created by motivic expansion.

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<sup>57</sup> Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 326.



I Declamato mm. 8-14

### Example 13

## II FUGA (Andante)

Peter Evans describes the fugal second movement as possessing an, “attractive blend of hesitancy and haste”<sup>58</sup> Similarly to the fugue movement of the First Suite, Britten derives his subject from motivic material already introduced in the opening movement. These motives appear at two different structural levels within the subject. At a more surface level, the intervallic contour of the first three notes of the piece (Example 12)—an ascending perfect fourth followed by a descending minor second—appears twice in inverted form, shown in brackets in Example 14. Additionally, the exact pitch classes of the first four notes of the piece appear more subtly at the middleground level, outlining the rhythmic contour of the fugue subject. These pitches are circled in the first part of Example 14. The countersubject, which accompanies the answer (i.e., second entrance of the subject) starting in measure eight, continues the motivic connections with the opening

<sup>58</sup> Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 326.

theme of the first movement by repeating the descending minor second of its second and third notes in the exact same rhythm but at different transposition levels.

As far as the fugal procedures that Britten employs to complete the body of the movement, his methods are quite conventional. The fugal subject occurs three times within the exposition, first on A, then the traditional perfect fifth away on D, then on C, which would be the mediant in the implied key of A minor. An episode, which begins in measure 36, explores the perfect fourth in the bracketed motive of the subject. At the culmination of this episode, both the subject and countersubject return in inverted form with the subject on C-sharp. This adds to the ambiguity between A minor and A major and foreshadows the change to a key signature of three sharps for the last five bars of the movement. While the structure of this movement as a whole is relatively conservative, the true innovation lies in Britten's construction of the fugue subject. His carefully considered use of rests allows for a contrapuntal texture without any double stops. Britten even manages to layer three entrances of the subject, each one beat apart, while still maintaining the clarity of each voice (Example 14). Peter Evans even asserts that "this working-out of a complete fugue (including canonic episode and a statement of subject-plus-countersubject in mirror form) is perhaps the most elaborately consistent use of the *style brisé* ever attempted."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 326.



II Fuga mm. 1-10



II Fuga mm. 42-44



II Fuga mm. 53-56

### Example 14

## V CIACCONA

The Ciaccona is on a five-bar ground bass, adapted from the most common of all the Baroque prototypes, the descending tetrachords from tonic to dominant.”<sup>60</sup> Before 1800, this form was a dance performed at a brisk tempo that generally used variation techniques, though not necessarily ground-bass variation. In 19th- and 20th-century music, it became a set of ground-bass or ostinato variations.<sup>61</sup>

While the bassline upon which this particular Ciaccona is built may appear to have been invented specifically for this movement due to its idiomatic nature, it can indeed be linked back to the generative material of the piece—Britten’s opening quotation of Shostakovich. Shown again in Example 15, the theme of the first movement can be divided into two distinct voices—the upper voice consisting of a descending chromatic scale starting on D, and the lower voice consisting of a descending perfect fourth followed by a rising whole step, then repeated (A-E-F#-C#-D#). If we take this lower voice and change the descending interval to a minor third instead of a perfect fourth, we get the exact intervallic contour of the ground bass. The chromatic line in the top voice is identical to the original but rhythmically augmented so as to parallel every other pitch in the bass. These alterations give the Ciaccona version of the theme a distinctly tonal D major feel that is not present in the original. Indeed, “...on Britten’s

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<sup>60</sup> Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 327.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Silbiger, “Chaconne,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deanne Root, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

familiar principle of delayed gratification, any hints of sweetness are reserved for the concluding Allegro.”<sup>62</sup>

Subsequent repetitions of the Ciaccona theme become increasingly elaborate and explore a variety of techniques for the performer in 12 variations, ranging in duration from five  $\frac{3}{4}$  measures (consisting of 15 total beats) to five measures of varying lengths consisting of 24 total beats. How Britten sets each variation serves to relate this movement to events in the other two Suites. For example, both the First and the Third Suites include a March movement that contains a galloping rhythm to be executed with a *ricochet* bowing technique (discussed in Chapter 4, see Example 21). While the Second Suite does not have a March, Britten instead features this bowing technique as a variation of the Ciaccona ground bass.

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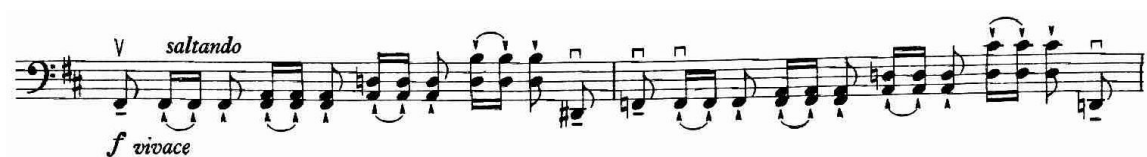
<sup>62</sup> Powell, *Benjamin Britten: A Life for Music*, 415.



I Declamato mm. 1-3



V Ciaccona mm. 7-17



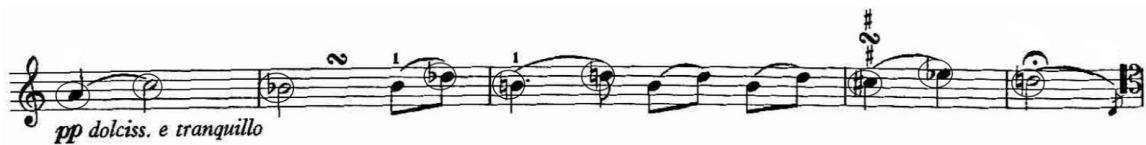
V Ciaccona, mm. 60-61

### Example 15

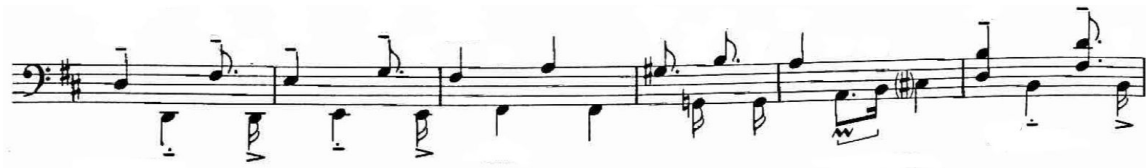
Britten not only alters the texture of each setting of the ground bass, but the bassline itself. A lyrical middle section, while entirely different in character from the opening of the movement, uses an inverted form of the bassline starting on A, “as a basis for freer figure development in a wider tonal field”<sup>63</sup> (Example 16). This establishes the

<sup>63</sup> Evans, *The music of Benjamin Britten*, 328.

middle section as an opposing reflection of the opening, not only in mood, but in its pitch material as well. The recapitulation in measure 108 does not simply return to the original form the ground bass, but instead to a new inverted forms starting on D, creating a sort of synthesis between the original form and the middle section's form. This synthesis strongly brings to mind formal principles explored during the final movement of the First Suite (VI Moto Perpetuo e Canto Quarto), in which the opening Perpetual Motion built on half-step neighbors, and material from the Canto Primo combine to bring the movement to a close.



Inverted ground bass on A, Ciaccona mm. 73-77



Inverted ground bass on D, Ciaccona mm. 108-113

### Example 16

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THIRD SUITE FOR CELLO, OP. 87

#### Introduction

The cover page of the Third Suite includes a brief explanation from Britten himself:

I wrote this suite in the early spring of 1971 and took it as a present to Slava Rostropovich when Peter Pears and I visited Moscow and Leningrad in April of that year. The occasion was a week of British music, and our programme with the London Symphony Orchestra was made memorable by the fact that both Richter and Rostropovich joined us - surely a unique gesture of Anglo-Russian friendship.

As a tribute to a great Russian musician and patriot I based this suite on Russian themes: the first three tunes were taken from Tchaikovsky's volumes of folk-song arrangements; the fourth, the 'Kontakion' (Hymn for the Departed), from the *English Hymnal*. When I played the suite through to Dmitri Shostakovich during our visit to Moscow, he remarked that he had been brought up on a different version of the Kontakion. I consulted my friend Bishop Pimen of Saratov and Volgograd, who confirmed that my version was the one he had always

known and regularly used. In the score I printed both versions for players to choose whichever they prefer.<sup>64</sup>

From Britten's description, it is clear that he began with a conception of the piece that would lend itself well to the same kind of intense motivic organization and development that we have already seen in the first two Suites. His decision to use relatively simple diatonic material from outside sources as the basis for the work provided him with nearly endless possibilities for variation. The three folk tunes and Kontakion hymn are only presented in their entirety in succession in the latter half of the ninth and final movement of the piece. In a sense, Britten reverses the logical order of variation, with the generative material appearing at the end as a culmination of its derivatives, as opposed to the beginning, with its development following. While many of Britten's motivic processes are similar among the Three Suites, the extremity of this specific temporal organization is unique to the Third Suite. Britten instead followed a pattern of his own earlier works: *Lachrymae*, Op. 48, and *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Op. 70, which both contain variations that precede their theme.<sup>65</sup>

In attempting to describe the experience of listening to this work, a certain visual analogy comes to mind. Listening to the first eight movements resembles the sensation of seeing a new place for the first time in various obscured ways: in the dark of night, in bad weather, or without one's glasses. Although the basic shapes are discernible, one's imagination must fill in the details of what might be in the shadows. The last movement

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<sup>64</sup> Benjamin Britten, *Three Suites for Cello, Opp. 72, 80 & 87*, ed. Mstislav Rostropovich (London: Faber Music Ltd, 1986), 35.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Hamburger, "The Chamber Music," in *Benjamin Britten*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 210-36.

finally gives clarity to what came before, like daylight over a scene that was previously only partially seen and partially imagined. This comes into full focus when one has heard it in its entirety, shifting the center of expressive gravity until the very end.

The folk tunes and Kontakion hymn appear throughout the first eight movements in varying degrees of completeness, ranging from three-note motives to entire statements in chromatically and rhythmically altered form. The motivic relationships that Britten explores do not limit themselves to simple, direct connections from the last movement to the rest of the piece. Instead, motivic ideas form an interconnected web both within and between movements, with alterations layering on top of one another and branching into new directions. For example, the eighth movement—VIII Presto (*moto perpetuo*)—is a swirling perpetual motion constructed entirely from a three-note cell of a descending major third and a rising minor second. There is no direct precedent for this figure in any of the original tunes. However, it is instead derived from a chromatically altered fragment of the third tune (“Street song”) that appears at the end of the previous movement—VII Fantastico (*recitativo*). Example 17 shows the progression of how this motive is developed.



IX “Street song” mm. 125-127, three-note motive



VII Recitativo (*fantastico*) mm. 23-25, first two pitches lowered by a half-step



VIII Moto perpetuo (*presto*) m. 1, second and third notes are reversed

### Example 17

#### I Lento (*introduzione*)

The Third Suite opens with a movement titled “I Lento (*introduzione*)” that is incredibly somber in character. Repetitive *pizzicati* on the open C string punctuate melodic phrases marked *parlando*. The overall mood of this movement resembles the Kontakion hymn that closes the piece with good reason; the first movement is in fact largely a transposition of the Kontakion in a different rhythmic setting, with chromatic alterations and some melodic development. The piece as a whole is therefore bookended by two versions of the Kontakion: one that begins the story as altered and incomplete, and one that reaches its final form and brings the expressive journey to a completed close.

How exactly Britten alters the Kontakion to open the piece provides important insight into its transformation from beginning to end. Example 18 shows a middleground reduction of the first half of Kontakion, the section that Britten uses to construct the first movement. The melody sits diatonically in C minor, reaching only scale degrees 1-4 and 7 below the tonic, reducing perfectly into a middleground descent from scale degree 3 to 1, as shown in Example 18. The limited range and predictable contour of the tune, combined with the minor key and harmonization in the lower range of the cello create a strong sense of closure and somber inevitability. Britten's first movement version, however, contains far more variation in pitch and rhythm, removing the feeling of finality that is so strong at the end.



Third Suite, IX Lento solenne (*passacaglia*), Kontakion, mm. 141-146



Kontakion middleground reduction, IX Lento solenne, mm. 141-154

### Example 18

Although Britten establishes the pitch center of the first movement, I Lento (*introduzione*), with a low C pizzicato as the very first note, he immediately introduces a sense of tonal ambiguity that is not present in the final form of the Kontakion. Instead of beginning the upper melodic line on C, as it appears in the end, he transposes it up a minor seventh to B-flat. This combined with the first C *pizzicato* forms a minor seventh

sonority, not unlike the opening sonority of the First Suite. Example 19 shows a comparison of the opening harmony of the First Suite with that of the Third Suite. In both cases, the outer voices create a seventh—a major seventh in the the case of First Suite and a minor seventh in the Second Suite. As demonstrated in the analysis of the Canto Primo from the First Suite, while this opening sonority is not triadic, it functions as a sort of tonic for the movement. By starting the Third Suite with something very similar (excluding the middle voice), Britten relates the two works as parts of a larger cycle, emphasizing motivic and thematic relationships not only within each Suite but between them. However, instead of contextually stabilizing this verticality (as in the First Suite), Britten opens up a large-scale instability that will be resolved in the final version of the Kontakion.



I Lento (*introduzione*) mm. 1-3

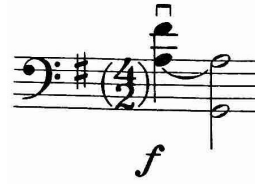


I Lento (*introduzione*) middleground reduction

### Example 19

The first phrase of the movement (measures 1-4) remains exactly parallel to the Kontakion in pitch, but with an entirely different rhythmic organization. Britten chooses rhythms that are consistently freer and more speech-like in nature, sometimes repeating specific notes many times for emphasis. For example, during the most climactic arrival of the movement in measure 10, the same G is repeated 19 times with increasing intensity

before the phrase continues. These rhythmic alterations throughout the movement serve to emphasize its introductory, story-telling quality. However, rhythm is not the only avenue that Britten uses to transform the Kontakion from an ending into a beginning. He also explores both chromatic alterations of the originally diatonic pitch material, as well as repetitions of certain melodic fragments at different pitch levels. For example, the second phrase (measures 5-8) continues on from the first at the same transposition level from the original tune, but the last four notes repeat one half-step higher, adding to the questioning intensity of the gesture. This is the primary way in which Britten melodically varies this treatment of the Kontakion hymn in comparison to the original—repeating melodic fragments at different pitch levels, adding a reaching, searching aspect to the music. While the Kontakion at the end of the piece has a sense of deep finality and solemn grandeur, Britten's alterations in the first movement modify its mood from an ending to a beginning. He creates a feeling of questioning and incompleteness that must be resolved over the course of the piece.



First Suite m. 1



Second Suite m. 1

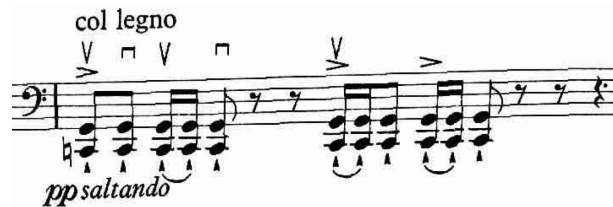
## Example 20

### II Allegro (*marcia*)

The second movement of the piece, II Allegro (*marcia*), is an eccentrically jaunty march. It is noteworthy that Britten chooses to include a march in both the First and the Third Suites, although this is not a form that would traditionally appear in a suite. These two marches share many similarities, especially in character, which adds to the sense of continuity across the cycle. Most immediately apparent is the *ricochet* galloping rhythm that occurs in both marches, and in fact makes its first appearance in the earlier Cello Sonata in C, Op. 65—the first piece that Britten dedicated to Rostropovich.



Cello Sonata, V. Moto Perpetuo (mm. 1-4)



First Suite, IV Marcia, m. 2



Third Suite, II Allegro (*marcia*), mm. 5-8

### Example 21

The march of the Third Suite contains motivic material from all three Russian folk tunes. The opening twenty measures are an altered version of “Street Song” (The grey eagle) (Example 21), most obviously in the gesture that is first presented in the fourth measure. Measures 22-50 develop motives from “Autumn.” Near the end of the movement, fragments of “Mournful song” (Under the little apple tree) interject with a *tranquillo subito* tempo marking, foreshadowing the beginning of the next movement.



Third Suite, II Allegro (*marcia*), mm. 1-4



II Allegro (*marcia*), mm. 1-4



"Autumn," IX Lento solenne, mm. 106-109

### Example 22

#### III Con moto (*canto*)

Movement III Con moto (*canto*) begins quite clearly as a version of "Mournful song" (Under the little apple tree), but undergoes similar alterations in pitch and rhythm to those that were exhibited in the first movement, with certain fragments repeating at different pitch levels for emphasis. Additionally, Britten's method of motivic variation via intervallic expansion which was so clearly evident in the opening movement of the Second Suite reappears in an almost identical fashion, shown in Example 22. In both cases, a lower voice repeatedly returns to a pedal point while an upper voice cycles up in

minor thirds. This resembles the prolongational interval cycles that David Forrest has analyzed in Britten's choral music.<sup>66</sup>



First Suite, I Decamato, mm. 8-12



Third Suite, III Con moto (*canto*), mm. 10-15

### Example 23

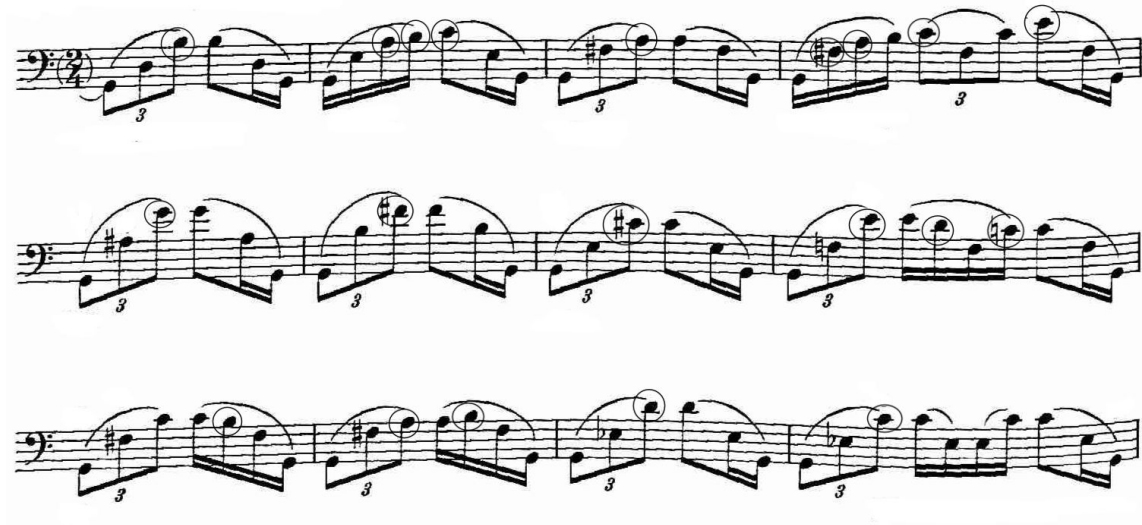
#### IV Lento (*barcarola*)

*Barcarola* is defined as “a title given to pieces that imitate or suggest the songs (barcarole) sung by Venetian gondoliers as they propel their boats through the water...a basic feature of the barcarolle is the time signature, 6/8, with a marked lilting rhythm depicting the movement of the boat.”<sup>67</sup> Like every movement in this Suite, the main generative material is one of the Russian folk tunes from the last movement—in this case “Autumn.” Britten imbeds “Autumn” within the top voice of the texture, transposed down a minor third with some chromatic alterations. These notes are circled in Example

<sup>66</sup>Forrest, “Prolongation in the Choral Music of Benjamin Britten,” 1-25.

<sup>67</sup> Maurice Brown and Kenneth Hamilton, “Barcarolle,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deanne Root, accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

23, along with a comparison of the pitches of the original “Autumn” tune with the *barcarola* version.



IV Lento (*barcarola*) mm. 1-12

### Example 24

However, the Russian folk tunes in the last movement are not the only borrowed material that Britten looks to. This movement contains the most direct reference to Bach in all of Britten’s Three Suites and in many ways stands out as a defining moment within the piece. Here we see nearly an exact quotation of the opening measures of the Prelude from Bach’s Suite No. 1 in G major, by far the most famous movement of any of his Cello Suites and perhaps the most famous work for cello altogether. While Britten’s indebtedness to Bach’s solo string works is apparent throughout his Suites, it usually manifests not as quotation but general compositional and textural devices, such as implying a polyphonic texture on a monophonic instrument. With this in mind, the arrival of such a conspicuous Bach quotation sets this movement apart as a central arrival within the work. Example 23 and 24 show the two passages in question, as well as a reduced

comparison of the harmonies. While the harmonic motion in both instances only outlines a simple I-IV-V progression with a G pedal, Britten's voicing and rhythmic texture, not to mention the instrument itself, imply an intentional reference that is immediately audible to the listener.





First Suite, Canto Primo mm. 4-6



Third Suite, IV Lento (*barcarola*), mm. 5-8

### Example 26

This shift from Bach quotation to self-quotation is not only a singular event within the movement, but a nested event that occurs on two different levels. When a repetition of the entire first phrase begins in measure 16, Britten adds a C pedal below the previous bass note, G. This harmonically recontextualizes what is otherwise the exact same material, transforming the opening sonority from a G-major triad to something closely resembling the opening of the First Suite, transposed down a perfect fifth. The circled notes in Example 26 show how the first measure of the First Suite is now also imbedded within the phrase. Britten's mixture of Bach quotation and self-quotation at two different structural levels reveals his intention to both communicate with Bach's Cello Suites and establish his own Suites as a related cycle.



First Suite, Canto Primo mm. 1-2



Third Suite, IV Lento (*barcarola*) mm. 13-19

### Example 27

#### VI Andante espressivo (*fuga*)

Britten's notion of fugue in the Third Suite is perhaps more adventurous than in the other two Suites in that he deliberately plays with the listener's temporal experience of the unfolding of musical events. In this instance, he accomplishes this by systematically lengthening the subject and countersubject each time they repeat. We first encountered a similar technique in the final *Ciaccona* of the Second Suite, in which the ground bass is mapped onto a rhythmic framework of vastly varying lengths of time, expanding and contracting to meet the needs of its different musical settings. In the case of the Third Suite's fugue, however, Britten's lengthening of thematic material is far more precise and methodical.

Britten begins the movement with a subject clearly derived from one of the Russian folk tunes, “Mournful song” (Under the little apple tree), but transposed down a ninth with some octave displacement. Example 27 shows a comparison of the original tune and the fugue subject, with the notes in boxes showing where the subject changes octaves to give a different melodic contour. Even the rhythms of the subject are almost exactly the same as the original tune, at least to begin with. Once the countersubject enters in measure 7, however, the proportions of the subject begin to change. The countersubject begins as a descending half-step sigh, a shape that we have already seen as a central motive throughout this Suite as well as the other two. The first time it enters, this figure only occurs once per measure during each of the longest notes of the subject, causing these held notes to expand by one eighth-note. Essentially, every time there is a statement of the fugue subject, the held notes (first notes of measures 2, 3 and 4) becomes longer as a result of the way the countersubject is constructed. The second time the subject returns, each of the long notes is expanded by one quarter-note. The effect of the subject becoming repeatedly longer is a sense of grandiosity: each time it returns, it becomes larger, heavier, more intense. Because stringed instruments inherently limit to the number of voices that can be effectively implied at one time, Britten achieves thickness with horizontal expansion instead of vertical. At first, the countersubject consists of a two-note figure—a descending half-step. This lengthens the answer as compared to the first statement of the subject by one eighth-note.

The third statement of the subject occurs in the middle of measure 10, this time with a countersubject that is twice as long—now two descending half-step figures that

wrap around the subject on either side of its register. Then the next subject statement and accompanying countersubject occurs in at the end of measure 14. The countersubject in this instance takes on a different shape, with the two-note figures expanding to three notes, both descending and ascending. Because the countersubject continues to grow in magnitude throughout the movement, the subject takes on its weight. Consequently, although this movement is certainly recognizable as a traditional fugue, Britten is able to increase the intensity in another dimension.



IX Lento solenne, Mournful song (under the little apple tree), mm. 95-100



VI Andante espressivo (*fuga*), mm. 1-6

### Example 28

## CONCLUSION

He [Bridge] taught me to think and feel through the instruments I was writing for...He fought against anything anti-instrumental which is why his own music is grateful to play...In everything he did for me, there were perhaps above all two cardinal principles. One was that you should try to find yourself and be true to what you found. The other—obviously connected with it—was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one's mind.<sup>68</sup>

-Britten, on studying with Frank Bridge

I became interested in Benjamin Britten's Cello Suites specifically through my own experience with them as a performer. In learning them, I sensed that there were many layers of organization, structure and meaning beyond what I was able to discover only through performance. Studying these pieces has been incredibly rewarding in that my analytic efforts have been continually met with fascinating musical content. While I have attempted to give an overview of all three Suites, there are many discoveries that did not fit into this document, as well as many more discoveries to be made. It is my hope, however, that this analysis will be useful to both performers and theorist who are seeking to better understand these works.

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<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Britten, "Britten Looking Back," *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 November 1963, 9.

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