

## 1 Introduction: Britten's musical language

Music, like speech, begins in the moment of utterance. As the cardinal act of performance, utterance is an externalizing of musical ideas in the physicality of vocal or bodily gesture. Utterance is a process of putting forth, emitting – an unbroken flow of sound emanating from a distinct source. Something is revealed, made manifest; utterance, to recall the word's origins, is a bringing “out.”<sup>1</sup> For the listener, utterance names an experience of being addressed directly by the performer or (less directly) the composer. By a process both interpersonal and reciprocal, performer and listener make contact. A musical thought moves from “in here” to “out there,” so establishing a chain of communication. Both music and speech impinge on the world in the living present of the utterance, whether as independent systems of address, or as paired discourses, acting together in the medium of song. And it is this composite musical utterance – a bringing forth of words and music meaningfully and vividly, as one – that is so clear in all of Benjamin Britten's work.

The phrase “musical language” in my title engages the moment of utterance in two distinct ways. In a first, metaphorical sense, Britten's music is itself a kind of wordless language – a characteristic way of presenting and shaping the interplay of essentially musical ideas (themes, rhythms, motives, or keys) within an unfolding discourse. The sounds of music, on this reading, themselves have properties usually ascribed to speech – expression, eloquence, a rhetorical force. Useful though the familiar metaphor of music as language may be, Britten's music acts as a musical language in a second, more literal sense. In opera and song, music and words encounter one another directly. The fusion of these two media in lyric and dramatic genres, or in sung liturgical ritual, is succinctly expressed in English as a “setting” of words *to* music, and yet the process is by no means a simple one (behind that “to” lies mystery). This musical language is anything but metaphorical, for its powers of communication depend on the material presence of words. At the same time, these words are tied, in their musical setting, to a precisely coordinated role in a composite utterance. My aim throughout this book will be to make the familiar interplay of music and words strange again and to reflect on the intricacies of their fusion in the single moment of utterance.

That the distinctive element in Britten's music is bound up with some quality of utterance (rather than specific details of technique) was a point

Ex. 1.1: Vocal utterance in a lyric setting: "Goddess, excellently bright," *Serenade*

god-dess, god-dess, god-dess ex - - - - - cel-lent-ly bright.

quickly sensed by the composer's early listeners. Henry Boys, writing in 1938, singles out Britten's gift for "sincere lyrical expression of simple moods," a perception echoed by the composer's stated preference for "clear and clean" orchestral textures, and "perfect clarity of expression." Erwin Stein, in 1953, remarks simply that "Britten's way of expression is direct."<sup>2</sup> The music's spontaneity of utterance, Stein feels, is a matter of text setting, in particular the balanced and supple shift between "natural" speech rhythms and a lyric stylization called for by details of poetic imagery. In the Ben Jonson "Hymn" of the *Serenade* (Ex. 1.1), as Stein notes, "the voice announces the words with such lucidity, and the coloratura on the first syllable of 'ex-celently' is so 'bright', that the poem appears to enhance the music as much as the music the poem" (1953b: 156). Here is the "sensibility, quick as a fish's fin, to a poetic image" that Edward Sackville-West praises in the *Serenade*, and a clear example of Britten's tendency to place the burden of musical expression in the vocal line itself, not in the accompaniment.<sup>3</sup>

In the early reception of Britten's works, utterance in the texted music is understood largely in terms of what Stein calls "musical diction." Questions of prosody and the "natural" speech rhythms of words – topics on which Britten's music was both praised and damned – remain central for his early critics, as too does his response, through word painting, to the semantic plane of language.<sup>4</sup> But such perspectives, however much they hint at a distinctive tone of musical "speech" – with or without actual words – fall short as a general model of musical utterance. If analyses of Britten's lyric songs tend to dwell, in a recognizably New-Critical vein, on diction and imagery, words on the operatic stage demand a different response. Texted dramatic utterances are *actions* – words and music forged, in the heat of a dramatic situation, into single, "multimedia" events. Hobson's "Peter Grimes!" call (Ex. 1.2) – to cite only the first two sung words of the opera *Peter Grimes* – is mechanical in rhythm and monotone in pitch, yet these features are not based in imagery or prosody but in social relations. This "Peter Grimes!" call is an order, an utterance addressed to Peter with a specifically juridical force in the courtroom, as he is called to give evidence. To recognize that all utterance is, to an extent,

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Ex. 1.2: Vocal utterance as dramatic act: hailing the protagonist in *Peter Grimes*

The musical score for Ex. 1.2 is in bass clef. The vocal line, labeled 'HOBSON', has the lyrics 'Pe - ter Grimes! Pe - ter Grimes! Pe - ter Grimes!.....'. The piano accompaniment features a string section (Str.) and a flute (Fl.). Dynamics include forte (f) and fortissimo (fp). The score is titled 'Peter Grimes steps forward from the crowd.'

social and interpersonal in nature, is to understand language as political. Utterance engages not only the linguistic ability to describe or signify (though the name “Peter Grimes!” does of course *refer*), but also linguistic powers of coercion. “To *say* something,” as J. L. Austin suggests, “is to *do* something” (12; Austin’s emphasis). Language, at the moment of utterance itself, is acting as much as signifying.

Returning the emphasis, as I will do throughout this book, to language as act or performance will help define a new set of questions for the role of words *in* music. The discussion raises issues that go beyond the specific case of Britten. If everyday speech can be “doing” as well as saying, does the same hold for words in a musical context? Do acts of song – a category that might include all sung vocal utterance, whether lyric or dramatic – draw on the coercive powers of conventional (i.e. non-musical) acts of speech? Does the social and institutional force of, say, a promise or a prayer function in *musical* promises or prayers, and if so, is this specifically linguistic agency acting independently, or is it supplemented, inflected, or projected by “musical” features of the utterance (melody, harmony, texture, and so on)? If the drama of opera may be said to spring precisely from an intensified enactment of everyday experience, in a more or less heightened vocal utterance, one might well appeal beyond traditional opera-critical concerns – motives, music as a response to “character,” genre – to consider operatic drama primarily in terms of individual utterances in specific social situations. Operatic speech, for all its patent artifice, obeys laws familiar from the social world beyond the stage.

Chapter-length readings of four of Britten’s operas are central to this book, and my interpretations of musical drama engage various developments in recent opera criticism, not least a renewed concern with codes of narrative and performance, and with representations of the ideological and psychological subject.<sup>5</sup> Little work has appeared, though, towards what might be called a performative understanding of operatic speech –

one that incorporates, say, the insights of linguistic philosophers into spoken utterances.<sup>6</sup> More frequently, utterance in vocal music is still treated largely in terms of textual “expression,” locating an originary meaning that is primarily verbal, while downplaying the possibility that music might, as Nicholas Cook puts it, “participate in the construction of that meaning” (1998: 115). Even where music’s powers to complement or contest a verbal meaning are acknowledged, Cook adds, discussion is conceptually loose.<sup>7</sup> But there are good reasons, as I will claim, to resist the familiar critical trope that pits words against music as separate media, and it is via the fused and composite notion of the utterance – rather than by an oppositional view of separate strands of the complex single event – that I approach the coexistence of text and music in Britten’s case.

The view that linguistic utterance is actional as well as symbolic is common to a range of mid-twentieth-century theoretical positions, from anthropological accounts of ritual performance in tribal societies to J. L. Austin’s philosophically tinged theory of the “speech-act” as the foundational unit of verbal exchange and Bakhtin’s concept of “speech genres” – forms of discourse peculiar to a given sphere of human activity.<sup>8</sup> The polarity is clear in Saussure’s classic distinction between the system of “language” and the event of “speech” as an “individual act of the will and the intelligence” (14). In Saussure’s analysis, however, linguistic meaning is sought primarily on the semiotic level of the sign,<sup>9</sup> and Bakhtin, for one, attacks earlier linguists for “weaken[ing] the link between language and life” by excluding language’s “addressivity” (“the quality of turning to someone”), and concentrating only on syntax and semantics.<sup>10</sup> The actional, operational view of language, on the other hand, is rooted in the contingency of situation, the primacy of exchange in verbal encounters, and the speaker’s ability to accomplish things with utterance.

The first recorded concepts of music encompass a fusion of words and pitches, yet later music history has emphasized only an interplay of “master” and “servant” arts.<sup>11</sup> The tradition is apparent, for instance, in Christoph Bernhard’s mid-seventeenth-century distinction between a *stylus theatralis* in which “language is the absolute master of music” and a *stylus gravis* in which the reverse applies (110). Such hierarchical oppositions are called into question by Bernhard himself, in the idea of a style in which “language and music are both masters” – the grandly named *stylus luxurians communis* – and yet Bernhard can be frustratingly brief on the central question of how this sharing of powers might be accomplished: “one should represent speech in the most natural way possible . . . render joyful things joyful, sorrowful things sorrowful, swift things swift, slow things slow” (111). The idea here that musical utterance effects one-to-one

representation of some univocal linguistic object (joyful things) seems quaintly mechanical as an account of musical speech, limited as it is to essentially grammatical concepts of subject and predicate.<sup>12</sup> Bernhard comes closer to detailing the moment of utterance itself with the mention of musical settings of “questions,” which “according to common usage, are ended a step higher than the penultimate syllable”:

Musical repetition occurs when two successive utterances are similar in subject matter. Musical repetition a step higher occurs in connection with two or more successive questions, when their words correspond in subject matter [*Gleichheit der Worte an der Materie*], and when the last seems to be more forceful than the first. (111)

The passage exceeds the grammatical notion of “subject matter” to consider a discursive category of social exchange (the question), and even a specific context in which the question is reiterated, in conjunction with the musical technique of sequence, to convey the singer’s “more forceful” attitude to what is being sung. Later writers, through the doctrine of *Affekt*, increasingly emphasize music’s powers to express not only figurative detail but also the speaker’s inner state, a matter of emotion and feeling, of which words are only the outer manifestation.<sup>13</sup>

That Britten himself showed more than a passing interest in Baroque models of text setting – notably in the Purcell realizations beginning in the 1940s – need not imply that his concept of musical utterance was bound by the overworked metaphor of music and words as “master” or “servant” arts. One sign of the composer’s sense of the utterance as a “fused” event is the prominence, in the texted music, of moments that underline cardinal dramatic points in a single stroke. These gestures of epiphany – one thinks not only of Grimes’s “God have mercy!” cry, but equally of Aschenbach’s “I love you” and the Spirit’s blessing in *Curlew River* – make their effect in ways that are both musically and verbally “new” in a given context. The most telling moments in Britten’s work are just that – *moments*, single utterances whose uncanny reverberating force springs from a careful “staging” in relation to larger dramatic unfoldings, as well as on the distinctive profile of local gesture. Examining these moments, throughout this study, I elaborate a view of Britten’s musical language as something all of a piece, a single mode of verbal-musical utterance. This foundational intuition is eloquently summed up in a comment of Myfanwy Piper’s, on her experience of collaborating with Britten on opera libretti:

Every word is set to be heard for its part in the unfolding of the story and for its quality as part of the human instrument. Speech articulated in sorrow or joy, in pain or ordinary conversational exchange is as much part of the music

of the voice as the note itself: the word and the note is one thing, not two.  
 (Piper 1989: 8)

Utterance, in all Britten's texted vocal music, is this "one thing," a point to be elaborated from a number of angles in the ensuing chapters.

In order to explore further the conceptual field I am considering here under the heading of "utterance," the remainder of this opening chapter offers three case studies of works in contrasting genres from different phases of Britten's career. Turning first to Britten's 1936 "symphonic cycle," *Our Hunting Fathers*, I consider the identity of utterance and its functioning in the speech situation. A second study explores the possibilities of utterance in a purely instrumental work, *Lachrymae* for viola and piano (1950), whose unfolding is rich in discursive shifts suggestive of the change of speaker implicit in acts of quotation. To close, I turn to Noye's *Fludde* (1957–58), a staged dramatic spectacle in which the inherently social and interpersonal character of musical utterance is especially vivid.

### 1. Utterance as speech event in *Our Hunting Fathers*

The term "utterance" refers, in common parlance, to an unfolding process of vocal enunciation (the verb, "to utter") and to the discrete units of vocally realized thought or expression ("utterances") that result. For linguists, the utterance is a minimal unit of speech ("any stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of the person"),<sup>14</sup> a usage whose applicability to a musical event such as the soloist's entrance in "Rats away!", the second song of *Our Hunting Fathers* (Ex. 1.3), seems uncontroversial. As in speech, the silences around the edges of a musical utterance are a matter of tolerance, and boundaries here are simply those of the onset and cessation of vocal sounds (excluding, for the present, orchestral contributions to the texture). Identifying the utterance as one stretch of singing says nothing about its formal structure. Musical utterances may or may not correspond to recognized musical phrase types (just as spoken utterances do not necessarily form grammatical sentences, clauses, or single words). The vocal utterance of Example 1.3 expires without conventional melodic closure, curtailed by an instrumental interruption, and its text (one word: "rats!") is grammatically inconclusive. Even so, one hears an utterance, for this is a continuous speech event of defined extent.

To call the vocal utterances in "Rats away!" speech events is to understand them first and foremost as actions performed with language. The fusion of words and music in the song, I will suggest, makes its points less

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Ex. 1.3: The first vocal utterance in "Rats away!"

⑥ Soprano Solo  
*fhard* *sempre f*  
 Ra

*pp* *sempre pp*  
 Vin. I *p* Bsn. Ob.

*cresc.* *ff*  
 Vin. I (*sopra*) Str. *sempre Pedale*

⑦  
 \* Timp. Str. Brass

[ instrumental interruption ]

by projecting the semantic content of individual words, than through a bold interplay of distinct speech events – vividly contrasted utterances that constitute specific actions on the part of the singer. Highlighting a proximity of extreme contrasts in the character of each utterance, moreover, the song builds up a strong tone of parody – setting a mood that Peter Pears aptly dubbed “spiky, exact and not at all cosy” (63). The opening setting of “rats!” is a case in point, far surpassing in sheer exuberance any spoken intonation of the word one might imagine. In Britten’s score, the word becomes a quivering series of breathless gasps, a stream of vowel sound that effaces its characteristic phonetic articulations. As a way of introducing the solo voice into the orchestral texture, this near-*vocalise* is a daring ploy on Britten’s part (one that lies outside the main text as Auden has devised it). The “rats!” exclamation is a shriek, albeit a highly stylized one, comprising numerous rapid scalar runs that build to a penetrating high-register finish.



In the body of the song, the singer settles down to more conventional forms of syllabic text setting (Ex. 1.4), each quite distinctive in texture: a rapid, monotone chant (“I command all the rats”) leads to more tuneful melodic contours (“the holy man”), then the voice drops, finally, to a kind of stage whisper (“Dominus, Deus”), at the lower end of the soprano range.<sup>15</sup> The chant, backed by the hurdy-gurdy sound of open strings (in solo viola), is a litany of holy and saintly names recited with a very distinct purpose. The song, a listener soon realizes, is a prayer of exorcism: “God grant in grace / That no rats dwell in this place.” The chant is as mechanical, in its repeating melodic revolutions, as the opening cry was wild, and it is the sharpness of this contrast at the level of utterance within the song that generates its bizarre climax. At this moment, the pious chant and the near-hysterical shriek come together within the soloist’s vocal part (Ex. 1.5). As the prayer shifts from English to Latin words for its formal Doxology (“Et in nomine . . .”), the singer reverts to chant, now against an orchestral backdrop more animated than before. But at the same time, as Britten’s own 1936 program note puts it, we hear rats “creeping into the soloist’s part”,<sup>16</sup> scampering between phrases and words – even at one point finding their way *inside* words (“et Sanc – (Rats!) – ti Spiriti”). The voice part fragments, its attempts at formal delivery of the prayer undercut by the high-pitched “rats!” shrieks.

Has the exorcism failed, or are these “rats!” cries a sign of rodents leaving in droves?<sup>17</sup> One is not exactly sure, yet Britten’s attitude to setting the text enacts the drama of the situation. The scene comes vividly to life in an experimental overlay of sharply distinct registers of utterance – a prayer, a cry of fright – to comic effect. The technique bears a resemblance, as an act of montage, to the inter-cutting of text and utterance types Britten was employing in his contemporary work on documentary sound film.<sup>18</sup> In its parodic caricature of ecclesiastic chant, moreover, the song looks ahead to the play with sacred and secular musical genres that informs several later operatic scores.<sup>19</sup> Capturing the song’s vein of parody almost requires that one make utterance a central term of the analysis; foregrounding utterance, one attends closely to questions of enunciation and delivery – an exaggeration of some recognizable *way* of speaking – while downplaying the more familiar perspective on texted song that seeks only musical translations of meanings grounded in figurative verbal imagery. An utterance-based analysis need not ignore details of illustrative “expression,” but it will direct attention to dimensions of the musico-verbal performance that lead beyond the local sphere of a word’s semantic reference, and out into its function within the social world. “Rats Away!,” as musical utterance, works above all by caricature, and – in a recognizably



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Ex. 1.4: Three utterance types in "Rats away!": (a) chant; (b) tunes; (c) stage whisper

(a)

Musical score for Ex. 1.4(a). The score is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo and mood are marked "very animated" and "molto animato". The piano part includes markings for "Tpt. (muted)", "Via.Solo", and "Trom. (muted)". The lyrics are: "I com-mand all.....the rats that are here a-bout That none dwell in this place, with-in or with-out: etc."

(b)

Musical score for Ex. 1.4(b). The score is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo and mood are marked "mf" and "dim.". The piano part includes markings for "Brass" and "Wood". The lyrics are: "ho - ly man who prayed to God Al - might - y....."

(c)

Musical score for Ex. 1.4(c). The score is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo and mood are marked "p". The piano part includes markings for "p" and "gva bassa". The lyrics are: "Do-mi-nus, De-us,"

## Ex. 1.5: Montage of chant and "Rats!" shrieks

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system is labeled 'chant' and 'shriek'. The vocal line starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes the lyrics: "Both by days and by nights, (Rats!) Et in no-mi-ne (Rats!) Pa-tris,". The piano accompaniment includes parts for D.B., Vi., Wood, and Timp. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics: "et (Rats!) Fi-li-i, (Rats!) et Sanc-(Rats!)-ti Spiriti". The piano accompaniment includes a *Tutti* marking and a forte (*f*) dynamic.

Audenish touch – by subverting the expected solemnity of a familiar speech genre, the act of prayer.

*Our Hunting Fathers* places a vocal soloist within the environment of a full orchestra, so prompting questions on the relation of vocal utterance to a surrounding instrumental texture. If utterance connotes a psychological presence – a sounding of intent, rather than merely a noise – then vocal utterances are not simply happenings, but actions.<sup>20</sup> The vocal soloist in “Rats away!”, I noted, casts out evil spirits with her ceremonial speech, but can the same be said for the song’s orchestral component? Everything the vocalist sings is an utterance of some definable type (cry, chant, whisper), but do the instruments too have a “voice”? Glancing back to the interplay of voice and orchestra in Example 1.3, one might regard the orchestra as a kind of second, wordless speaker, capable of interrupting the singer. Britten’s 1936 program note mentions “an emphatic protest from the wood-wind” here,<sup>21</sup> and this “protest” interrupts with a theme heard previously (also in the orchestra) at the climax of the first song of the cycle. The orchestra, like the singer, would appear capable of a form of speech governed by more than the local exigencies of a verbal text.

To suggest that wordless instrumental gestures, like texted vocal music, are a form of utterance might seem too broad a claim. But explicitly appropriating a general linguistic category in this way foregrounds the role of verbal language in Britten’s music at levels beyond that of conventional text