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0521387507 - Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd - Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed

Excerpt

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I *Synopsis*¹

MERVYN COOKE

Act I

Prologue

Captain Edward Fairfax Vere, formerly commander of the HMS *Indomitable*, is revealed as an old man. To the accompaniment of hazy muted strings and an ominous brass theme with prominent perfect fourths later to be associated with Claggart (Ex. 1.1), he sings of his past experiences in war and of his philosophical attempts to fathom 'eternal truth'. Introducing the contrasting poles of good and evil, he laments that the good is never perfect but always flawed; here the music introduces the stuttering wind interjections and nervous wood-block roll which are later to depict Billy Budd's stammer. In a passionate outburst, Vere admits to his confusion and asks 'Who has blessed me? Who saved me?' As the light fades, he begins to recall the summer of 1797 when he commanded the *Indomitable* in the treacherous days following the mutiny at the Nore.

Scene 1

It is early morning on board the *Indomitable*, and a cutter has been dispatched to board a passing merchantman in the hope of impressing new recruits to bolster the ship's dwindled complement. Under the brutal watch of the First Mate, a party of sailors are holystoning² an area of the main-deck and are soon joined by a second party under the leadership of the Second Mate. Coerced by blows from the two Mates, the sailors sing a theme later to be associated with repression, rebellion and mutiny (Ex. 1.2). More activity begins with the arrival of the Sailing Master (Mr Flint), the Bosun and four young Midshipmen. As more men enter pulling halyards, a young and inexperienced Novice accidentally collides with the Bosun and is warned 'you need a taste of the cat'. The yard is duly hoisted and fastened under the Bosun's

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Ex. 1.1

Slowly moving

pp legato

Str.

W.W. Harp

ppp Trpt. Trb.

Str.

pp

CURTAIN

Captain Vere is revealed as an old man.

più espressivo

W.W. Harp

Brass

ppp *pp* *ppp*

direction. As the hoisting party departs, the Novice slips and falls; the enraged Bosun encharges the ship's corporal (Squeak) to take him away for a punishment of twenty strokes. With an expansive return of the 'repression' theme (Ex. 1.2), the two parties of holystoners slowly leave the deck.

A distinctive fanfare (Ex. 6.2)³ introduces the Maintop, who announces the return of the boarding-party cutter alongside the ship. The Sailing Master is joined over the muster-book by the First Lieutenant (Mr Redburn) as he complains of the wearisome succession of unsuitable recruits repeatedly paraded before them. The three men impressed from the merchantman *Rights o' Man*, homeward bound to

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Ex. 1.2

[Quick and energetic]

5 The men sing as they work.

TENORS *mp dragging*

CHORUS (and Str.)

1st PARTY O heave! O heave a - way, heave! O heave! O heave a - way.

BASSES *mp dragging*

Timp.

heave! O heave, O heave, O heave a - way, heave! heave.

Bristol, have now arrived on deck under the supervision of the boarding-party officer (the Second Lieutenant, Mr Ratcliffe). The master-at-arms, John Claggart, arrives to question the newly impressed men with characteristic brutality. Threatening the querulous first recruit with his rattan, he soon establishes that his name is Joseph Higgins (later dubbed 'Red Whiskers' by his shipmates). Next is Arthur Jones, an equally miserable specimen who is assigned to the forepeak along with Higgins. But the third recruit is the handsome and strong Billy Budd, a naïve able seaman who doesn't know his own age and who takes ingenuous delight in his ability to sing. His only failing is a stammer at moments of stress, a fault soon revealed as he attempts to admit to being a foundling (with the return of the appropriate music from the Prologue). To a series of warmly envious trombone triads, Claggart declares 'A find in a thousand . . . A beauty. A jewel. The pearl of great price.'

Budd is assigned to the Foretop, and immediately displays his singing prowess with a glowing diatonic celebration of his appointment. Bidding farewell to his comrades on the merchantman, he shouts to seaward: 'Farewell to you for ever, old *Rights o' Man*' (Ex. 1.3). The setting of these words to the 'repression' theme illustrates the unfortunate double meaning,⁴ and the theme is picked up by the off-

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Ex. 1.3

Broadly
33 BILLY *ff*
Fare - well _____ old Rights _____ o' Man! Fare - well _____
dim.

stage sailors as the officers voice their unease. Mr Redburn instructs Claggart to keep a close watch on Budd's activities in case his apostrophe to *The Rights of Man* is an indication of trouble ahead.

Left alone, Claggart expresses his resentment against the officers to a development of his brass theme first heard in the Prologue (Ex. 1.1; cf. Ex. 6.14). He summons Squeak and orders him to plague Budd by tangling his hammock, messing his kit and generally making a nuisance of himself: it begins to emerge that the malevolent master-at-arms intends to see the handsome new recruit framed. As Squeak scurries off, a sailor enters to inform Claggart that the Novice has been flogged as instructed by the Bosun but has taken the punishment badly and can hardly walk. Claggart's response is a brutally dismissive 'let him crawl'. The Novice is helped on stage by a group of friends, and he bewails his shame to a poignant and expansive saxophone melody (Ex. 1.4).

Ex. 1.4

[Slow and deliberate]
Sax. *espress.*
pp legato
The novice enters, half-supported by a small group of sailors. The Novice's friend goes forward to help him.
B. Clt. Vc.
NOVICE'S FRIEND *pp*
Come a - long, kid! come a - long, kid.
Str. consort.
pp

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Billy Budd and his new friend, an old seadog called Dansker,⁵ emerge from the shadows and join with the newly christened Red Whiskers and another sailor called Donald in an agitated quartet. Shrill whistles off-stage signal the changing of the watch, and Claggart returns with the two Mates. Apprehending Billy, the master-at-arms orders him to take off ‘that fancy neckerchief’, and the envious trombone triads return as he sings: ‘Take a pride in yourself, Beauty, and you’ll come to no harm.’ Billy takes this as a compliment, but Donald warns him to watch ‘Jemmy Legs’⁶ closely if he wants to avoid punishment. This discussion of their superiors prompts Billy to ask about the ship’s captain, whom the sailors call ‘Starry Vere’⁷ (Ex. 6.18). While the chorus of sailors serenade Vere as ‘the salt of the earth’, Billy sings triumphantly but with inescapable irony: ‘Starry, I’ll follow you . . . I’d die to save you, ask for to die . . .’ This corporate paean addressed to the unseen commander is cut short by the appearance of the Bosun and the rapid dispersal of the sailors when ordered below decks.

Scene 2

A tranquil interlude for strings and harp, with wind solos adopting motives associated with Vere at the conclusion of the preceding scene sets a new mood of contemplation as the curtain rises on the solitary Captain Vere seated in his cabin one week later. It is evening, and Vere is engrossed in a volume of Plutarch: he compares the troubles of the Greeks and Romans to his own. The First Lieutenant and Sailing Master are summoned to join him, and they partake of a glass of wine to toast the King. The conversation reveals that the ship is approaching enemy waters at Finisterre, and could encounter a hostile vessel at any moment. This realisation prompts Redburn and Flint to launch themselves into a duet expressing their disgust at French habits, and with Vere they drink a second toast condemning the enemy.

When the First Lieutenant asks if there is any danger of French ‘notions’ spreading amongst their own men, Vere cautiously alludes to ‘a word which we scarcely dare speak, yet at moments it has to be spoken. Mutiny’⁸ (Ex. 6.8). He cites the recent mutinies at Spithead and the Nore (with an appropriate allusion to the ‘repression’ theme; cf. Ex. 1.2), and Redburn offers his personal reminiscences of the events at the Nore. Vere, now agitated, sings of the wider implications of the disaffection and allies it to insidious French influences. He declares that vigilance is called for, and Claggart’s omnipresence among the men is

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praised. Flint alludes to Budd's unwitting invocation of *The Rights of Man* as a prime example of dangers to be feared; but, as the peaceful music from the beginning of the scene returns, Vere waves aside their worries. The distant sound of a shanty is heard below decks, and Vere draws attention to the apparent happiness of the sailors.

A sudden knocking on the door heralds the appearance of Lieutenant Ratcliffe with the announcement that Finisterre has been sighted and therefore enemy waters reached. Vere dismisses the officers to their duties and returns to his contemplation of Plutarch, but is distracted by the return of the distant shanty below decks and listens to his men's singing as the scene slowly fades.

Scene 3

An orchestral fantasy based on the shanty theme reaches a broad climax as the curtain rises on the berth-deck later the same evening. The watch below is finishing the shanty 'Blow her to Hilo', and other seamen are dispersed with their kitbags and hammocks in the gun-bays. As the song fades, Donald starts a rendering of a contrastingly lively shanty 'We're off to Samoa.' Additional verses are supplied by Red Whiskers (who now seems remarkably at home after his initial protests when impressed) and Billy Budd. The song concludes with a verse about Billy himself, hesitantly improvised by Donald and taken up jubilantly by the full chorus.

Attempts to persuade Dansker to join in the communal merriment fail with the realisation that all the old man yearns for is a plug of tobacco. Ever generous, Billy sets off to hunt in his kitbag for the chew he desires. Suddenly Billy's tense stammer is heard off-stage, and he reappears dragging Squeak with him. Accused of meddling in Billy's kit, Squeak draws a knife and fights with Billy until Claggart appears with his corporals and demands an explanation from Dansker. Claggart turns the tables on his henchman, ordering his corporals to clap Squeak in irons and (when he cries 'Sir, it was you told me . . .') to gag him. Fixing his attention on Billy, Claggart sings to his warm trombone triads from Scene 1: 'Handsomely done, my lad. And handsome is as handsome did it, too.' As he turns away from the scene, a young boy stumbles into him and is met with an angry blow from his rattan – a brutal moment which prompts a brief but telling allusion to the poignant saxophone theme associated with the flogging of the Novice (Ex. 1.4).

A mood of nocturnal unease descends as the men retire to their

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hammocks and a solo tenor sings a strain from another shanty 'Over the water', based on a flute theme from the previous orchestral interlude. Claggart stands alone in a small pool of light by the companion-way and expresses his feelings about Billy in a long soliloquy accompanied heterophonically by a solo trombone (Ex. 6.21):

O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness! Would that I never encountered you! Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born. There I found peace of a sort, there I established an order such as reigns in Hell. But alas, alas! the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it and suffers. . .

Having seen you, what choice remains to me? None, none! I am doomed to annihilate you, I am vowed to your destruction. I will wipe you off the face of the earth, off this tiny floating fragment of earth . . . No, you cannot escape! With hate and envy I am stronger than love . . .

I, John Claggart, Master-at-arms upon the *Indomitable*, have you in my power, and I will destroy you.

His final words are set to a tolling repetition of the sinister and widely spaced chord of F minor which has by now become a simple but effective reminder of his depravity (cf. Exx. 6.14 and 6.15).

The Novice now approaches Claggart (return of his saxophone theme, Ex. 1.4), having apparently been summoned some time before. Blackmailing him with the threat of further punishment, Claggart finally succeeds in coercing the Novice into attempting to frame Billy on a charge of mutiny by bribing him into disaffection with some gold guineas supplied by the master-at-arms. The Novice reluctantly moves off to Billy's gun-bay (further statement of Ex. 1.4). Billy is asleep and dreaming, and the music supplies a foretaste of his simple diatonic ballad in Act II, Scene 3 (Ex. 1.5). When woken, it takes the naïve Billy some little time to see through the Novice's scheme; and it is only when shown the coins (to glittering music for muted trumpets and oboes based on the 'repression' theme: Ex. 6.12) that he finally understands the ploy and plunges into his characteristic stammer with fist clenched in rage. The Novice flees and Dansker comes forward to investigate the commotion. Billy explains that he has been incited to mutiny, and the sombre Dansker deduces that the master-at-arms is out to get him. But Billy blithely trusts his own popularity on the ship and refuses to believe Dansker as, to a version of Claggart's theme, the old seadog grimly repeats: 'Jemmy Legs is down on you.'

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Ex. 1.5

116 Slow and dreamily (♩)

NOVICE *pp* freely *lunga*

Bil - ly! Hist, Bil - ly Budd!

Vic. Solo warmly

ppp *lunga*

2 Bass Clts. Hn.

NOVICE *pp* freely *lunga*

Hist, Bil - ly, Wake up! Wake up!

BILLY *ppp*

Dreaming . . . Drows - ing . . . *lunga*

BILLY *ppp*

It's a - dream - ing that I am. Fath - oms down, Fath - oms

Act II

Scene 1

A lively and martial orchestral introduction establishes an atmosphere of tense excitement before the curtain rises on the main-deck of the *Indomitable* some days later (Ex. 1.6). Vere stands on the quarter-deck with a handful of officers, looking seawards through a telescope, expressing dissatisfaction with the prevalent mist and voicing the hope that his impatient men will see action soon. A series of chromatically ascending trombone triads signals the approach of an obsequious

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Ex. 1.6

Lively

w.w.

f

Trpts.

pp

Str. Timp.

G.P.

f

pp

Claggart, who removes his cap to denote his wish to speak with the captain. The master-at-arms ascends to the quarter-deck and, unusually tongue-tied, begins a rambling story; but he is cut short before he reaches its point by a wild cry from the Maintop.

An enemy sail has been sighted on the starboard bow, and the scene brightens as the mist obligingly begins to lift. From now on there is a bustle of activity on deck as a massive ensemble is built up over the martial music from the orchestral introduction, with considerable development of a theme derived from Ex. 1.6 which expresses the sailors' optimism (Ex. 1.7). The braces are manned, the ship is put under full sail, the gunners rush to load their guns, afterguardsmen attend to the firing paraphernalia, powder-monkeys rush on with cases of gunpowder, and the Marines join the ship's complement on deck. As the activity continues, the First Lieutenant calls for volunteers to board the French ship and secures the services of Donald, Red Whiskers,⁹ Dansker and Billy Budd. After a tutti climax in which the orchestral rhythms are strengthened by four drummers on stage, the volume drops but the tension increases as the sailors quietly invoke the wind to fill the sails. The *Indomitable* is barely making in its pursuit, and the French ship is still out of range. As the speed picks up a little, Vere authorises a shot from the 'long eighteens'. There is a colossal explosion and a cheer from all hands, but the shot falls short by half a mile and the mist begins to close inexorably around the ship. The mood darkens (Ex. 6.3), and the frustrated sailors are dismissed from their action posts in an atmosphere of gloom and repressed anger.

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Ex. 1.7

[always very lively]
CHORUS

T *f* *sempre*

This is our mo - ment — the mo - ment we've been

B *f* *sempre*

This is our mo - ment — the mo - ment we've been

w.w.

f *sempre*

sim.

wait - ing for, these long weeks —

wait - ing for, these long weeks —

16 w.w.

Claggart now resumes his petition to Captain Vere, and appears once again by the quarter-deck with cap in hand. Without yet naming the culprit, Claggart informs Vere of ‘a man on board who’s dangerous [Ex. 6.23] ... Ripe for the crimes of Spithead and the Nore’. He produces some guineas and, inverting the truth, relates how the man in question supposedly offered them to a young Novice in an attempted bribe to mutiny (Ex. 6.4). Vere questions how a common seaman could come by such gold, and demands to know the man’s name. The reply ‘William Budd’ provokes an incredulous outburst from Vere (Ex. 6.13) who, convinced of Billy’s innocence, impulsively decides to ‘see the fellow at once’. A boy is sent to fetch Budd to the captain’s cabin, and Vere orders Claggart to confront him with his accusation face-to-face after Vere has had the chance of a quiet word with him alone.