

1 | 'Chronically volatile'

Gesture in Adès's Living Toys and America: A Prophecy

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A single note pierces the air, offered up jointly by bassoon and trombone; others augment the sonority a split second later; then a higher note, and another, nervously crescendoing; brighter winds (an oboe, a clarinet) appear, the melody rising before quickly evaporating, piccolo and piano trailing off overhead. A string-harmonic cloud lingers as an after-image, the memory of a single, composite gesture. Then a gong strikes: a new gesture. For all the detail of the preceding three sentences, the sounding effect of the opening of Thomas Adès's *Living Toys* (1993), as notated in the score (Ex. 1.1), escapes the medium of words. Prose description hardly seems adequate to music's gestural fluency: a tracery of continuously arcing lines, intricate woven textures and delicately fluctuating timbres and weightings. Even so, a notion of gesture as perceptible musical shape – emergent, or recalled – remains intuitive for musicians, whether performing or listening. And while notations for pitch, duration, volume or articulation apparently exceed prose in precision of reference, a verbal language of gestural connotations creeps back in to the score itself. Adès writes instructions ('felt hats', 'pedal'), for example, to control muting and resonance details. Other expression marks are more overtly metaphorical: the percussionist is told to strike the gong 'nobly' (*nobilmente*), as if to convey ceremonial purpose, and there is the movement's title, 'Angels'. Already the musical gestures – whether traced in notation or words – trigger associations, connotations of physical, social or cultural worlds.

No amount of verbal or notational refinement will banish the metaphorical quality of musical gesture. My prose description above is itself metaphor-bound; sounds do not literally 'evaporate', the piccolo is not spatially 'overhead'. But ordinary language is saturated with figurative translations between musical and non-musical domains. If metaphor is the bedrock of verbal evocations of music's passage, the task of defining specific gestures – far from eschewing figurative language in a quest for the 'structural' – will actively engage metaphor as a precise instrument of analytic enquiry. Listeners often acknowledge the element of interpretation in perception – a metaphorical 'hearing as'.¹ The distinctive melodic-registral profile of a given gestural unit, though, might signal many things – some untexted pictorialism, an

The musical score for the opening gesture of 'Angels' from *Living Toys* (bars 1-5) is presented in a multi-staff format. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 50. The score includes parts for Piccolo, Oboe, E♭ Clarinet, Bassoon, Piccolo Trumpet, Trombone, Piano, Gong, Violin I & II, and Viola/Contrabass. The woodwinds play a racing, arpeggiated ascent, with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *ff*. The Piccolo Trumpet and Trombone parts include a 'felt hat' marking and a '1/2' marking. The Piano part includes a 'Ped. sempre' marking and a 'Gongs' marking. The Violin I & II part includes a 'f' marking and a '1 II' marking. The Viola/Contrabass part includes a 'ff' marking and a '(Cb.)' marking. The score includes rehearsal marks [2] and [3].

Ex. 1.1 *Living Toys*, 'Angels', bars 1–5, opening gesture

intertextual allusion or a nod to Baroque and Classical traditions of conventionalised gestures (so-called *topics*). Openings 'ex nihilo', from a weightless, high-treble entrance, are for Adès something of a signature.² Does the racing opening ascent of *Living Toys* resemble the kind of arpeggiated 'rocket' theme familiar in late eighteenth-century symphonic openings?³ Adès's gesture climbs faster than a Classical theme, its flashing woodwind and

¹ Among recent theoretic perspectives, see, respectively, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and Helen M. Prior, eds., *Music and Shape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and the colloquy by Joseph Dubiel, Marion A. Guck and Bryan Parkhurst, 'Hearing as Hearing-as', *Music Theory and Analysis*, 4/ii (2017), 229–70.

² See for example Adès's *Violin Concerto* (2005) or the upper-treble register emphasis of the early piano works.

³ On the Mannheim 'rocket' as beginning gesture, see William Caplin, 'Topics and Formal Functions: The Case of the Lament', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. by Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 415–52 (p. 415).

trumpet colours delineating a single arc. But the gesture is also fluent and subtly modulated, less conventional than *sui generis*. Rapidly cutting between distinct moments, without obvious pattern, Adès here pursues aesthetic proclivities he himself describes evocatively – a lava-like flow, a search for the ‘chronically volatile’: ‘my music is naturally always transitioning, always slipping’.⁴

Before considering this central notion of volatility more closely, let me briefly outline some axiomatic features of a gestural approach to Adès’s early music. We may recall, to begin with, the composer’s rejection of a tidy distinction between abstract and programmatic writing – ‘to me all music is metaphorical, always’ – and his emphatic embrace of music’s potential for semiotic correlation: ‘Musical and non-musical things are inextricably connected.’⁵ The specificity of music’s ‘non-musical’ meanings, *chez* Adès, often evolves according to a range of metaphorical signals – including titles, programme notes and other paratexts. ‘Angels’, opening *Living Toys*, invites listeners to varied proximate associations – the playthings of the title, a child’s imagination of their animated adventures or brightly ethereal realms. Adès’s own programme notes, in this vein, speak of the horn’s solo in ‘Angels’ as ‘haloed with gongs and little trumpets’.⁶ The programmatic view of musical gestures will often centre on a proto-dramatic event sequence, and within it, interpretation will soon discern the activity of defined musical agents.

Definitions of gesture, in the present essay, will interweave structural and semantic traces – not only tonal and metric features, but also a bevy of micro-expressive detail inflecting the passage of even brief musical units. In Robert Hatten’s evocative phrase, gesture encompasses all that pertains to the ‘energetic shaping of sound through time’.⁷ The Adèsian gesture, as already seen, transcends definition solely in rhythmic or pitch domains, demanding attention to the less codifiable realms of timbre and texture. The notion of ‘energetic shaping’ applies both to brief single events and to much larger continuities including extended ‘movements’. The characteristic gesture in Adès’s music, moreover, is fleeting and mobile – its

⁴ Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises – Conversations with Tom Service*, paperback ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), pp. 4, 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5; Joseph Finlay, ‘A Jewish Quarterly Interview with Thomas Adès’, *Jewish Quarterly*, 60/iii–iv (2013), 126–7 (p. 127).

⁶ Thomas Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys*, 1993, www.fabermusic.com/music/living-toys-2373.

⁷ Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 95.

interplay of parameters producing what Hatten terms ‘perceptually *synthetic* gestalts with *emergent* meaning, not simply “rhythmic shapes”’.⁸ As for semantics, Adès’s cyclical pitch patterns in particular have attracted analytic attention for the expressive effects of transmuted ‘lament’ figures, intersecting ‘orbits’ or continuous ‘spiral’ transformations.⁹ To play classical integration off against modernist ‘disorientation’, Arnold Whittall observes, is a basic Adèsian strategy of some dramatic force: ‘idyllic sublimity tilts towards nightmarish horror’.¹⁰

With images of unending gestural transformation, we return to the cardinal idea of a volatile music in perpetual flux. An early exemplar, Adès’s *Chamber Symphony* Op. 2 (1990), shows the degree to which ‘returning’ materials lack stable identity. The first movement’s forthright Beethovenian horn-call (*maestoso*, C major, bar 46) soon deteriorates chromatically, losing pulse definition behind the topically alien jazz of the solo clarinet. Later reworkings of the opening murmuring theme (alto flute and viola, bars 6–14) – a semitone lower (trombone, bar 131), then a fourth lower (basset-clarinet, bar 282) – exhibit characterological shifts to the point of erasure. While all musical ‘repetition’ spans a dialectic of identity and difference, Adès’s variation procedures invite awareness of textural and timbral signatures (as well as intervallic or rhythmic profiles) as integral to hermeneutic understandings of their sounding evanescence.

This chapter concentrates on ‘early’ Adès, in particular on two major works from his first professional decade: *Living Toys* and *America: A Prophecy*, for mezzo-soprano and orchestra with (optional) chorus (1999). With gesture as guiding concern, I shall explore two facets of a conceptual spectrum. At one end are the directly mimetic gestures and ‘actions’ (bullfight, battle, funeral, etc.) defined in the literary programme accompanying *Living Toys*; in *America*, meanwhile, the composer charts a more metaphoric network of gestures grounded in historical circumstances – the sixteenth-century conquest of Mayan peoples in Mexico by arriving Spanish *conquistadores*. With the singer as lonely prophetic witness, Adès creates temporally shaped gestures of apocalypse, in a language whose volatility is rooted in the denial of pulsation and the fracturing of time’s flow.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94 (emphasis original).

⁹ On ‘lament’ as expressive topic, see Edward Venn, *Thomas Adès: Asyla* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 31–4; for ‘spiral’ motions, see Chapter 5.

¹⁰ Arnold Whittall, ‘The Adès Effect’, in *British Music after Britten* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020), pp. 255–69 (pp. 261, 264).

Living Toys: Gesture and Programme

Beyond the arresting opening of ‘Angels’, *Living Toys* describes a continuous seventeen-minute sequence of discrete, titled movements whose main gestures correspond to – or even enact – the imaginary hero’s life mentioned in the score’s prefatory epigraph. As Adès’s invented text (‘from the Spanish’) begins, ‘When the men asked him what he wanted to be, the child did not name any of their own occupations, as they had all hoped he would, but replied: “I am going to be a hero, and dance with angels and bulls.”’¹¹ The literary scheme is supplemented by a visual dimension in the score-cover reproduction of Goya’s etching *The Agility and Daring of Juanito Apiñani in the Bullring of Madrid*. For concert listeners, then, the gestural life of Adès’s work corresponds to the elaborate metaphor of a literary-cum-pictorial paratext. Where Goya’s matador is frozen in a single instant, musical gesture restores him to life. The interpretive challenge, amid the temporal unscrolling of gestures, will be to sort out the degree to which changes of gestural state – Adès’s characteristic ‘slipping’ – support coherent musical agents – dramatic actors, individual or collective – or the distanced perspective of a narrator.

Before discussing specific gestures, we may ponder the narrative precision of Adès’s epigraph and programme notes. These ‘dream-adventures’ range from excited combat (‘into the ring charges an **Aurochs** . . . He is whipped and goaded by the brutal, elegant matador-kid’) to a ritualistic ‘three-gun salute’ in the closing scene.¹² Adès’s programme is as anthropomorphic as anything in Schumann or Strauss and equally bound by the essentially arbitrary quality of its real-world denotations.¹³ The unfolding plot sequence, as in Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, conveys dream-experiences bound by a logic of uncanny doubles or strange repetitions. Gestural transformations, in this realm, may transcend ‘realistic’ narrative. We may also consider the verbal tokens of Adès’s programme as a supplementary or dialogical response to the score’s internal musical logic. The formal scheme in *Living Toys* comprises eight titled segments, five of which bear numbers; interspersing them are three interludes whose anagrammatical titles promise a disguised continuity. A prominent melody – which Adès calls the ‘hero’ theme – is first announced in ‘Aurochs’ (Ex. 1.2).

¹¹ Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys*. ‘I invented this story . . . after I’d written the piece’ (Adès and Service, *Full of Noises*, p. 72).

¹² Adès, programme notes on *Living Toys* (bold emphasis original).

¹³ For closely hermeneutic readings, see Jacqueline Susan Greenwood, ‘Selected Vocal and Chamber Works of Thomas Adès: Stylistic and Contextual issues’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Kingston University, 2013), pp. 277–339.

223 [♩ = 67] Poch. allarg. - - - - - ♩ = 60

Perc. Talking drum
 mp p sempre

* Vln. 1, Vln. 2, Vla.: (quasi) con una dita sola al "Balett"; tutti molto cantabile

Vlns., Vla.
 mf espr.

Pno. solo
 mf

Picc. Tpt., Hn.
 p

Pno., Cb.
 mf p sonore

Vc. pizz.
 mf marc.

Vc., Cb.

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B.D.
 mp p

III (+C.A.)
 IV

Vc. arco senza vib.
 mf

Hn., Picc. tpt.
 Cb. harm.
 mf <

Vc. arco Pno.
 mf

Vc. arco, sul pont.
 Fl., Cb. harm.
 sf mf

Cb. pizz.
 mf

B. Cl., Bsn.
 mf

(+ Pno.)
 mf

Vc. pizz.
 mf

B. Cl., Bsn.
 mf pp

Pno., Cb. pizz.
 mf

Vc. pizz.
 f

Ex. 1.2 *Living Toys*, 'Aurochs', bars 223–30, the 'hero' theme announced

It returns to preface the later anagram segments, so enacting an underlying three-stage progression:

- I Angels II Aurochs ['hero' theme, E] BALETT
 III Miliatiamen IV H.A.L.'s Death ['hero' theme, F#] BATTLE
 V Playing Funerals ['hero' theme, G#, E] TABLET

Since the 'hero' theme enters on an E tonic, moving later to F# and finally to G#, its returns trace an emergent tonal progression. Such a pattern offers long-range formal coherence, even as the shifting tonal level, locally, embodies change. With more fragmented flashes of materials within the anagram interludes – and a constantly evolving instrumental palette between and within each segment – *Living Toys* can sound almost kaleidoscopic in its moment-to-moment agility. Before revisiting the distinctive role of the 'hero' theme itself, there is room to consider more closely the pattern of brief, apparently ephemeral gestures contributing to such an impression.

Adès's score signals 'childish' detachment from the adult world by the use of timbral coding: the emphasis on high-range percussion (very small cymbals, piccolo snare drum) or markedly 'high' solo sonorities – piccolo trumpet, sopranino recorder – defines a palette of pronounced brightness, set in relief by deep bass touches (contrabassoon). Such timbral choices bear cultural-semiotic affinities with the magical realm of fairy tales (where large and small are subject to strange inversions). Timbre itself – particularly where 'unusual' instruments are heard – defines or inflects gestural meanings in conjunction with a host of stylistic or topical references. For example, in 'Aurochs', the solo piccolo trumpet hardly signals any specific national origin, but Adès's choice of accompaniment – prominent clicking castanets and handclaps (by pianist and conductor) – clearly indexes the Spanish locale of a bullfight. Apart from the folk-traditional allusions, the Iberian setting is further delineated in Flamenco-tinged harmonies. The trumpet deepens the reference through characteristic *jota* triplets, and by imitation (in staccato repeating notes) of *rasgueado* guitar strumming. With this multiplicity of references, Adès constructs a Spanish topical field by a fusion of signs.

The piccolo trumpet solo in 'Militiamen' – a 'mad bugler', according to Adès's programme – 'talks' with a plunger-muted, *parlato* stream of snarls and growls. The stylistic borrowing here is from jazz, framed as a historical topic (a style relocated to a new context),¹⁴ and more specifically from the 1920s playing of Bubber Miley. With fusion or collision of 'otherwise incompatible style types', as Hatten observes, expressive meaning arises by a *troping* of musical gesture.¹⁵ Adès's jazz trumpet is further marked as a topic by audible paradox – a sounding incompatibility of materials. Directing the player to feel his/her 'own meter' (3/4 against the ensemble's 9/8) and meticulously notating cross-rhythms and 'speech' syllables, Adès maintains palpable performative tension throughout 'Militiamen'. The plunger-muted idiom is a stylistic about-face in relation to the earlier *brillante* role in 'Aurochs' – as if the player, switching between trumpets, has suddenly donned a disguise. Nor is this the only stylistic topic on display in 'Militiamen'. Adès's opening direction – *in modo popolare* – gives a verbal hint, but most listeners will immediately catch, at the end (bar 336), the jolting arrival of a famous James Brown phrase (from the 1965 hit song 'I Feel Good'). The acrobatic arpeggio figure is not actually

¹⁴ See Danuta Mirka, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, ed. by Danuta Mirka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–57 (p. 2).

¹⁵ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, p. 68.

new: the trumpet calls it out three times, moments earlier (bars 325–9). Only with heavy percussion – bass, field and snare drums – does the ensemble’s punching syncopated response suddenly speak intertextually as Brown’s funk horn section. Perennially volatile, the stylistic-topical reference vanishes almost instantly. Adès continues the rising F[#] arpeggio string – F[#]–A[#]–C[#]–E–G[#] – with seven further pitches – G–D–A–E^b–F–B–C – an answering descent that completes a twelve-note aggregate (stylistically remote from the quoted funk lick).

Within a programmatic frame, *Living Toys* coaxes semiotic precision from individual gestures by a timbral-textural dialogism founded on the meaningful interplay of solo instruments and larger groupings. Possible concertante situations (as in the *Chamber Symphony*) reflect the basically soloistic scoring. Adès’s street-band vernacularisms, along with the prominent percussion and virtuoso trumpet soloist, recall Stravinsky and Walton as precursors.¹⁶ With the rhetorical and dramatic force of virtuoso soloists – the ‘Militiamen’ trumpet, the horn in ‘Angels’ and ‘BATTLE’ – *Living Toys* also continues an ‘instrumental-drama’ genre whose hallmark is the assignment of instruments to character-like roles.¹⁷ An account of musical gesture, as Hatten has shown, will entail a rigorous delineation of *agency* within music’s ‘virtual-fictive world’.¹⁸ To understand the agentive function of individual gestures, we revisit Adès’s ‘hero’ theme, attending closely to its first entrance, and later transformations.

Arriving suddenly, the ‘hero’ theme (Ex. 1.2, above) quells the frenetic bullring combat of ‘Aurochs’ in a salient ‘rhetorical gesture’.¹⁹ In melodic terms, the tune’s rising third (E–F[#]–G[#]) reverses the falling motion of the nursery-rhyme tune (‘Three Blind Mice’, E–D–C) that dominates the earlier hectoring brass phrases.²⁰ The bullfight’s taut machismo display is countered now by a relaxed loping motion at a slower tempo (bars 224–52), a kind of dream-march by a triumphant hero (as in ‘O Albion’

¹⁶ As a seventeen-year-old, Adès listened ‘obsessively’ to *L’histoire du soldat* and *Façade* (Adès and Service, *Full of Noises*, p. 118).

¹⁷ On British genre contributions, see Philip Rupprecht, ‘Images in Sound: Movement, Harmony and Colour in the Early Music’, in *The Music of Simon Holt*, ed. by David Charlton (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), pp. 56–79 (pp. 59–61).

¹⁸ Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 37.

¹⁹ I use the term in Hatten’s strict sense, to denote ‘sudden change in energy, force, direction, and character’ of some musical discourse. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, p. 165.

²⁰ On interactions between ‘hero’ and ‘mice’ themes within a network, see James Donaldson, ‘Living Toys in Adès’s *Living Toys*’, presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Columbus, OH, 8 November 2019.

from *Arcadiana*, the elegant swoons recall Elgar). The instantaneous shifts of mood, perspective and tonality are further marked, as gesture, in the timbral domain. With two-string unisons on muted violins and viola and lazy sliding portamentos, tuning is meaningfully fuzzy. Previously raucous brass timbres are now reduced to soft doubling lines (*espressivo* and *cantabile*). Behind the hero's song-like march, the gentle accompaniment reveals a new instrumental colour (talking drum).

The 'hero' theme, after defining a public triumph at the end of 'Aurochs', reappears in two later movements – 'H.A.L.'s Death' (at bar 369) and 'Playing Funerals' (bars 512, 520) – in each case in gestures quite distant in character, bearing and dramatic effect from the original theme's presentation. Tonally, I have noted, this 'hero' theme accumulates a long-range coherence as *Living Toys* unfolds, rising by step from E to G# before loosely revisiting E (a possible 'home' tonic cruelly swept away in the F minor cadence of 'Playing Funerals', bars 549–53). With an ear to timbre, again, it is volatility of gesture that tells in performance. For the two funereal dream-scenes, Adès finds fresh instrumental colours: the soprano recorder's bird-like piping (*lugubre*) announces the tune as H.A.L. expires; for the hero himself, finally, the tune is borne with great solemnity in a respectful collective blending of instrumental voices (each new timbre entering softly 'inside' those already sounding). This tune gradually loses definition, as perceptible pitch is lost to hearing: in a cloud of ghostly percussion strokes ('slacken drums', bar 530), prolonged trombone glissandos and string shivering effects (*pizzicato tremolo*), gestural coherence fades, along with any outline of musical figure, into the distance.

Gesture and Myth: *America: A Prophecy*

History as Gesture

Where gestures in *Living Toys* cast solo instrumental agents as proto-dramatic enactors of a literary programme, in *America: A Prophecy* the modalities of music's temporally unfolding shapes spring from the very different textural situation of a lone voice pitted against the collective. The solo mezzo-soprano in *America* issues her prophetic visions of destruction as a challenge to the massed sonority of a full orchestra and chorus. Like William Blake (from whom he took his title), Adès seeks to illuminate within documented historical events an underlying layer of deeper archetypes. This historical 'America' refers to the home of Mayan and Mexica

(Aztec) peoples in the Yucatán peninsula, invaded in 1519 by Spanish *conquistadores*. Adès's vocalist is a seer, her 'Prophecy' delivered in words sacred to the vanquished, from books of their 'jaguar priests' (*Chilam Balam*).²¹ 'O my nation / Prepare . . . They will come from the east', she warns in the first of the two panels of Adès's fifteen-minute diptych form; in the second she foretells inevitable destruction: 'we shall burn, we shall turn to ash'. The music's fierce progression is from a briefly glimpsed antediluvian calm, through states of disturbance, to a climax of mounting excitement, moving on finally to an awful emptiness, the aftermath of destruction. *America's* Panel I falls into six sections, while the shorter Panel II comprises three.²² Like a mural, the score treats actual historical events, yet seems to avoid diachronic 'history' in its local arrangement. The piece, instead, works in gestures with more abstract referents: fear of the future, a fateful moment of encounter, apocalypse as calendrical certainty. *America* does not create a musicalised drama so much as give sounding form to the broader cultural representations of myth.²³

The grand gestures in Adès's scheme cannot be reduced to some schematic 'before–after' sequence. The whole piece is taken up with the 'priestess'-singer's prophetic visions. At the end of Panel I Adès writes only a comma, directing that Panel II follow *attacca*: the absence of transition or real pause marks a filmic gap in representation (a black screen between visual scenes). 'Prepare', she warns (but there is no time to do so). When she returns, just a few seconds later ('Weep'), she sings in a prophet's future-tense vision of that which is to come. The Mayan texts, Adès observes, 'are both prophecies and histories',²⁴ and it is from this double-temporal perspective that we may listen for the telling musico-gestural signals of *America*. The sumptuous brass fanfares, for example, midway through Panel I (bars 124–93), in context, announce a self-evidently 'Spanish' music, yet the musical battle, as Paul Griffiths suggests, sounds ambiguous in tone, mingling graphic destruction with flamboyant

²¹ Hélène Cao calls the soloist a 'Mayan priestess' ('la prêtresse maya'). Cao, *Thomas Adès le voyageur: devenir compositeur, être musicien* (Paris: MF Éditions, 2007), p. 97. Adès's literary source for Mayan texts is Christopher Sawyer Lauçanno, trans., *The Destruction of the Jaguar: Poems from the Books of Chilam Balam* (San Francisco: City Lights Publisher, 1987).

²² On the temporal proportions, see Christopher Fox, 'Tempestuous Times: The Recent Music of Thomas Adès', *Musical Times*, 145/1888 (2004), 41–56 (pp. 44–5).

²³ Valuable historiographic contexts include Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Quoted in Tom Service, 'Altered States', *Guardian*, 29 August 2002, section G2, p. 17.