

Catching on to the Technique in Pagoda-Land

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Source: *Tempo*, New Series, No. 146 (Sep., 1983), pp. 13-24

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944972>

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CATCHING ON TO THE TECHNIQUE IN PAGODA-LAND

Donald Mitchell

Ubud, Bali (Indonesia)

17 January 1956

The music is *fantastically* rich—melodically, rhythmically, texture (such *orchestration*!!) and above all *formally*. It's a remarkable culture At last I'm beginning to catch on to the technique, but it's about as complicated as Schönberg.

(Britten to Imogen Holst)

THE PRINCE OF THE PAGODAS, Britten's only ballet score (his only mature score originally composed *for* the ballet, that is),¹ and that comparatively rare bird in the 20th century, a *full-length* ballet, was first performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1957, on the first day of the new year, with the composer conducting. The choreographer was John Cranko and the scenery was designed by John Piper.

Pangs rather than pleasure had attended the birth of the work, for Britten had found the whole business of writing the ballet an exceptionally arduous task. It was not so much the quantity of music involved, though this was daunting enough, but his being confronted with the difficulties, intransigencies, and vivid temperaments (and tempers!) of the ballet world. The 'language' of ballet did not come easily to him: thus communication was a problem. It was an experience that left him feeling bruised and debilitated;² and almost up to the time of his death he could rarely be persuaded to

1 Though one should bear in mind the Choral Dances from *Gloriana* and the dance element of *Death in Venice*.

2 For example we find him writing to Erwin Stein (his publisher, at Boosey & Hawkes) on 13 November 1957: 'I was delighted with your sweet letter, but please don't think I was cross with anyone particular about the Ballet proofs. I was only just cross in the abstract to have to go back to that beastly work, of which at the moment I am heartily sick. The maddening thing is that after we have all spent hours reading it there will quite clearly remain dozens of mistakes. I frankly don't know what we can do, but I am clear at the moment I don't want any more to do with it! But I must not be silly, and your nice remarks about it make me feel that the work was not just a waste of a year's work'.

return to his score, either to look at it with a view to publication or to discuss a possible new production.

All this would be principally of biographical interest were it not that for the fact that the experience of the première so profoundly coloured the composer's attitude to the work that to this day no full score, and indeed no score at all that he saw through the press himself, is generally available, and this a major composition that was first performed in 1957!³ A further ironic twist to the tale is provided by the character of the music: it is not only one of the most exuberantly inventive of Britten's orchestral scores but also—if one can commit oneself at all to a sweeping generalization—one of his 'happiest' and most extrovert in spirit. We are lucky that the distempered view he came to take of the *Pagodas* did not prevent him from recording in 1957 a slightly shortened version of the complete score, and did not affect his spirited conducting of it.⁴

The Prince of the Pagodas remains an undeservedly little-known work, so I give here a synopsis⁵ of the complete ballet.

Act I

A brief orchestral introduction discloses first the fanfares (see Ex. 15) that herald important events throughout the ballet and second a preview of Pagoda-land. Each of the *dramatis personae* in the ballet is depicted in a theme which remains a constant factor throughout while undergoing all manner of transformation and variation: the theme, like the human personality, retains its essentials but continually appears in a new light according to circumstance. Ex. 1 is the motif associated with the Prince-as-Salamander:

Ex. 1

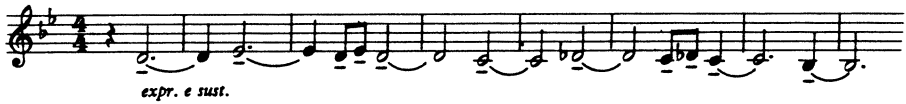


Ex. 2



The Fool and the Dwarf come to blows, but the Emperor enters and stops the fight (alto saxophone and characteristic figuration). He separates the opponents, after which a brilliant festal *March* introduces the Courtiers. The *March* gives way to an elegant *Gavotte* (life at Court) whose middle sections yields a solo dance for the Emperor (alto saxophone), the major-minor theme registering the precariousness and pathos of the aged Emperor's position:

Ex. 3



The *Gavotte* returns and ends with the physically frail Emperor's collapse. Fanfares, punctuated by distortions of the *Gavotte*, herald the arrival of the four Kings who have come to seek the hand of the heiress to the crown of the Middle Kingdom. The 'royalty' motif accompanies the entry of their four Pages and, later, of the Kings themselves:

Ex. 4



The Kings declare themselves in a series of character dances. The King of the North dances a kind of Gopak; the King of the East is immersed in a quivering but virtually static harmonic texture; the King of the West is satirized in a malformed quasi-Polka (?), the unmelodious melody of which is a grotesque twelve-note invention; the King of the South polyrhythmically rocks and rolls to native drums (see Ex. 13a). The dances over, the Emperor sends for his elder daughter, Princess Belle Épine. His questing figuration is succeeded by her proud solo number (Ex. 5), with a middle section (Ex. 6), which later proves to be of great significance:

Ex. 5



Ex. 6



The Kings bow to Belle Épine (to Ex. 4), but the Fool, to his own music, interrupts them and runs off to find Princess Belle Rose. The Dwarf tries to stop him (to Ex. 2), but without success, and Belle Rose enters on the wings of an oboe, which bears the burden of her melody:

Ex. 7



First she dances alone, a melancholy dance that expresses her status as a neglected younger daughter. But, as in a vision, the Prince appears to her, to his own princely tune:

Ex. 8



They dance together through a chain of variations on Ex. 8, at the height of which the Prince vanishes (cymbal), leaving Belle Rose alone. The Kings kneel ('royalty' motif, Ex. 4) before Belle Rose—an action that angers the Emperor who, to yet another eruption of his nervous figuration, demands a choice of heiress. The Kings choose Belle Rose (Ex. 4 again), and the now furious Emperor holds the crown over Belle Épine's head (tense brass climax, trumpets and trombones over side-drum) to stimulate the Kings' wandering affections. Belle Épine is triumphant (Ex. 5), and the humiliated Belle Rose runs off, to the impetuous motif to which she ran on. Belle Épine dances with each King in turn: reminiscences of their diverse character dances are now confined within a uniform 3/4 and 'married' to motifs from Belle Épine's solo (Ex. 5). But this is as far as her marital intentions go. To the Kings' disgust, she rejects each of them. At this there is consternation in the Court and royal spleen (a furious version of Ex. 4). The Emperor tries to pacify the jilted suitors (Ex. 3); fails (Ex. 4); attempts to placate them with a recall of Belle Rose (Ex. 7); but fails once more (Ex. 4 again): Their Majesties' sole interest is the crown. The confusion is brought to an end

by fanfares, broken into by derivations of Ex. 4, now expressing astonishment rather than range. The doors of the palace open and four green Frogs enter, bearing a large emerald casket. The unexpected intervention of these emissaries from Pagoda-land is accompanied by a further transformation of the 'royalty' motif. Belle Épine tries to open the casket (to Ex. 5, *pizzicato* strings), but without success. For Belle Rose, however, the casket opens of its own accord and she takes out a rose (celesta). The Courtiers laugh (*Gavotte*) but the Frogs silence them (Ex. 4) and invite Belle Rose to step into a huge golden net. To turmoil in the Court and the Prince's tune (Ex. 8) in the orchestra, Belle Rose is born aloft, bound for Pagoda-land, with the Frogs as accompanying courtiers.

Act II

Scene 1 consists of three broad sections in which the three natural elements—air, water, fire—are depicted in finely contrasted textures that give the 'feel' of each element in turn. The thread that binds the sections together is the urgent 'travel' music which accompanies Belle Rose's flight in search of her vision:

Ex.9



Appropriately enough, Ex. 9 is both in her own key (G minor, compare Ex. 7) and is also a variation of the tune associated with the object of her search (Ex. 8, the Prince). *Scene 1* opens with Ex. 9, after which we encounter the *corps de ballet* impersonating clouds and stars (their respective textures are unmistakable). Ex. 9 recurs, and then the clouds and stars settle down to an ingenious *Waltz* which culminates in an attempt by the clouds to extinguish the stars. The strife is interrupted by the appearance of the moon (tolling trumpet motif with clarinet arpeggios). The moon vanishes, and the clouds and stars resume their waltzing. At the climax of the dance the moon reappears, triumphant, and then fades. The clouds cover the stars, and Ex. 9 dashes Belle Rose into 'Water'—'a great Wave', whose salty intervention throws up sea-horses and fish-creatures and initiates their darting *Entrée*. Then follow a vigorous number for the sea-horses (dotted rhythm prominent) and a trembling, watery (!) nocturne—a miracle of invention and instrumentation—for the fish-creatures. A smart coda rounds up the sea-dwellers in a *Galop*, after which Ex. 9 plunges us into 'Fire', in whose *Entrée* we meet first the Male Flame (tuba) and then, after a brief continuation of Ex. 9, the Female Flame. Both Flames are then 'developed', together in a *Pas de deux*, apart in two ensuing solo dances (Male, then Female). A dynamic coda for the principals and *corps de ballet* of Flames brings this section to an end, but Ex. 9 remains to drop Belle Rose on to the threshold of Pagoda-land.

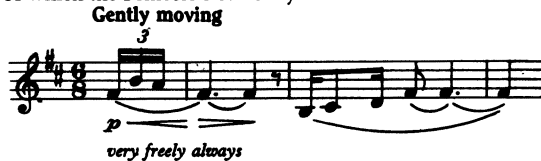
In *Scene 2* Belle Rose explores this strange territory to a solo violin cadenza (a free variation of Ex. 8), discovers the Pagodas, and touches them, whereupon they revolve and emit their distinctive music (Balinese percussion band). The Pagodas are not unfriendly and offer her gifts. The dialogue between violin and percussion band continues until the fanfares sound once more, to which the Pagodas respond with an important characteristic rhythm:

Ex.10



At this very moment Belle Rose is blindfolded by the Pagodas—none too soon because, to Ex. 1, a huge green Salamander now appears. The creature wriggles towards Belle Rose (who has tried unsuccessfully to remove her bandage) but, as his music moves to a climax, he sloughs off his skin. Ex. 8 is heard, predominant in its rightful key (C major) but still combined with Ex. 1—the thematic complex presenting Belle Rose's Act I vision of both Prince and Salamander—and the Prince emerges, tailless and resplendent (see Ex. 14), unperceived by the blindfolded Princess. The Prince and Belle Rose dance a tender *Pas de deux* (Ex. 11), at the height of which the Princess's curiosity overcomes her and she tears off her bandage. The

Ex.11



Prince hides, and when Belle Rose finds him he is a Salamander again (gong) and so, too, is his characterizing theme (Ex. 1), with which, ruffled by muttering from the spinning Pagodas, the act ends.

Act III

In *Scene 1* we return to the Palace of the Middle Kingdom. A brief orchestral prelude (based on Ex. 5) establishes Belle Épine's precedence. She is now Empress. The Court is corrupt—a D minor section (D is

apotheosis—first the fanfares and then an overwhelming processional, the ultimate transformation of Ex. projected across an ostinato bass and embedded amid fanfares and flourishes. But the kind, compassionate Fool has the last word. He joins the hands of the Prince and Princess and, to the scampering music to which he made his first appearance in Act I, he leads them forward in the sprightly epilogue that precedes the *fin* curtain.

There is no doubt that the way we hear the *Pagodas* in 1983 is very different from the way we heard it in 1957. Then, the *Pagodas*' music seemed to represent an enthralling, presumably one-off, dash of exotic colour, the result of Britten's visit to Bali in 1956. Now, we hear a whole future embodied within their glittering revolutions. But there is something else too: not just anticipations of something to come but methods of organization, ways of compositional thinking, that with hindsight we clearly perceive to have had their roots in the techniques Britten encountered and assimilated on his Far East trip. One example comes early in the work: the treatment of the Prince-as-Salamander motif (Ex. 1) which appears first at Figure A.⁸ It is projected above an ostinato (bass trills!),⁹ and as it develops through rhythmic contraction and motivic superimposition one has a substantial glimpse of the particular techniques that were to become prominent in Britten's music after 1964 (the watershed year of *Curlew River*).¹⁰ Indeed the texture at this juncture—how it is compiled—is already conspicuously heterophonic in character. It is no accident that out of this preview of the Salamander music emerge the repeated chord-clusters that later are to characterize the *Pagodas*' music proper.¹¹ In retrospect, then, the *Pagodas* stands revealed as one of the first substantial manifestations of the new compositional methods that were to evolve in Britten's art over the last decades of his life.

But though we may not fully have received this dimension of the *Pagodas*' message in 1957, what we did hear was the tribute the work paid to Tchaikovsky, whose full-length ballets Britten took as a model. The score of the *Pagodas* is rich in salutations, not only in sonorous Tchaikovskian detail—the moments when we respond with delight to an unmistakable bit of witty or affectionate mimicry are too numerous to mention: they are of course deliberate and part of the composer's tactics—but in the work's larger formal organization. This was typical of the way Britten's mind worked: he would have thought it distinctly odd *not* to have 'consulted' the outstanding creator from the past in the same field. If he was going to write a full-length ballet, then one aspect of its authenticity would be guaranteed by an audible pedigree. There was also Britten's own intense admiration of Tchaikovsky's ballets, which was of long standing and based on an intimate knowledge of the scores.

When I was teaching at Sussex University, I had hoped to tempt Britten into a lecture room by inviting him not to teach or attempt to analyse but simply to talk about *any* piece of music that meant something special to him, from which he had learnt, and from which he thought students might learn. The response was immediate, though, alas, the project never got any further than that. The work he said he might be persuaded to talk about was one of the Tchaikovsky ballets. Why?

8 I refer throughout to the rehearsal letters and figures that appear in the piano reduction of the full score and in the full score itself.

9 An ostinato seldom encountered. But there is a precedent in the last song of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, well known to Britten.

10 The only writer who, to my knowledge, has noted the implications of this passage is Peter Evans (*The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 225). But then he is virtually alone in having written anything serious at all about the music of the *Pagodas*.

11 Cf. Act II Figure 74f., where the clusters reappear and have a very important role to play and where the Salamander music itself is incorporated into a fully fledged gamelan texture.

Because of the marvellous orchestral imagination, of course; but also, more significantly, because of *the perfection of the small forms*, and because of Tchaikovsky's inventiveness within the formal constraints of the genre. I remember Britten's precise illustration of this last point: it was the *Pas de deux* (No. 14) from the complete *Nutcracker*, and what gripped him was what Tchaikovsky was able to extract from his scale:¹²

Ex. 12



Tschaikovsky's importance as a principal model for the *Pagodas* inevitably brings to mind another marvellous 20th-century score in which he was again saluted: Stravinsky's *Le Baiser de la fée*. In Stravinsky's case, Tchaikovsky's ideas stimulated him to a kind of simultaneous running commentary: we end up with a brilliant double perspective, a double image. In Britten's case, what *he* takes from Tchaikovsky were not the senior composer's own ideas—apart from those affectionately 'realistic' details which were part of the authenticity he sought to achieve—but what he had learnt in creative practice and principle from *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Nutcracker*. It was the renewal and extension of that great tradition that was Britten's ambition and he did not so much comment on Tchaikovsky as consult him, and make sure that we were aware that the process of consultation had taken place by the conscientiousness of the Tchaikovskian detailing.

Of course it was not only Tchaikovsky who was consulted by Britten, but also Tchaikovsky's major successors in the field. Hence, for example, a number such as the *Variation for the Female Flame* in Act II (Figure 56f.), which unambiguously shows how well Britten knew his Prokofiev. Stravinsky too is a presence in the *Pagodas* in his own right. Everyone has remarked upon the tribute paid him, and particularly *Apollo Musagètes*, in the music for Belle Épine (Act I Figure 36f.), but this is by no means the only salutation to him.¹³ Less widely observed, if at all, is the witty, tongue-in-cheek reference to Stravinsky in Act I, in the fourth of the characteristic dances of the four Kings. One needs to be aware that the preceding dance (for the King of the West) is a mild satire on an aspect of Modernism, on what was, in Britten's view, the doctrinaire application of the twelve-note method: hence the peculiarly contorted and graceless twelve-note theme for the dance. Incidentally, the satire is given a further twist by a mechanical canon (see the entry of the xylophone at Figure 28)¹⁴ which is there to emphasize and ridicule the *academicism* that Britten, or at least a part of him, associated with the serial method and its more mirthless practitioners. If Schoenberg is entertainingly scrutinized in the King of the West's dance—and none of this should be taken too seriously—it is Stravinsky's turn with the King of the South (from Africa), the middle part of whose dance (pianos and drums) offers a kind of kindergarten but highly effective simplification of a very famous passage indeed from *Le Sacre de printemps*: compare the rhythmic scheme at Figure 31 with Stravinsky's drumming in the concluding *Danse sacrée*, which likewise alternates threes and twos:

12 It is hardly surprising, given Britten's own obsession with scales, that it was this number that so powerfully appealed to him.

13 A rather amusing though no doubt unconscious quotation is to be found in Act III at Figure 16f. (cf. also its repetitions 16 bars later and most extensively at Figure 18f.), where Britten shows that for all his well-known looking down his nose at *The Rake's Progress*, he had stored away a memory of Stravinsky's brilliant prelude to Act III of the opera.

14 The only significant stretch of canonic writing I have found in the *Pagodas*.

Ex. 13a and 13b

Britten

Energetic

Native Drums
(Pfte. omitted)

f etc.

Stravinsky

$\text{♩} = \text{♩} = 126$

Timps.
Tamtam and
Bass Drum

f etc.

Thus in these two dances Britten gently guys in sequence both the elaborate *cerebration* and the no less elaborate *primitivity* which constitute two of the most important manifestations of 'modern music'. This was satire that was not meant to draw blood, but how Britten went about it was typical as well as great fun.

Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Stravinsky: all of them great *Russians*. These were the right ancestors for a full-length ballet and shared a common tradition. The very exclusivity of the genealogy, its Russian-ness, was once again part of the 'authenticity' of Britten's approach. But of course Britten himself was one of his own primary sources; and it is to his own musical personality that we should now turn, and in so doing take the widest view, i.e., not only of Britten past but of Britten future.

The past in fact need not detain us long. We may note briefly such things as the celesta's figuration, one bar after Figure 74 in Act I, which evokes *The Turn of the Screw* while being stripped of its association with Quint. (Though there is some connexion, in that this is a *supernatural* moment—a casket, offered to Belle Rose, opening of its own volition: Britten was ever consistent in his instrumental imagery). Then there are things of more general significance: for example we can be sure that Britten would never have been able to turn his hand to such a memorable, menacing and convincing tango in Act III (Figure 1f.) if it had not been for his experience in the 1930's, when he turned out so many brilliant stylizations in a popular vein as part of his work for the theatre.

But it is the indications of the Britten yet to come which are now exceptionally intriguing. There are many relatively trivial, yet fascinating, glimpses of works still waiting to be born: for example, it is impossible now, when one hears the tom-toms 5 bars before the curtain at the end of Act II, not to be transported into the sound-world of the church parables and especially of *Curlew River* (cf. the use of the drums in *Curlew River*, Figure 43f.). But there is one late work that the *Pagodas* score often brings to mind in a quite particular way: *Death in Venice*. Again, one can divide the anticipations into categories of lesser or greater significance. Into the first perhaps falls the use of the tuba as a distinctive voice in the *Pagodas* (e.g. Act I Figure 61f.): one feels the instrument to be well on the way towards the extraordinary emancipation it achieves in *Death in Venice*. Or there is the tiny, tailpiece solo for the vibraphone (4 bars before Figure 72 in Act II) which so precisely replicates this particular feature of the gamelan music of Bali and reminds us of its further use in *Death in Venice*.¹⁵ Speeded-up versions of the solo—shades of *Paul Bunyan* (cf. Prologue to Act I Figures 11–12)—follow just before the repeat sign after Figure 72 and again two bars before Figure 74.

15 Britten would have assimilated this particular Balinese practice in the first instance from his acquaintance with Colin McPhee's two-piano transcriptions of *Balinese Ceremonial Music*, even before hearing it for himself on the island.

An anticipation of a rather subtler order, and an altogether weightier one because it is bound up with a complex, quasi-dramatic manipulation of dissimilar categories of music, occurs in Act II, in the scene where the Princess's eyes are bandaged and the Prince dances with her in human form (*Pas de deux* for the Prince and Belle Rose, Figure 78f.). It is a highly dramatic moment of confrontation, between both the *dramatis personae* and the two types of music involved: the Prince's, which belongs to the Pagodas, and Bali, and the Princess's, which belongs to Europe. It is a juxtaposition that we are to meet again in *Death in Venice*, and again for dramatic reasons, introduced to articulate the different experiential worlds. What is even more striking is that the Princess's little game of hide-and-seek with the Prince-as-Salamander (Act II Figure 85 to end) is conducted, albeit in embryonic form, in precisely the terms in which Aschenbach conducts his hide-and-seek with Tadzio through the alleys and *piazze* of Venice in Act II of *Death in Venice*:¹⁶ the repeated percussion clusters,¹⁷ derived in both instances from the Balinese gamelan, are used in precisely the same way to identify Tadzio and the Prince-as-Salamander in the circumstances of a *pursuit*, a *hunt*.

The full-length ballet of 1957 was a report on the experience of visiting Bali the previous year. There were further reports to come—*Curlew River* and its successors and, ultimately, *Death in Venice*; and yet it was an experience that had actually begun in New York in the 1940's. The 'authenticity' of Britten's *Pagodas* would surely have given pleasure to his old friend Colin McPhee. McPhee would certainly have noticed with satisfaction the authenticity of the model upon which Britten had based his gamelan music in the ballet. As Douglas Young has pointed out, an excerpt from the original Balinese music which was Britten's inspiration and point of departure also appears in transcription in McPhee's major study, *Music in Bali*.¹⁸ But McPhee's book

16 Cf. *Pagodas* Act II, 1 bar after Figure 74f., and *Death in Venice* Scene 16 Figure 301f.

17 I have already pointed out (above, fn. 6) that the chord-clusters initially emerge from the Salamander music as it first appears in the Prelude. They are as it were the vertical manifestation of the impact made on Britten by Balinese music, of which just such clusters are a prominent feature. They are also the direct predecessor of the similar cluster which identifies Tadzio in *Death in Venice*.

18 (New Haven: Yale University Press), Ex. 337, pp. 348–9. See also Douglas Young's sleeve-note for *East-West Encounters*, Cameo Classics GOCLP 9018(D), a most valuable source of information about McPhee. Britten must have met McPhee not long after his arrival in New York in August 1939. At the back of his pocket diary for that year we find scribbled there: 'Colin McPhee [sic] 129 East 10. Algonquin 4-4980'. The registering of that address and telephone number undoubtedly marked the beginning of their friendship. McPhee died in Los Angeles, where he was teaching at the University of California, on 7 January 1964. It is possible that the original gramophone recording of the ballet came to his attention. Further evidence has come to light of the close association of the two men during Britten's years in the United States. It was McPhee who prepared an ingenious and skilful transcription for two pianos of Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, which was used for performances in New York in 1942 of a ballet, *Jinx*, presented by the Dance Players at the National Theatre and first performed on 24 April. (We must remember in this context McPhee and Britten as performers at two pianos of the Balinese Ceremonial Music). The manuscript of this transcription, now in the Britten-Pears Library at Aldeburgh, is dated 'Feb–March 1942'. A dyeline of a copyist's copy (also in the Library) was clearly used for performance: on it appear cues related to the dancers. (George Balanchine and Francis Mason, *Festival of Ballet* [W. H. Allen, 1978], pp. 326–7, give a detailed account of the story of the ballet. It was revived by the New York City Ballet in 1949.) There is also an intriguing undated letter of Britten's from these years, drafted for him by Elizabeth Mayer and addressed to David Ewen, an American popular encyclopaedist. Ewen had evidently asked for information about Britten and his music, to which the composer replied: 'Of course I shall be delighted to co-operate with you in your new book. Unfortunately I have so far been unable to obtain copies of the best articles written about me. They were published in periodicals in England some time ago & I am afraid I have not got them with me. But Mr. Colin McPhee is engaged in writing a comprehensive

was not published until 1966, and of course where Britten found his model was in Bali in 1956, where he made his own notations of the various gamelan ensembles he heard and the various styles of performance.¹⁹ Thus was the ‘authenticity’ of the gamelan music in the *Pagodás* guaranteed in just the way that the ‘references’ to Tchaikovsky *et al.* guarantee the mainstream tradition of which the *Pagodás* forms intended part.

I think I have said enough about the oriental dimension of the score to establish both the *Pagodás*’ continuity with the past and its anticipation of the future in Britten’s *oeuvre*. But there are one or two comments I should like to add which suggest how the *total* fabric of the music is permeated by the impact made on Britten’s ears by the Balinese gamelan. I have discussed the clusters that characterize the Prince-as-Salamander and are conspicuously part of Britten’s gamelan music:

Ex. 14 *The Prince emerges.*

Quick $\text{♩} = 54$ ($\text{♩} = \text{previous}$)

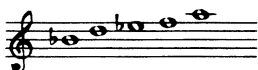
Pfte.
Perc.

Trp.

Str.

survey of my work at the moment, which Arden Music is considering using sometime—but at any rate not before the fall—& anyhow there would be no objection to you using it I know’. Presumably, and regrettably, McPhee’s study was never completed and never published; perhaps Britten’s departure from the States in 1942 killed off the project.

- 19 Britten’s manuscript notes of scales and fragments of typical Balinese gamelan figuration and textures, including indications of instrumentation, are preserved in the Britten-Pears Library. At the top of one page is written ‘Kapi Radji (Overture)’; then follows this notation of the scale on which the particular piece Britten had heard was based:



(See also *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 234, where Peter Evans has correctly deduced the scale.)

Britten also wrote out as part of the same sketch scraps of motifs and rhythmic figuration and indications of the basic pulse or beat. At a later date, clearly, he looked through these notes in order to locate something appropriate for the ballet: under the notation given above appear the underlined words ‘This for beginning of Pagoda scene’; and it was indeed by the scale and the subsequent outline of motif, rhythm, instrumentation and texture that the music for the *Pagodás* was generated. Cf. Figure 71f. with this transcription of Britten’s on-the-spot, seminal sketch.

Xyl. Metal. Soft high gongs. Cymbals.

There is little probability that Britten would even have known of McPhee’s *Music in Bali*. It is exceptionally interesting, however, that McPhee’s 1966 excerpt from and commentary on the Balinese *gambang* style relate back to his two-piano transcription of the same *Gambang* that he had published in 1940—one of the very transcriptions he played at that time with Britten. While there can be no doubt that Britten consulted not the almost forgotten transcriptions from 1940 when composing the *Pagodás* but his own manuscript notes from 1956, there can be little doubt that it was his unconscious memory of playing the 1940 *Gambang* that influenced him to choose the very same music again from his own 1956 notations. I am much obliged to Douglas Young who has shared his thoughts with me about the history of this fascinating passage.



It seems to me now that the concept—the sonority—of the cluster very significantly fertilizes long (occidental as well as oriental) stretches of the *Pagodas* and is indeed latent in the very first bars of the Prelude, whose diatonic fanfares, we come to realize, incorporate the two narrowest, most economical forms of the cluster, the major and (as echo) minor second:²⁰

Ex. 15 Quick ♩ = 140

Ex. 15 is a musical score for a quartet: Trumpet (Trp.), Snare Drum and Strings (S. Dr., Str.), and Clarinet (Cl.). The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of Quick (♩ = 140). The Trp. part features a melodic line with triplets and a dynamic marking of *ff*. The S. Dr., Str. part has a dynamic marking of *dim.*. The Cl. part features a melodic line with triplets and a dynamic marking of *ppp*.

The seed we discern there in the Prelude retrospectively proves to be the generator of so many formulations of the cluster principle throughout the ballet (one prominent and climactic example being Ex. 14 above) that it is impossible not to conclude that the cluster is one of the leading and characterizing features of the unique soundscape of the *Pagodas* as a whole. It is not possible to list every example here, but in support of my contention I draw the reader's attention to the following passages, which include some of the major instances of the systematic use of clusters, of many different kinds and yet all sharing to some degree a common sonority:

20 One recalls Erwin Stein's famous remark about Britten's discovery of 'the sonority of the second' in his discussion of the *Sinfonietta* (*Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works by a Group of Specialists* [Rockcliff, 1952, and Greenwood, USA, 1972] p. 249). The piled-up clusters one finds in oriental music must have made a special appeal to a composer who had long been devoted to the smallest type of cluster. Thus in the *Pagodas* two favourite sonorities—one fresh, one of long standing—are integrated. Chains of seconds abound, most of them matching up to Stein's description of Britten's exploitation of them as 'beautiful and tender'. Furthermore, the very first initiating chord of the work, the added sixth, might be thought of in this context as particularly appropriate—a chord as it were with a built-in cluster. See also Peter Evans's comment in his review of the full score of *Death in Venice* in *Music & Letters* 62 (1981), pp. 112–14:

Britten's conversion, for long stretches of this opera, of harmony from an agency of movement into one primarily of motivic amplification ensure that one's ears soon become acutely sensitive to the harrowing ubiquity of certain intervallic complexes; and when the same nuclei are operating melodically, often in tenuously related two-part writing or a single part *heterophonically tensed against itself* (the logical final stage in Britten's lifelong addiction to the 'sonorous second'), then 'analysis', whether or not verbalized, appears an unusually immediate, and a required, part of the listening process. [My italics.]

Act I

Prelude (complete); Figure 16f; Figure 23f. (tremolando clusters); Figure 34f.; Figures 48 and 48a ff.; Figure 50f.; Figure 64 to end of act.

Act II

Figure 32f. (tremolando clusters); Figure 56f (seconds!); Figure 60f.; Figure 74f.; Figure 77f.; Figure 78f. (seconds!) to end of act.

Act III

Figure 19 to end of scene; Figure 60f.; Figure 73f.; Figure 89f.; Figure 97 to end of act.

One might even claim that it is through the idea of the cluster that the human beings of the Court are brought into relation with the magic world of the Pagodas. Just at the point (Act II Figure 74) when the offstage fanfare (the world of the Court) is juxtaposed with the Salamander's repeated chord-clusters (the world of the Pagodas) one hears that it is in fact the cluster that unites the two opposed ideas: the juxtaposition spells out the relationship between them. The cluster is one of the principal means through which Britten integrates his score—a bridge not only between his *dramatis personae* but between the musical world of East and West.

I have said nothing about the orchestration, which is virtually a subject in itself. It is in its way a veritable textbook of orchestration—or, perhaps better, the complete guide to Britten's exceptional orchestral imagination.²¹ *Pagodas*, from this point of view alone, is surely one of the most remarkable scores to have been produced so far in the second half of the century. If nothing else it suggests that, given a composer of genius, there was a good deal of life left in the 'standard' symphony orchestra. It might be thought to be Britten's 'Concerto for Orchestra', though not so titled. Dazzling orchestration,²² perfect small forms: what better model could there be for teaching?

21 It seems beyond belief—certainly beyond *my* belief—that Michael Kennedy (*Britten: Master Musicians*, [Dent, 1981] p. 214) can commit himself to the opinion that *Pagodas* 'of all Britten's large-scale works' is 'the least characteristic in sound'. Almost any bar of the score demonstrably shows this to be the reverse of the truth. And this from a *student* of Britten's music! Scarcely less disconcerting is Stephen Walsh's suggestion (*Observer*, 20 June 1982) in a review of the first recording of the 'Del Mar' Suite (see above, n. 3) that in comparison with Britten's work from the 1930's the ballet 'is merely a work of effortless talent . . . more like a well-rehearsed high-wire act; the creative muscles are so attuned to it that it barely stretches them any more'. It seems curious to come to such a sweeping conclusion on the basis of the suite, which represents only a fraction of the total music and from which the *Pagodas*' innovative music is altogether excluded. But perhaps this is what Mr. Walsh means by writing, as he puts it, 'tongue-in-cheek'.

22 I am thinking not just of the gamelan music, extraordinary though that is, both in its own right and as a marvellous example of Britten's 'photographic' ear: it seems hardly possible that so authentic a gamelan-like sound could be conjured out of the modern symphony orchestra. I also have in mind—but how does one choose amid such riches?—Variations I and II from the *Pas de six*, both of them built around very particular instrumental timbres and agilities (horn and piano in Variation I, solo violin in Variation II), both of them representing opposed extremes of colour and density (the one dark and heavy, the other light and weightless), both products of a common *un*common imagination.