

20

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 twentieth 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

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

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

up to the time of his death he could rarely be persuaded to 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 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

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.'

³ Britten was also reluctant to approve the idea of a suite, to be drawn from the ballet by another and sympathetic hand, on the grounds that this was something he eventually wanted to do himself. But, though he may have contemplated it, he never got round to doing it. This meant that it was, in the main, only the *Pas de six*—the final set of dances from Act III scene 2—that was heard in the concert hall, and that infrequently. It was given a separate opus number, Op. 57a, but was available only on hire, presumably because everyone was waiting on the appearance of the composer's own, or other authorized, suite, which was never to materialize. Not long before his death in 1976 Britten at last authorized the publication of a suite, taken from the ballet by Norman Del Mar. While this is more extensive than opus 57a, it is, in a sense, more 'Prince' than 'Pagodas' since, for practical reasons—the extra percussion required—it excludes the Pagodas' music. The 'Del Mar' Suite was given a first broadcast performance on 7 December 1963 by the BBC Scottish Orchestra conducted by Norman Del Mar. The first concert performance took place at the Edinburgh Festival on 29 August 1964. A study score of the 'Del Mar' Suite, *Prelude and Dances from the Prince of the Pagodas* (Op. 57b: Boosey & Hawkes, 1980 (HPS 919)) constituted the first publication of any of the music from the ballet. (The first recording of this suite was issued in 1982 by EMI (ASD 4073).) Mr Del Mar has described the circumstances in which Britten heard the suite and the extent to which the published score of the suite neither represents entirely the composer's wishes (the *Pas de deux* is excluded) nor Mr Del Mar's own (so far as the finale is concerned). He writes in a 1980 programme note: 'Shortly before his death . . . Britten invited me to perform my suite in his presence at an Aldeburgh Festival and after this performance he finally sanctioned publication since he saw that he would clearly no longer consider tackling afresh the problems of a new and original suite. He regretted only two things: in the first place I had included nothing from Act II which described Bell Rose's journey through air, water and fire to Pagoda-land, and her first meeting with the Prince; and secondly he found my ending too abrupt.'

'Where Act II was concerned a simple solution lay to hand in the form of the *Pas de deux* from the second scene describing the dance of the mystified Belle Rose with the Prince, temporarily released from his enchanted metamorphosis into a salamander, and this will be added to tonight's performance between Nos. 4 and 5 of the [published] suite. . . .

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

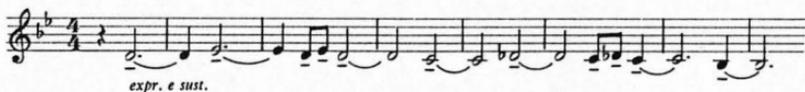
associated with the Prince-as-Salamander. The curtain rises on the Court of the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom. The compassionate Fool prepares the room for the arrival of the Court. His characteristic scurrying music is interrupted by a threatening trombone motif associated with the malevolent Court Dwarf, who is bent on obstructing the Fool as he goes about his duties (Ex.2). The Fool and

Ex.2



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 yield 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*

Ex.3



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).

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

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

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 rage. 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 borne aloft, bound for Pagoda-land, with the Frogs as accompanying couriers.

ACT II

Scene 1 consists of three broad sections in which three of the 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



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

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

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 Belle Épine's tonality) is suggestive of the prevailing atmosphere: its tune is none other than Ex.6, its accompaniment a vicious distortion of Ex.5. Thus the themes of the principal and middle sections of Belle Épine's first solo combine to produce a brilliant picture of power-drunk decadence. (The Dwarf is drunk: note his staggering gait in the brass, a motif appropriately derived from his mistress's Ex.5—Empress and Dwarf are thematically allied in evil intent.) The Empress summons the guards and has them fetch in the old Emperor, who is imprisoned in a cage (Ex.3). The Courtiers mock him: a variant of their *Gavotte* alternates with Ex.3. He is released, and forced to dance (alto saxophone): in a hushed middle section (muted brass) he remembers his former glory, then resumes his tottering steps. His torment is abbreviated by the agitated entry of an exhausted Belle Rose (Ex.7), together with the Salamander, who is at first not noticed by the Court, though his watching presence makes itself felt in the music. Belle Rose upbraids her sister for ill-treating their father. After a further (varied) reference to the Emperor's dance and dream of faded majesty, the music becomes yet more animated: the Empress orders the guards to seize Belle Rose. The Salamander moves to her rescue, whereupon he too is seized and prepared for execution. Belle Rose implores them to stop and—a crucial moment marked by a return of Ex.11—tenderly embraces the Salamander. He rises to his full height, sheds his skin, and in a clap of thunder (gong) the palace disappears. The Prince stands erect.

In *Scene 2* an extended orchestral transition, mounting to an enormous climax, leads us to the Pagoda Palace: the transition consists of the Prince's two tunes (Ex.1 and Ex.8) welded as continuous melody and surrounded by motifs, including Ex.10, drawn from the Pagodas' music in Act II scene 2. From darkness to light: the Prince, Belle Rose, the Emperor and the Fool appear and the inhabitants of Pagoda-land are liberated. A second orchestral transition gradually decreases in dynamic intensity, leaving the way open for the ensuing *Divertissement*, in which Love and Freedom are saluted in a set of dances:

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

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.⁹ It is projected above an ostinato (bass trills!),¹⁰ 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*).¹¹ 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.¹² 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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ An ostinato seldom encountered. But there is a precedent in the last song of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, well known to Britten.

¹¹ The only writer who, to my knowledge, has noted the implications of this passage is Peter Evaris (*MMB*, p. 225). But then he is virtually alone in having written anything serious at all about the music of the *Pagodas*.

¹² Cf. Act II Figure 74f., where the clusters reappear and play a very important role, and where the Salamander music itself is incorporated into a fully fledged gamelan texture.

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.¹³ 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? 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 (Ex. 12).¹⁴ Tchaikovsky's importance as a principal model for the *Pagodas* inevitably brings to mind another marvellous twentieth-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.

Ex. 12



¹³ See also above, pp. 33–5, for discussion of this characteristic feature of Britten's thinking in a slightly different context; and see his own comments on the *War Requiem*, above, p. 96.

¹⁴ It is hardly surprising, given Britten's own obsession with scales, that it was this number that so powerfully appealed to him.

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

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 *Apollon Musagète*, in the music for Belle Épine (Act I Figure 36f.), but this is by no means the only salutation to him.¹⁵ Less widely observed, if at all, is the witty, tongue-in-cheek reference to Stravinsky in Act I, in the third 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)¹⁶ 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 (Ex. 13a) with Stravinsky's drumming in the concluding *Danse sacrée*, which likewise alternates threes and twos (Ex. 13b). 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.

Ex. 13a Britten

Energetic

Native Drums
(Pfc. omitted) $\left| \frac{3}{4} \right. \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \left| \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \right| \frac{2}{4} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \left| \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \overset{\text{f}}{\text{tr}} \right| \text{etc.}$

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ The only significant stretch of canonic writing I have found in the *Pagodas*.

Donald Mitchell

Ex. 13b Stravinsky

♩ = ♪ = 126

Timp.
Tamtam and
Bass Drum

etc.

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 connection, 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 thirties, 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

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

feature of the gamelan music of Bali and reminds us of its further use in *Death in Venice*.¹⁷ 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.

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*:¹⁸ the repeated percussion clusters,¹⁹ 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.²⁰ There were further reports to

¹⁷ See above, pp.43–5, where I point out that 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* (1940), even before hearing it for himself on the island.

¹⁸ Cf. Pagodas Act II, 1 bar after Figure 74f., and *Death in Venice*, Scene 16, Figure 301f.

¹⁹ I have already pointed out (above, p.201) that the chord-clusters initially emerge from the Salamander music as it first appears in the Prelude. They are 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*.

²⁰ As for any possible Balinese influence on the *Pagodas* scenario, I am much indebted to Dr Roger Savage (Edinburgh) who has drawn my attention to the description of an *arja* play—a 'modern operetta based on traditional theatre, with songs in old Javanese metres'—in Colin McPhee's *A House in Bali* (O.U.P., 1947), p.170, some features of which—e.g. 'the Princess who married Green Frog'—strike up an association with the *Pagodas* fairy tale (not to speak of our own *Cinderella*). There may well be other Balinese plays or tales to which the scenario of the *Pagodas* is more closely related, but even this example suggests that Cranko, when devising the

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 1940s. 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*.²¹

ballet, acquainted himself with Balinese sources; and the most likely source of these would have been McPhee. The idea of a Prince born in some other form—a tiger, a frog—seems to run through Balinese mythology: see also McPhee, *op. cit.*, pp. 65–6. There is an opportunity here for basic research into the origins of the story of the *Prince of the Pagodas*. John Percival, in his biography of John Cranko, *Theatre in my Blood* (The Herbert Press, 1983), gives an account of the collaboration between the choreographer and the composer (pp. 113–18). It is not without interest. For example, Cranko apparently referred to his scenario as a ‘mythological fairy-tale’ and hoped that people might leave the theatre saying ‘I’m sure I’ve heard that story somewhere before’; and we may be sure they would have mentioned *Cinderella* among other remembered tales. On the other hand, Mr Percival makes no mention of Balinese sources whatsoever. I find it scarcely credible that these would not have been investigated by Cranko, to some degree at least. When Mr Percival remarks that Britten ‘made some research into oriental music—Japanese and Balinese—for exotic colour’, in seeming ignorance of Britten’s historic 1955–6 trip to the Far East, which preceded the composition of the ballet, we become conscious of the pressing need for a properly researched account of the conception of the joint creation. Although somewhat oddly put, Mr Percival’s reference to Britten studying ‘a complete edition of Tchaikovsky’s music’ in the context of the *Pagodas* only goes to confirm what I write about Britten’s consultation of his great predecessor on pp. 201–2 above.

²¹ 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 McFee [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, *Finx*, 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),

Catching on to the technique in Pagoda-land

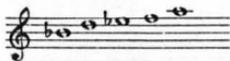
But McPhee's book was not published until 1966, and of course where Britten found his model was in Bali in 1956, where he made his own notations of the various gamelan ensembles he heard and the various styles of performance.²² Thus was the 'authenticity' of the gamelan

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 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.'

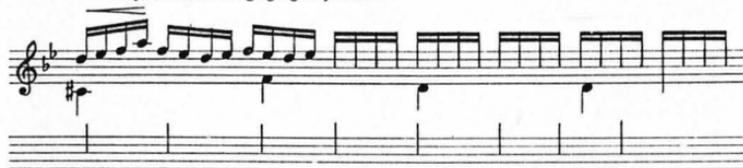
Presumably, and regrettably, McPhee's study was never completed and never published; perhaps Britten's departure from the States in 1942 killed off the project.

- ²² 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 Radja (Overture)'; then follows this notation of the scale on which the particular piece Britten had heard was based. (See also *MBB*, 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 below 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 Pagodas 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 *Gambangan* 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 transcription from 1940 when composing the *Pagodas* but his own manuscript notes from 1956, there can be little doubt that it was his unconscious memory of playing the 1940 *Gambangan* 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.

Donald Mitchell

music in the *Pagodas* guaranteed in just the same way that the 'references' to Tchaikovsky *et al.* guarantee the mainstream tradition of which the *Pagodas* forms intended part.

I think I have said enough about the oriental dimension of the score to establish both the *Pagodas*' 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). It seems to me now that the concept—the

Ex. 14

The Prince emerges.
Quick $\text{♩} = 54$ ($\text{♩} = \text{previous } \text{♩}$)
Pfte.
Perc.
Tip.
Str.

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, major and (as echo) minor seconds (Ex. 15).²³ The seed we

²³ One recalls Erwin Stein's famous remark about Britten's discovery of 'the sonority of the second' in his discussion of the *Sinfonietta* (*BS*, 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, with 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

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.²⁴ *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,²⁵ perfect small forms: what better model could there be for teaching?

²⁴ It seems beyond belief—certainly beyond my belief—that Michael Kennedy (*BMM*, 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 thirties 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 a curious conclusion to arrive at, especially in view of the *Pagodas*' innovative music. But perhaps this is what Mr Walsh means by writing, as he puts it, 'tongue in cheek'.

²⁵ 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 uncommon imagination.