

THE REALIZATIONS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN-HENRY PURCELL: EXPERIMENTAL FIELD AND THE INFLUENCE INTO ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS

Giedrė Muralytė-Eriksonė

The composers Henry Purcell (1659–1695) and Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) were major figures in English musical culture, like a bridge between Baroque and the twentieth century. Britten had the idea to refresh English music and literature, to show the beauty, freedom, and vividness of the English language. Britten was one of the few twentieth-century composers who regarded melody as the most important element in music. He started to realize Purcell's songs from 1943, which had a huge impact on his original musical language. He was inspired by Purcell's musical language, which made use of texts in an expressive and free manner. The identified patterns will be used to explain the linkages between the musical text in Britten's realizations of several of Purcell's, which were expressive and free, more like improvisations, filled with strong notes diatonically and chromatically.

The paper will analyze the correlation between Britten's realizations of Purcell's songs and the deep connection with original vocal cycles by Britten *Winter Words* op. 52 and *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61 and some interpretation ideas of the realization *Sweeter than Roses*.

WINDOW INTO THE PAST

According to Joseph N. Straus, "In notes as in words, twentieth-century composers misread their predecessors in accordance with their own conceptions of musical structure. Furthermore, a different artistic impulse gives rise to the twentieth-century recompositions" (Straus 1990: 44). The renaissance of past music ideas was felt in post-war England too. Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), Michael Tippett (1905-1998), and others were inspired by English Baroque music. They brought the personality of Henry Purcell (1659-1695). Both Britten and Tippett composed the arrangements and realizations of Purcell's songs. But they took and adopted some composing ideas in their subjective way.

Purcell wrote more than 100 secular and extended songs, most for theater. The phonetics and intonation of the native language in the vocal music made an impact on Purcell's music character, and the use of texts in an expressive and free manner helped him to understand the music. There were many unexpected harmonic and rhythmic changes in the compositions. The composer used melismas and figurations to express the feelings, ideas, or even realistic sounds or pictures. "In Purcell's

keyboard temperament most of the chords in such remote keys would have sounded distinctly out of tune, and this is clearly a calculated part of the effect” (Laurie 1984: 19). Purcell regarded melody as the most important element in music. The melismas and figurations he used to express the feelings, ideas, or even realistic sounds or pictures.

THE INFLUENCE OF PURCELL’S MUSIC

Britten was one of the few twentieth-century composers who regarded melody, like Purcell, as the most important element in music. Some important aspects that connect Britten to Purcell:

- melody is one of the most important structural elements in music;
- music form, music speech, accompaniment, vocal line, intervals, etc. aspects;
- poetic text or musical elements combining parallels.

The echoes of Purcell’s melismas could be clearly traced in Britten’s realizations of Purcell’s songs and even in Britten’s original vocal pieces, including the song cycle *Winter Words* Op. 52 (1953). By comparing Britten’s realizations of several of Purcell’s songs from the period preceding the composition of *Winter Words* with the songs from the cycle analyzed, it has been shown that *Winter Words* was directly inspired by the musical language of Purcell, especially the experimental aspects of Britten’s musical language such as the invention of a lively figuration. The use of melismas and appropriate textures has been drawn from the musical legacy of Purcell.

There are three parallels between Britten’s realizations and two vocal cycles *Winter Words* op. 52 and *Sechs Hölderlin—Fragmente* op. 61:

- Melismas’ importance in the music,
- Harmony, tonality instability,
- Piano/harpsichord manner of execution composing.

We will compare some realizations with the original songs.

BRITTEN-PURCELL REALIZATIONS

To realize a piece is to give full artistic life to the music left by a composer in the contemporary style, to fill out the continuo bass line of a composition. Britten wrote many realizations of Purcell’s songs.

Purcell wrote two settings for *Orpheus Britannicus* (1698 and 1702). Britten wrote several realizations and put them in his own order. In his realizations of Purcell's songs, he added to the bass and harmonies prescribed by the figured bass and filled in gaps, but only with material that he had. In the realizations, Britten was writing idiomatically for the modern piano or using voice fully in the freely sung manner of the most standard repertoire, as opposed to the restrained tone that was often used in early music. "Britten fully exploited the lower range of the modern 20th-century piano, which of course Purcell did not have at his disposal (...)" (Hendsbee 2007: 202).

In that case, the main aspect and the question for the musician is how to understand and interpret the realizations: like a Baroque piece or like music from the twentieth century. The pianist faces even more questions for interpretation, for example, to open or close the piano, to use a huge scale of dynamics or only *piano* and *forte* (like with harpsichord), to use the pedal or not. In this case it should be will analyzed in the aspect of pedalization too.

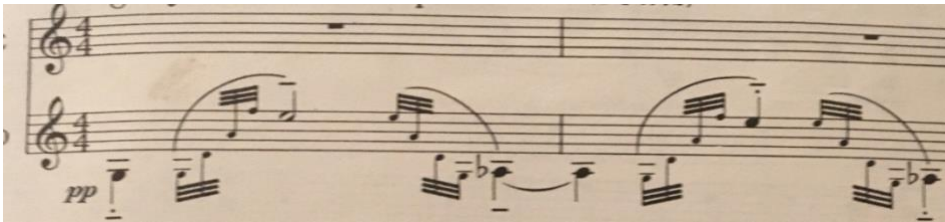
We will analyze some songs from *Orpheus Britannicus* and compare them to the song cycles *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61 and *Winter Words* op. 52. We already notice that the realizations were composed in 1943-45, the cycle *Winter Words* in 1953, and *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* in 1962. So we agree that those compositions were not written at the same time. However, there are very clear parallels in between these songs.

In the Baroque period, composers used effects to raise and render the feelings of the listeners. For example, they illustrated sounds from reality and used rhetorical figures with specific meaning and special tonalities. It is interesting that Britten adopted the idea about musical illustrativity from Purcell too. In Baroque-period rhetorical figures, illustrativity was very commonly used to express the music more clearly and deeply. Britten borrows this idea in the vocal cycles *Winter Words* op. 52. "Britten's music is itself a kind of wordless language—a characteristic way of presenting and shaping the interplay of essentially musical ideas (themes, rhythms, motives, or keys) within an unfolding discourse. The sounds of music (...) themselves have properties usually ascribed to speech—expression, eloquence, a rhetorical force" (Rupprecht 2002: 1). In this paper I discover the connection in aspects of manner of execution composing, melody and rhythm.

The song *Sweeter Than Roses* from the setting *Orpheus Britannicus* originally had an accompaniment of harpsichord. In those days the interpreter played the basso continuo and made it in their individual manner. Britten realized the bass line. But what we notice in the next song from *Winter Words* the same model of accompaniment.



Example 1. Britten-Purcell *Sweeter Than Roses* from *Orpheus Britannicus* (mm.1-2), 1945

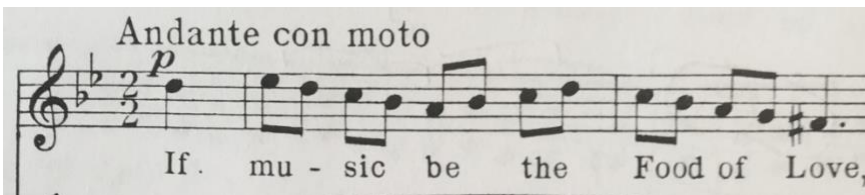


Example 2. B. Britten song *At the Railway Station, Upway* from the vocal cycle *Winter Words* op 52 (mm. 1-2), 1953

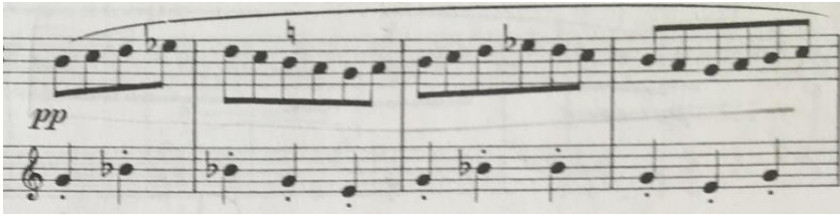
Sweeter Than Roses originally had an accompaniment of harpsichord. In those days the interpreter played the basso continuo and made it in their individual manner. Britten realized the bass line. But what we see in the next song from *Winter Words* we notice the same model of accompaniment. It is not the only one example of this composing model; it is the same in the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61 too. But the most similarities can be found in the aspect of melody.

THE PARALLELS BETWEEN THE REALIZATIONS AND THE VOCAL CYCLE *SECHS HÖLDERLIN-FRAGMENTE* OP. 61

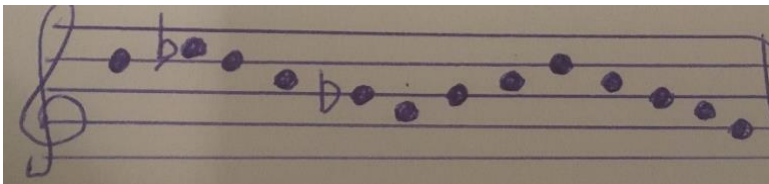
Britten composed the realizations and put them into different settings in his own order. I present the melody comparison results of analysis from *Orpheus Britannicus* 6 songs and the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* by Britten.



Example 3. Britten-Purcell *If Music Be the Food of Love* (mm. 1-3)



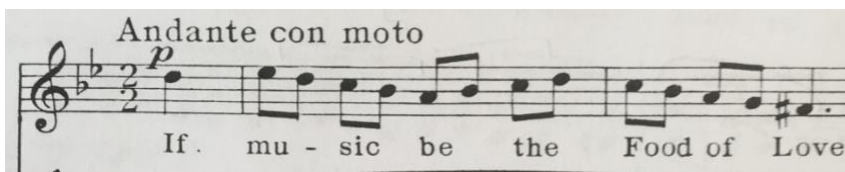
Example 4. Britten's song *Die Jugend* from the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61



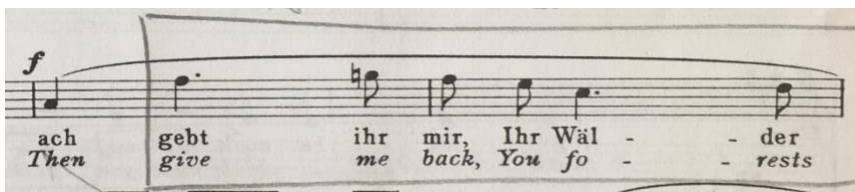
Example 5. Reduced right hands part of Britten's song *Die Jugend*

In the examples (3-5) we can find the same melody in the same notes, but in the realization this line has a vocalist, although in Britten's original song this melody has a right hand.

The realization *If Music Be the Food of Love* has more than one correlation with this cycle. In the realization the melody starts from a stronger D tone and the melody goes diatonically five notes down (examples 6-7). However, in the song the melody starts from a stronger tone F and the melody has a line down with a small modification (permutation). In these examples, we notice a very similar melody composing model.

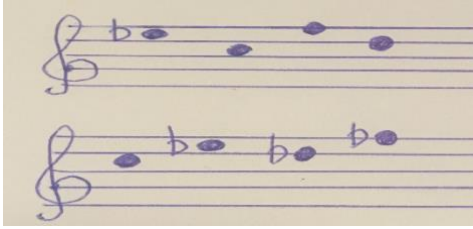


Example 6. Britten-Purcell realization *If Music Be the Food of Love*

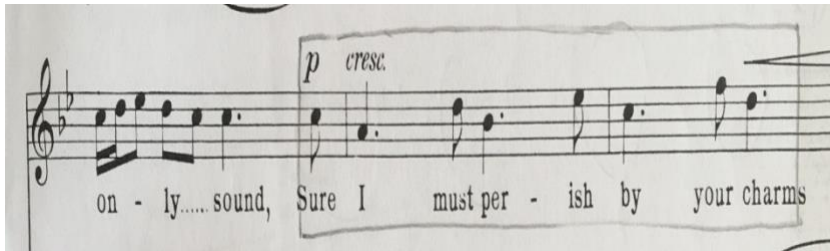


Example 7. Britten's song *Die Heimat* from vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61

The permuted melody line can be found in the examples (8-10) from the realization and the original song below. The reduced example can demonstrate the similarities more clearly:



Example 8. Reduced melody *If Music Be the Food of Love* and *Menschenbeifall*



Example 9. Britten-Purcell *If Music Be the Food of Love*



Example 10. Britten's song *Menschenbeifall* from the vocal cycle *Sechs Hölderlin-Fragmente* op. 61

In the examples above, we can see deep cohesion between the compositions.

CONCLUSIONS

In Purcell's vocal music the intonations of the language and phonetics made an impact on the music's character; the use of texts in an expressive and free manner made a specificity in the music understanding. In flying from the poetry and symbols in the compositions, we can find many unexpected harmonic and rhythmic changes. Britten adopted some ideas, so in that way we see a deep connection. There are some important aspects that connect Britten to Purcell:

- melody is one of the most important structural elements in music;
- music form, music speech, accompaniment, vocal line, intervals and etc. aspects;

- poetic text or musical elements combining parallels.

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