Connotations
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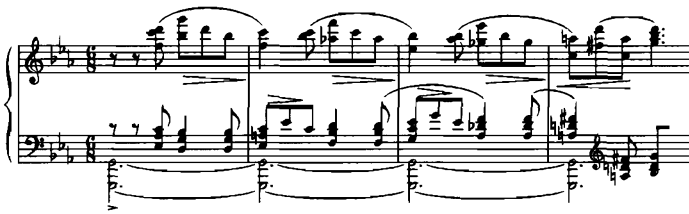
"A kind of musical conversation":[1] Britten and Crozier's *Let's Make an Opera!*

REBEKKA FRITZ, INGE LEIMBERG, NINA SANDMEIER

1. Meeting the theme and getting in touch[2]

I.L.

When asked for a theme within the theme of the conference, I found myself singing the Owls' Nightsong with the audience in one of the performances of *Let's Make an Opera* at the Hammersmith *Lyric*, half a century ago:[3]



The full title, *Let's Make an Opera! An Entertainment for Young People in Three Acts, including* The Little Sweep, *A Children's Opera* gives us the matter and the manner and the purpose and the persons of the work in a nutshell. The first two acts consist of a preliminary play devoted to the making of the opera which will be performed in the third act. Apart from a professional composer, a young lady who writes poetry, a charming young nanny, and the middle-aged lady who tells the story of the little sweep's rescue, the opera-makers are boys and girls, so that the entertainment is not only "for" but also by young people and, finally, the imperative "Let's" turns out to be an invitation extended to the audience. Thus, on that remembered occasion, we were asked to participate in the little "entertainment" that consisted of words and music arising out of conversation and

performed in a manner that never denied that origin. Nor should it be absent from the discussion of the theme at this conference. Therefore the partnership of a musicologist and a literary historian seemed to be indicated. So I rang up a musicologist colleague and asked for the address of a likely candidate. He named Rebekka Fritz who named Nina Sandmeier as our pianist. Frau Fritz and I will discuss the theme from our different angles while Frau Sandmeier will intermittently play some of the musical examples mostly alive in your memory, anyway. In the last part of our talk we shall ask you to "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts,"[4] dividing us, if not "into a thousand parts," at least into a couple of adults (male and female) and half a dozen children. As their substitutes we shall, moreover, have to sing, for which we ask your "pardon, gentles all."

2. Where does this "Entertainment" come from?

R.F.

When Inge Leimberg asked me whether I would like to join her in giving a talk on Benjamin Britten's *Let's Make an Opera* I was intrigued. How does this work fit into a symposium on "the poetics of conversation"? Investigating the relationship between poetry and opera seems plausible, but looking for conversation in opera? So I wanted to find out more about the work itself and its context, especially the historical one.[5]

Let's Make an Opera falls into the category of school opera, children's opera etc.[6] This genre has a long tradition going back to the sixteenth century when, in Germany plays in Latin were performed at the Protestant *Lateinschulen*. They often included choruses at the end of acts. In England, up to the seventeenth century, choirboys—e.g. the Children of the Chapel Royal—often doubled as actors, performing at court and in public, now mostly in the vernacular. Since they were trained musicians the proportion of music in the plays and the standard of performance was very high. Having said this much—or

rather little—I must leave the enormous subject of the English boy companies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the experts, proceeding to the modern practice of performing not only by but for children. From the nineteenth century onward the plays often combined spoken dialogue with songs, like ballad operas or operettas, and the educational aim which had gradually given way to a purely representational one, came to the fore again, e.g. in Brecht and Weill's Lehrstück *Der Jasager*, Hindemith's *Wir bauen eine Stadt*, or Britten's *Let's Make an Opera*. Here the combination of spoken dialogue and music occurs on two levels. The first two acts form a play with a few sung passages, whereas the last act is an opera with a few spoken dialogues.

Secondly *Let's Make an Opera* is closely linked with the operatic tradition from the very beginning, since the first two acts discuss the thematic and structural elements of a grand opera, especially of the nienteenth century. In the opera proper, the third act of the entertainment, the typical forms of grand opera—ensembles, arias, recitatives—are reproduced on a smaller scale in three scenes instead of acts. Britten works with the set pieces and traditional methods of opera but he also undercuts their respectability by placing them in that educational context. This does not "come from" the operatic tradition, nor does the audience involvement in the songs which function as entr'actes. As a parallel perhaps Hindemith's *Ite, angeli veloces*, a cantata on a text by Paul Claudel, should be mentioned where the tradition that the congregation sings the final chorale in cantata is taken up in a secular work. But in opera I know of no audience involvement, apart from the possibility to sing-along in ballad operas (e.g. *The Beggar's Opera*) the music of which is made up mainly of popular songs.

Britten not only knew about these traditions, but was literally steeped in them:[7] for the English Opera Group he realised *Dido and Aeneas* and *The Fairy Queen* by Purcell, who was himself a "Master of the Children" at the Chapel Royal, as well as John Gay's *The Beggars Opera*—and, surely, we are supposed to read the words "a children's

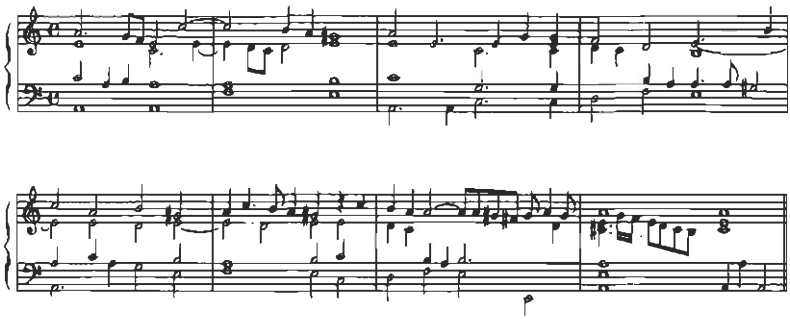
opera" in the title as a reminiscence of the opera that was made by the beggar as this is by children. Britten's immersion in the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows in many compositional aspects of *Let's Make an Opera*. If the structural patterns are looked at more closely, Handel and Mozart have contributed rather than later composers; even though the only operatic work mentioned in the play is an operetta of the late nineteenth century—*The Pirates of Penzance* by Gilbert and Sullivan.

I.L.

Seen from a literary viewpoint the opera of the little sweep's misery and rescue recalls, of course, the charming but, perhaps, to a modern reader somewhat longish story of the Water-Babies but also the formal austerity and music of Blake's two poems.[8] In fact it was through reminiscing their lines that Britten thought of a little sweep for the hero of the planned children's opera. But when, at Aldeborough in 1949, the libretto had been written and the opera composed, it simply did not measure up to an evening's entertainment for an audience consisting of adults and children at a connoisseurs' festival, and that is how the first two acts came into being,[9] which are only partly operatic and poetic but mostly conversational in style. Moreover, they mix up the melodrama of the poor little sweep from Jane Austen's days[10] with present-day reality, as well as the finished artefact of the opera with all the various technicalities of its making.

The idea of this mixture comes under the heading of Touchstone's dictum "the truest poetry is the most feigning,"[11] and some random examples begin to line up before the mind's eye: first Ralph Roister Doister tramples over the boards of Terentian school-drama written, in this case, by a real schoolmaster for his boys.[12] Then Christopher Sly made his boisterous entrance and, doing so to an audience brought up on Plautus, Terence *et alii* by well-read humanist teachers, the drunken old tinker set against a background of Ovidian trees and hounds had a good chance to be recognized as a Silenus in disguise. (But modern scholars and producers fail to see that point and so the

lovely Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* is usually dropped.) When the new century (I mean the seventeenth) was well on its way, Citizen's Wife insisted on making a play rather than merely watching one, casting and rejecting actors and absolutely refusing to do without the musical hit of the day, Dowland's "Lachrymae":[13]



'Let's Make a Musical Comedy' would have been a fitting subtitle for *The Knight of the Burning Pestle.*

While the three figures mentioned above thrust themselves upon our memory, no hero of an eighteenth-century rehearsal play has survived, though in its time the genre flourished and, containing a number of thematic links, calls for scholarly regard as a historical foil of the preliminary play to *Let's Make an Opera.*[14] "Jumping o'er time"[15] and finding ourselves in the 20th century, we think, perhaps, of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* making use of traditional as well as modernist ways of theatrical self reflexion[16] with enormous though, lately, waning success and thus sharing the fate of its eighteenth-century forbears as well as Britten and Crozier's *Entertainment.*[17]

Feigned theatrical reality effectuated by a Stage Manager or in the form of an induction or interlude, combined with the straightforward kind of illusion germane to stage-plays or operas (however veristic) is just one of the old tricks of putting the metaphor of the stage upon the stage. Since, in *Let's Make an Opera* conversation is the mode of expression characteristic of the feigned reality while "truth" is the hallmark of the story of the little sweep, the question comes up

whether, in this case, conversation may not be coupled with "All the world" and poetry with the "stage." Looked at more closely or rather listened to more attentively, however, all the examples cited have a conversational element in common. Moreover they share the fate of the first two acts of *Let's Make an Opera* that they are not much appreciated in our own age or, in Crozier's words:

3. That the preliminary play "does not wear so well."

I.L.

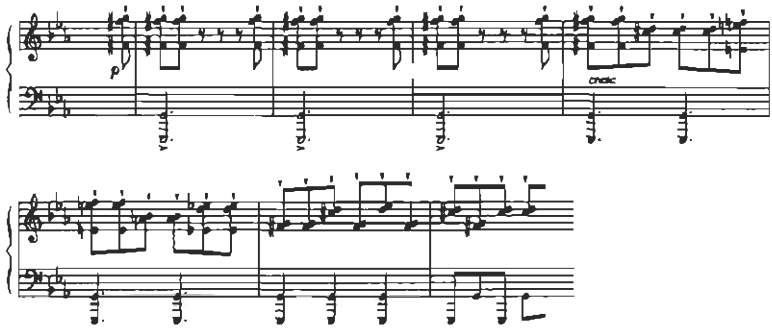
It was not easy to collect at least some sources reflecting the critical response to *Let's Make an Opera* from the beginning. If it had not been for the courtesy of Britten's publishers Boosey & Hawkes, who provided us with copies of the press cuttings on their files, we should have been completely on the rocks. As it is, the fragmentary kind of medley has emerged of which Rebekka Fritz and I shall now try to give an impression.

Generally the critics' attitude to *Let's Make an Opera* is of the more patronising type: the *Opera* is said to be, on the whole, very nice and in some particulars really fine and the whole entertainment not without a certain didactic value. Often there is some businesslike criticism of the professional singers and, more often, a pat on the back for the children's singing and performing. The one really interesting aspect, however, is the radical change in the appreciation of the preliminary play including the audience-songs.

R.F.

After the first performance at Aldeborough in 1949, the whole Entertainment including the preliminary play with the audience songs and the opera was called "delightful" in the *Times*,[18] and again in one of the most recent notices available (Matthias Roth in the *Rhein-Neckar Zeitung*) the whole Entertainment, especially the audience participation is praised enthusiastically: "Das Vergnügen, mit dem sich die

jungen und älteren Zuschauer beteiligten, [ließ] diese Premiere zu einem Erlebnis werden . . . ." (The pleasure with which the audience [whether young or middle aged] participated made this first night quite an event . . . .)[19]



But, as far as the preliminary play goes, this praise did no longer concern Crozier's original libretto but a completely new text written for this 1991 Mannheim Production which, actually, followed the lead of a former one at Sadler's Wells in 1986 where the opera had already been provided with a newly invented up-to-date introduction of which we could, regrettably, find no trace.

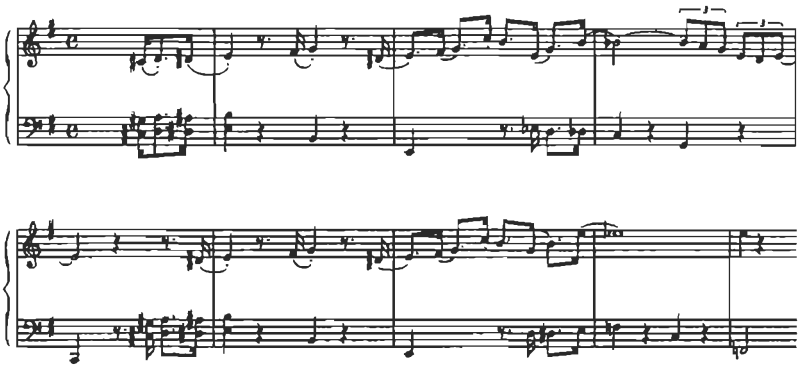
I.L.

Strangely enough it was Crozier himself who gave producers the green light for this kind of substitution. In 1962 the commentator of the *Opera Magazine,* reviewing a performance with a considerably abridged introduction, could not but "wonder . . . if it [the introduction] should not be dropped altogether."[20] Such a radical purging would of course have made away completely with the idea of "Entertainment." Therefore (perhaps) Crozier in his short foreword to *The Little Sweep* in David Herbert's 1979 edition of the libretti of Britten's operas suggested a middle course: the "preliminary play," he wrote, "does not wear so well as the opera" and "should be rewritten to suit the local circumstances and characters performing *The Little*

Sweep."[21] And promptly the introduction was modernised for instance by the National Youth Theatre in their production at Sadler's Wells in 1986 which drew wholehearted praise from the critic of the *Independent* who felt that Crozier's preliminary play was "irredeemably time-locked" and that the opera without any kind of introduction was "limp"[22] (whatever that means). At Aldeburgh in 1989, however, the preliminary play was indeed "dropped."

R.F.

But dropping the preliminary play bears on the realisation of the audience songs which are meant to integrate the audience into the whole Entertainment. Not only do children as well as adults "learn by doing" but an improvisational character is maintained throughout. In this way both of Britten's ideas in *Let's Make an Opera* are realised: the experience of "making" as well as of producing an opera for and together with everyone—the children onstage, the audience, people like you and me. Without the rehearsals included in the preliminary play the audience rehearsal becomes separated from the performance, takes much longer than envisaged by Britten—up to an hour instead of 20 minutes—and acquires a seriousness which does not really suit the context. In the Munich performance of 1990, therefore, the director had the audience songs sung by the ensemble, even though a radically shortened and rephrased preliminary play preceded the opera, while in the performance at the Theater der Freundschaft (Berlin) in 1992 the preliminary play was completely omitted and the audience songs sung, apparently, by the ensemble. This way the artistic and social edge is taken off Britten's *Entertainment for Young People* and, as the commentator of the *Kurier am Morgen* notes, *The Little Sweep* is reduced to a "gefällige Kinderrevue" (an undemanding musical show for children).[23]

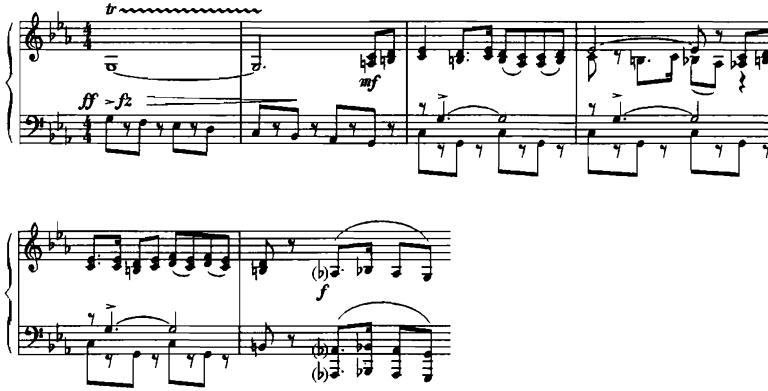


4. What's wrong with the preliminary play

I.L.

The question "what's wrong with it" is the other side of "what's right with it?" And I should prefer to look at that first. After all, at least for about a dozen years the first two acts were a success and audiences enjoyed participating and singing the songs composed for them. So let's have a look at *Let's Make an Opera* from our viewpoint of poetry and conversation.

When the curtain rises a conversational tableau presents itself: some more or less grown persons and some children are comfortably seated in a drawing room and one of them, a lady, tells an old but approvedly true story, frequently interrupted by the listeners, so that the story develops in a conversational manner. If this is really obsolete ("irredeemably time-locked," as that reviewer wrote),[24] it is a pity. But if it is only just a little old-fashioned, why not play it (as another critic implicitly suggested)[25] as a costume piece? Surely the opera itself is just that but it has worn well, all the same. And so have some of the most successful musicals of the twentieth century in spite, or perhaps rather because of their old-fashioned settings:[26]



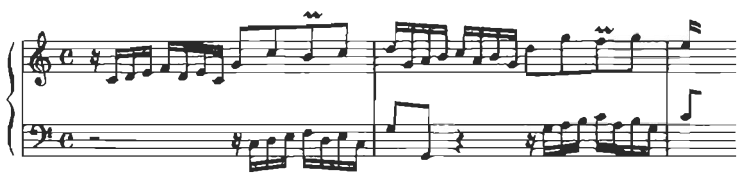
In the movies (for instance in Christie-films) the fashions and jargon of the twenties are felt to be an added charm. And who says that children shy away from that sort of thing? The children I happened to know as a schoolteacher loved nothing better than dressing up in whatever strange garb and trying out a kind of language different from their own everyday usage. Hopefully, children are brought up now to converse in spite of social or national or intellectual or whatever barriers, then why not let them take part in an at least fictional conversation bridging the gap of a few generations?

When it comes to the actual words they seem, perhaps, even less "wrong" than the setting, especially when looked at from the viewpoint of conversation, being, nearly all of them, charged with participation. Here are some examples. A story of, at least for children, mythical age is told but it is a true one: "Is it a true story?" "True as true."[27] Truth and fiction converge. The old story happened in the Christmas holidays and so does the action developing on the stage but in this case the holidays are used for "working," "hard work," "more work."[28] Work and play are as necessary for each other as the famous proverb says.[29] Writing the libretto and composing the score make clear that music and poetry go together and are well-nigh interchangeable: the librettist must learn to try and imitate Shakespeare's magic idiom, i.e. to "pick out the words that sing from

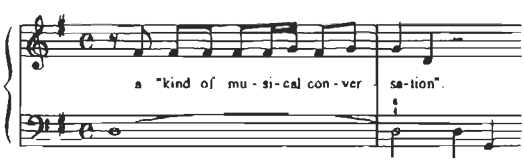
those that only mumble"[30] while the composer mixes words and music "just like a painter who mixes blue, red and yellow . . . ."[31] As the arts work together so do the professionals on the stage with the amateurs in the auditorium: "The whole audience is going to sing it!"[32] But, of course, on this stage, most of the professionals are supposed to be amateurs which, in some cases, they really are, while, on the other side of the footlights, the audience plays the part assigned to the chorus in Greek tragedy.

R.F.

Finally many musical terms implicitly refer to meeting and mixing; Norman, the composer, speaks of "blending the characters in different combinations" such as "ensemble" or "trio" or "duet,"[33]



as "it would be very dull if they [the characters] only sang by turns or if they all sang all the time."[34] Some of the musical numbers use forms of traditional communal music making: the Shanty (No. 4) of seamen appears as the rope is pulled to get the little sweep out of the chimney, and a Marching Song (No. 6) illustrates the placing of sooty foot tracks on the floor. The recitative is defined as[35]



The persons even have their own characteristic way of speaking in the music just as in the text. This is most obvious in such comic characters as Tom and Alfred: Alfred usually sings in stepwise motion, while Tom uses many big leaps like octaves and fifths.[36] Since these musical devices are realized by the characters of a story,

language comes in again because "character" is also another name for "letter"; "phrase" is another term which links music and poetry in Crozier's libretto. Even the names of the characters, especially the two musicians, refer to music: Norman Chaffinch, the composer and Mr. Harper, the conductor.

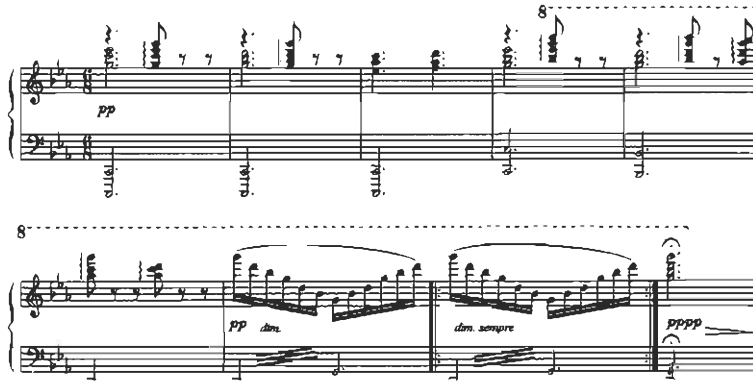
While the first Act of the preliminary play shows how music and words are combined to converse in an opera, the rehearsals of Act II are chiefly concerned with making music together and most importantly—as in a conversation—listening to each other. Especially the audition for Clem's role shows the conversational interaction on several levels: in the scene the children and Norman try to make Max, who is auditioning for the role of Clem, feel at ease, not only in the situation of the audition: "Is this the right key for you?"—"How is this?"—"That's comfortable, thank you!"[37] They also illustrate the idea if the opera as a conversation between the persons on stage and in the auditorium—"We are making this opera for people just like ourselves."[38] Through their involvement in some of the songs, the audience is not restricted to listening only but can actually participate in the making of the opera.

I.L.

When it comes to the initial act of finding the right words as well as the right music it is through the characters that the energetic impulse needed is produced: "After working for a week or two on the story," says the composer, "the characters will begin to become alive. Then you will find the words lining up on the end of your pen, and I'll be hearing the notes they call for." Characteristically this dictum is part of a conversation. Anne, the librettist, says: "It sounds wonderful when you put it like that, Norman. Are you sure you're not exaggerating?" And Norman answers: "Of course I am!" Then Gladys, the teller of the story who is going to play and sing the part of the nasty housekeeper, Miss Baggott, concludes: "He's leaving out the hard work."[39]

I would not like to miss this bit of 'trialogue.' Of course it is didactic, but then the whole little entertainment is, quite openly, that. It has a bit of the old school-drama about it, but teaching does not necessarily prevent delight. At least Crozier's, in this instance, doesn't. It is terse not longish, it is modest not pompous, and it is by no means trite but intelligent and felt to be derived from genuine professional experience. Though Norman may be exaggerating, he is not just talking rarified aesthetical jargon or building mere castles in the air. We have it on excellent authority (to pick out only three examples at random, from Horace[40] and Sidney[41] and Rose Ausländer[42]) that words are not dead matter, nor are they pulled on a leash or sucked out of a pencil or copied out of a lexicon but come of their own accord—always provided that the author really met the characters in his story and handled the *characters* in his type-case, working out, carefully and patiently, pattern after pattern till the evident one, surprisingly, emerges.[43]

Working with the notes of music and the words of language does not mean using mere tools but opening a conversation with these speaking entities. It is this initial, creative partnership that inspires and invites actors and singers and stage-hands and audiences in this exemplary conversation in which, in perhaps the most beautiful of the audience-songs, even the animals join when Sammy is dreaming:[44]



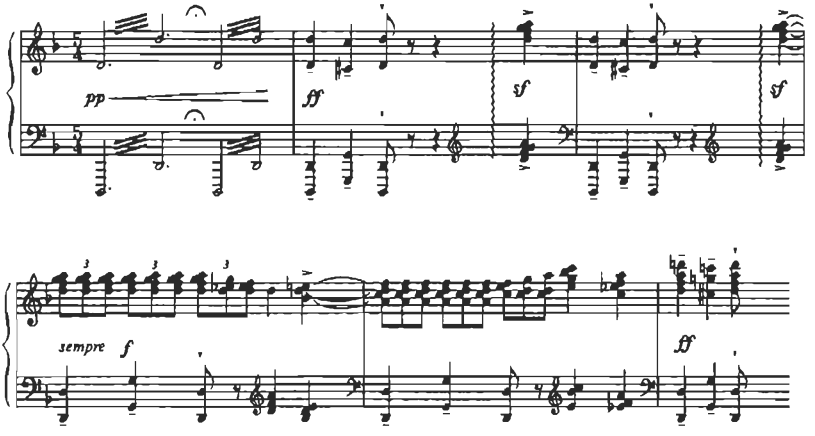
The short passage devoted to *The Little Sweep* in *The New Grove Dictionary* of 1965 culminates, after touching cursorily on the preliminary play, in the definition: "Like much other Britten this is a parable about cruelty and compassion";[45] in the 2001 edition, however, that statement has been cancelled. This is a most welcome revision, especially as regards the preliminary play, which is only very cursorily related with that theme. The story of the little sweep has, of course, a social appeal, but *Let's Make an Opera* as a whole was never thought of by its makers as a parable but as an entertainment, and its focus is not cruelty and compassion but opera-making, that is to say, creativity. And the lesson we are, accidentally, taught about it is that, as a child needs father and mother, human creativity needs particitation, meeting, conversing. And the composer and librettist (i.e. Britten and Crozier, not Norman and Anne) have taken great pains to make this obvious in an emblematic manner, by focusing on a model which appears to be nothing less than the model of this entertainment which is in itself a model.

R.F.

At the beginning of the second scene of Act I, which is set a month later, the stage directions refer to "a scale-model of the opera set" standing on a table with a lamp to illuminate it.[46] This lamp, however, is not yet lit. At first the model can hardly be seen by both the actors and the audience. About half way through the scene Monica discovers it; the lamp is switched on and the children now admire the model, realising only gradually that it is the scaled-down stage set of the opera.

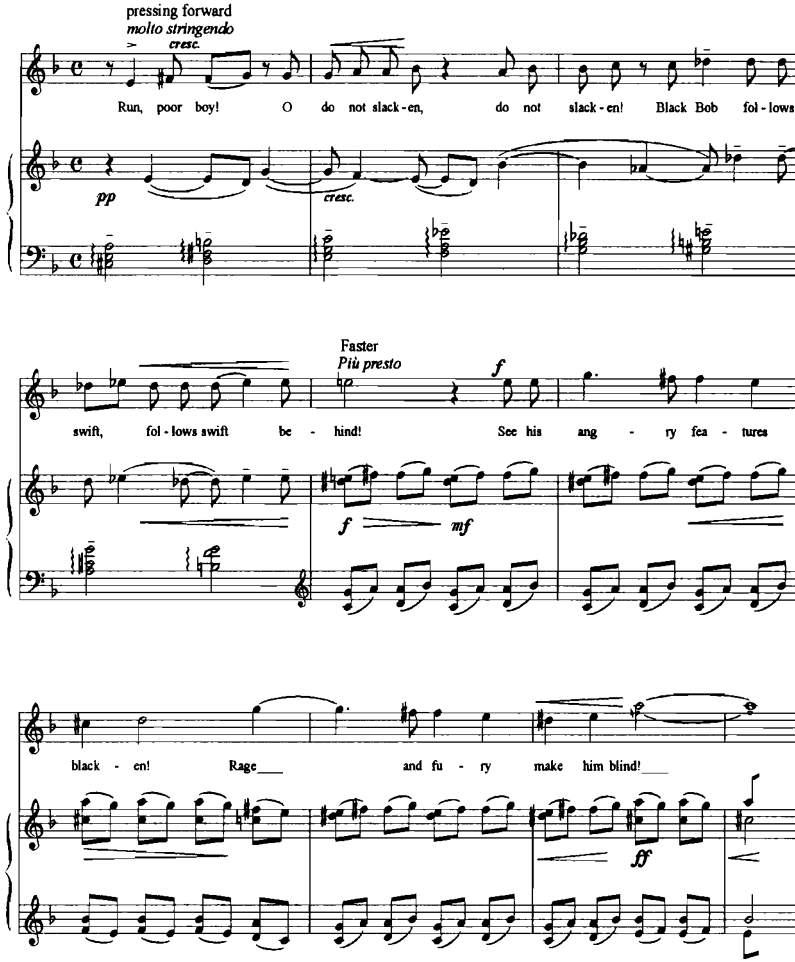
But even before this, in Gladys's story the light goes on, so to speak, and the set lights up in the imagination of the children who all contribute their ideas to invent a scenery of only one set: a nursery with "Two doors, a fireplace, a window . . . and the toy-cupboard!" But not only the scenery is invented in this model imagined in

conversation, but the beginning of the opera, too: "We could start bang off with the arrival of the sweeps dragging Sam into the room . . . ." [47]



Then there is, of course, the stage of the opera proper. The curtain is drawn back at the beginning though the illusion had been destroyed already when it went up in the dress rehearsal. In the opera itself, too, the illusion is broken several times: Juliet's announcement of "the great transformation scene" closes Act I and the 'coach' at the very end of the opera is a kind of Heath Robinson contraption improvised by the children using chairs and umbrellas. Moreover the window which is already present in the children's first idea of the room opens out to yet another stage: Sam has supposedly fled through it and in the *Finale* the children remaining onstage watch his actual departure through it, reporting what they see to the audience.

The music in the opera often functions as a scaled-down model for grand opera as well. Many forms are taken from or refer to the operatic tradition from Handel to Strauss: Rowan's Aria (No. 8) is set as a *da capo* aria with introductory recitative, a form common in the eighteenth century, even though the text is not repeated as the music is. From the seventeenth century come the emotional effects like the syncopations and quaver motion which are used in the middle section of the aria to express haste and flight:[48]



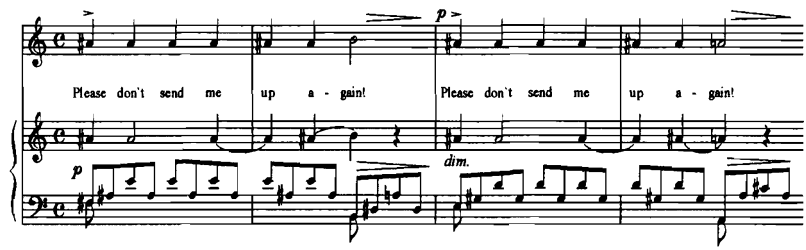
And, of course, the entire subject matter—making and performing an opera within an evening's entertainment—is in itself a model. It can be seen in a grand opera, too: for instance in Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*.[49] Here Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the librettist, also plays with the various levels of time and illusion. As in *Let's Make an Opera*, several time-levels are intermingled: the opera is set in the

eighteenth century, in terms of style the music belongs to the nineteenth century, but the opera was written and is performed in the twentieth century. The "Vorspiel" shows the preparations of various groups for an evening's entertainment at court. An opera and a *commedia de l'arte*-pantomime are to be performed before the duke, who decides at the last minute that it would be better to have just one performance—a mix of both. The second act, thus, starts off as a conventional opera, which, however, is interrupted again and again by the comedians. The two groups are set off against each other not only in their different theatrical genres—tragedy and comedy—but also in their musical idioms, which are both taken from nineteenth-century convention. The characters in the opera sing as in a grand opera, the *commedia de l'arte* characters use the idioms of operetta, especially coloratura.[50] As in *Let's Make an Opera* the illusion of opera is not only broken by showing the preparations for its performance in an induction, but also during the actual performance by the introduction of elements which, strictly speaking, do not belong to the genre.

6. Poetry and music conversing together

I.L.

The paradigm being an opera, the nucleus of conversing as well as creating is the meeting of words and music. This is a recurring motif in the ongoing conversation in the first act, e.g.: "Opera is very like Shakespeare," or "Music is just the same as . . . poetry . . . it cuts to the heart of things."[51] Moreover, we are made to realize how the symbiosis of words and music can be put into practice. For instance, we are taken step by step from the moment in Gladys's story when she relates the original little sweep's words "Please don't send me up again" and the composer says: "Good moment for music"[52] to the finished Ensemble in the opera when each stanza leads up to the climax of "Please don't send me up again."[53]

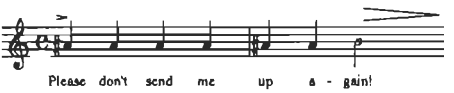


R.F.

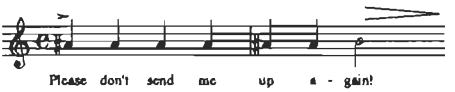
The decision to write an opera having been made before the play begins, the discussion now centres on the prerequisites essential to an opera and the suitability of the story. But doubts are soon dispersed: Even as the story is told, Norman hears a "Good moment for music!"[54] More points are added later: the story is true and simple, and it has musical and dramatic possibilities. When the composer is asked how to begin he describes the essentials of opera: "What's an opera for?—to tell a story through words and music. Gladys has given us the story. We have a family of characters, . . . We know pretty well what happens to them . . . We want them to sing . . . So we must aim to blend our characters in as many different combinations as we can—duets, trios, alone sometimes, or all together . . ."[55]

At this stage, the composition of the opera is already well under way: Norman's reaction to the little sweep's cry leads to a first experiment on sung and spoken text. And even before that Gladys describes music and poetry as speaking "in a magic language" and being able to "reveal all the wonderful and terrible and exciting things that lie beneath the surface of everyday life."[56] In his experiment Norman shows exactly how music changes the expressions of everyday life into magic.

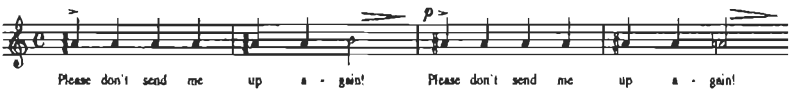
NORMAN: Just speak it. Go on! [...]
JOHN: "Please don't send me up again!"
NORMAN: Say it once more, as movingly as you can.
JOHN: "Please don't send me up again"—Easy! [...]
NORMAN: Now sing it. I'll give you the notes. *He plays the phrase on the piano.*



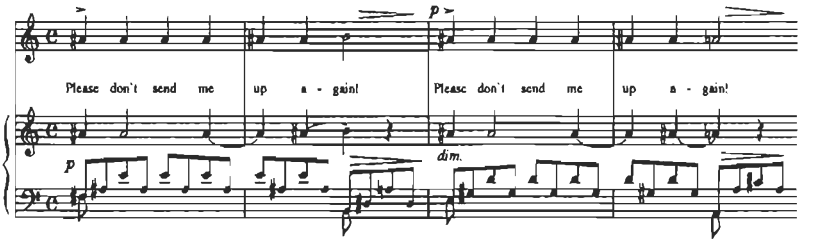
Got it?
JOHN: Once more, please.
NORMAN: *playing the phrase again*



Sing it twice. First time rising a semitone on the last note, second time dropping a semitone. *He plays the phrase that way.*



Off you go!
JOHN *sings the phrase twice, with appropriate chords.*[57]



CHILDREN: Oh, yes! Much better than speaking![58]

The emotion is caught in the setting, as Britten uses the musical figure of *Passus duriusculus*, conventional since the seventeenth century, where rising or falling semitones express sadness, lament or pain. So "When [the little sweep] sings, you can hear the heartbreak in the musical phrase."[59] The experiment also shows how Norman actually composes; it shows how a character comes to life and makes

the poet and composer find the right words and notes, as Norman will later describe to Anne.

I.L.

Trying to outline in at least some detail the characteristic contribution of the words, I should like to stick to just one example, only mentioning in passing what an essential part is played throughout by rhyme and metre and stanza-forms and levels of style and, last but not least, by sound-symbolism, especially onomatopoeia.[60] My chosen example is an Ensemble echoing one of the two poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* which gave birth to *The Little Sweep.* Perhaps it deserves special attention, too, because it is the only number that is repeated in full, though in the dress rehearsal it is called "Ensemble" but "Song" in the opera. Here is Blake's first stanza:

> A little black thing among the snow:
> Crying weep weep in notes of woe!
> Where are thy father and mother? say?
> They are both gone up to the church to pray.

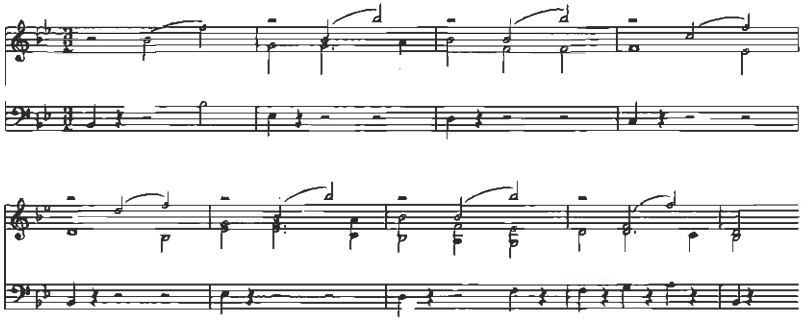
And here is Crozier's:

> O why do you weep through the working day?
> O why do you weep at your task, poor boy?
> Father and mother are far away,
> How shall I laugh and play?[61]

There are striking parallels: i.e. the repeated "weep," the motif of father and mother being absent, or the interplay of question and answer. In the refrain Crozier seems to have introduced a new motif, laughing and joy, but this is taken over from Blake's next stanza: "Because I was happy upon the heath . . . ." Both songs have three stanzas of four lines in what we are accustomed to call iambic metre with the unaccented syllable frequently doubled. In Blake all four lines have four beats; Crozier shortened the refrain and, moreover,

filled Blake's rhyme scheme a-a-b-b, or a-b-a-b with near-identical sounds : ". . . day . . . boy . . . away . . . play" in all twelve lines, which was, of course, not very difficult for him, since his Song or Ensemble practically consists of repetitions: "O why do you weep . . . / O why do you weep . . . / O where is the home . . . / O where is the home . . ." etc. while in Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" the phrases emphasized by repetition alternate with a rich variety of words charged with bitter satire and tragic pathos.

Surely the *Songs of Experience* are far from being an "Entertainment," but *Let's Make an Opera* is and, though inspired by Blake's passionate accusation of father and mother and king and priest and God, Sammy's complaint is sentimental rather than tragic. And why shouldn't it? A composition for which Britten will perhaps remain most dearly beloved by his public (if not most highly admired by the pundits) is the slow movement of the *Simple Symphony* called, quite openly, "Sentimental Saraband."[62]



Our Ensemble, too, is simple and sentimental, using the small vocabulary of children and repeating, again and again, the meaningful phrases of complaint which are chosen to blend with the interjection "O" which signifies wordless complaint: "O why . . . O where . . . O what . . . O . . . O . . . How . . . how . . . Home . . . Home." The whole effect verges on an onomatopoeia that imitates a complaint uttered in sounds rather than words.

In Blake, too, there are moments of that kind; for instance in the "weep weep" that is used in a manner resembling the *peep peep* of a young bird. He also repeated the phrase "notes of woe" making it rhyme, moreover, with "snow" but he used it as a formula of pathos in a richly varied, highly expressive context, while, in Crozier's Song, the repetition of word and sound and rhythmical pattern reigns supreme. Blake wrote a poem. Crozier, imitating that poem, wrote a Song which is also an Ensemble in a children's opera.

Repetition is recommended, for instance in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (IV.28, 38) as a means of arousing pity, and even in writing a treatise on the subject the author uses a kind of style that will move rather than instruct the reader:

> Reduplication is the repetition of one or more words for the purpose of Amplification or Appeal to Pity . . . .The reiteration of the same word makes a deep impression upon the hearer and inflicts a major wound upon the opposition—as if a weapon should repeatedly pierce the same part of the body.[63]

The rule above all rules the classical rhetoricians insist on is, however, not to overdo things. Blake, though far from being a classicist poet, avoids this *vitium* while Crozier revels in repetition to a degree that would kill his piece as a poem which, of course, it isn't. It was made for an opera and wants to be read not in the libretto but in the score. Here it is clear at once that repetition in the text is balanced by variation in the music.

R.F.

The advice from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* might have been applied literally to the music by Britten: Sammy's lines, in the ensemble and already in his cry "Please don't send me up again!" are extremely repetitive: several notes in the phrases are repeated—(the phrase "Please don't send me up again" consists almost only of one repeated

note) and the phrases themselves are also repeated, although starting on different pitches. By reiterating the same note or phrase Sammy's lines indeed make "a deep impression upon the hearer."

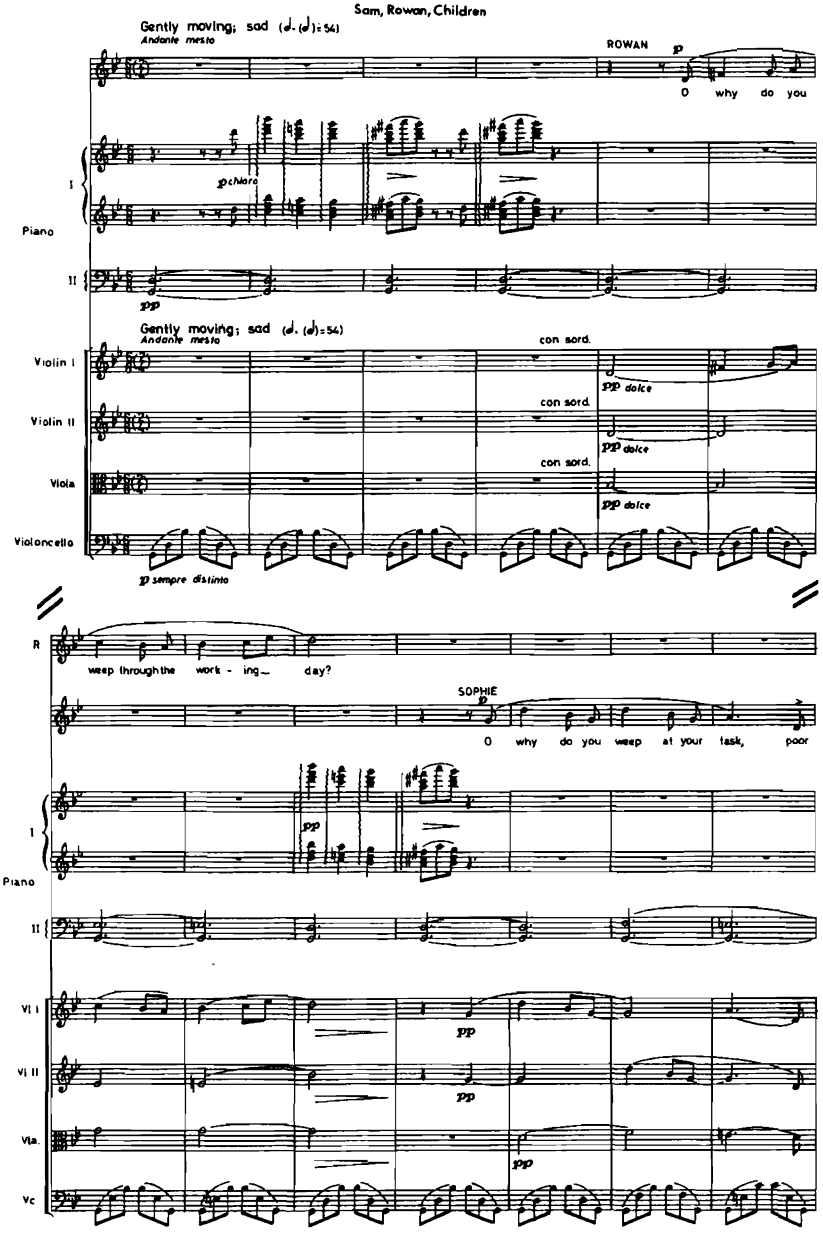
The other lines in the ensemble, however, balance this repetition by their variety. The first two lines of every stanza are sung by different singers not only in different voices but to different though similar tunes. So every stanza has a character of its own. The third line, sung by all except Sammy, is treated as a miniature chorus of three voices which leads up to Sammy's refrain. Even though the chorus repeats the same music in all three stanzas, the harmonies underlying Sammy's refrain change, giving a subtle balance of the variety in the harmonisation against the repetition in the words and music of the refrain.

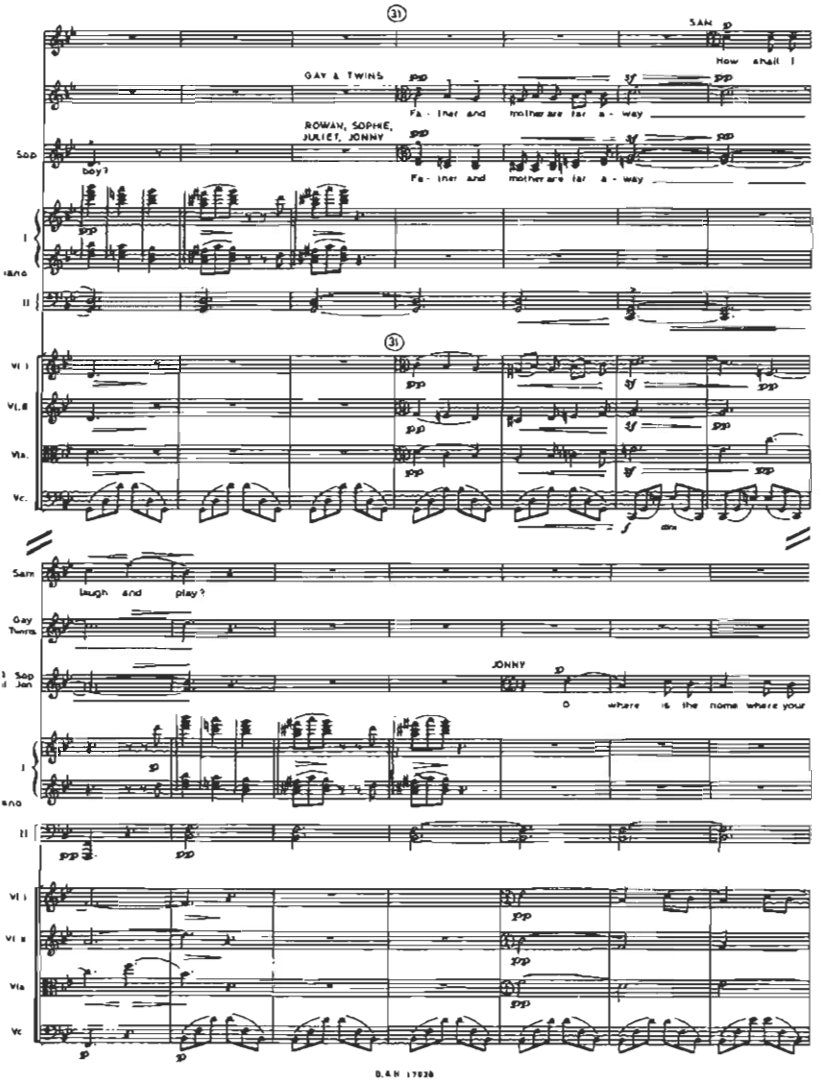
The three stanzas of the ensemble are held together in their variety by several elements in the accompaniment which run through the entire number: the rocking quaver motion in the bass as well as the rhythmic pattern of 2 against 3 in the bass and vocal lines. This idea of variety in an *Ensemble*, as opposed to a *Chorus*, is described already in the first act of the play:

> NORMAN: Scene One ensemble.
> RALPH: Scene One *what*?
> NORMAN: Scene One *ensemble*—French for 'together.'
> ANNE: *Ensemble*—when we all sing together.
> RALPH: Then why not say so?
> BRUCE: I thought singing together was called a 'chorus.'
> NORMAN: So it is, Bruce. But in this number, each of you has his own line to sing. You have separate parts, and it's easier to call that an 'ensemble.'
> MONICA: It sounds jolly difficult.
> NORMAN: Let's try it and see.[64]

X. ENSEMBLE

Sam, Rowan, Children





The repetitious pathos of the text allows for the variety of the music. Eric Crozier alias Anne has written a text for an operatic ensemble, so the words and music converse in supporting and complementing and balancing each other. But the Ensemble is, of course, conversational in

itself. In the first stanza Rowan sings the first line and Sophie the second, in the second stanza Johnny begins and Gay takes over (which means the striking change from women's to boys' sopranos); in the third stanza Juliet and the twins sing the first lines while, throughout, Gay and the twins sing the third line with Rowan, Sophie, Juliet and Johnny providing an accompaniment of thirds. Then Sammy sings his little solo.

I.L.

The verbal repetitions go smoothly with the musical conversation; the persons involved in it seem to be taking their cues from each other. Blake's poem (like "Shakespeare") is poetry and music in one and here, too, a conversational energy is at work, with different voices speaking in different grammatical persons, the third, the second, and the first. Blake's little sweep is introduced by the magic voice of a lyrical speaker. Then he is asked a question. Then he answers it, and then he goes on speaking in a voice no longer his own. He does not say "I" and "me" any more, but "our" which means that now he speaks not in his own name but in the name of humanity, drawing a striking conclusion from the contributions of the different voices.

Realizing this argumentative kind of pattern one cannot but think of the sonnet which has been compared, structurally, with the syllogism and the enthymeme. One of the Renaissance authorities on this subject, Torquato Tasso, goes even further: to him certain kinds of poems are parallel with certain kinds of arguments; the canzone is a reflection of the "divisive" argument, the sonnet of the "compositive" ....[65] These are explications of a rule set by Dante in *De vulgari eloquentia* where he calls poetry a "fictio rhetorica in musica posta."[66] Now, public and forensic rhetoric, focusing on the *summa quaestio* are always in league with dialectic. But, according to Plato's *Sophistes,* there is (as Quintilian reminds us) still another kind of rhetoric named "προσομιλητική." In Quintilian's Latin translation that means "sermocinatrix" which, translated into English, means "conversational."[67]

This cluster of rhetorical considerations and definitions calls for a syllogism:

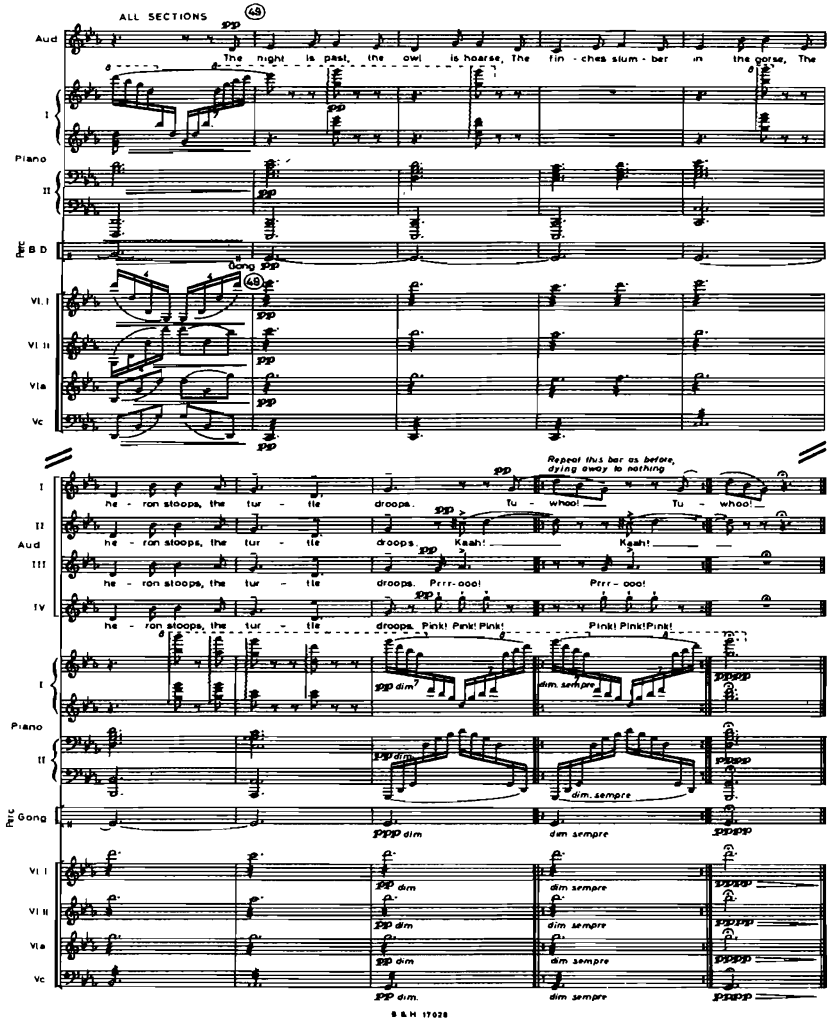
> When rhetoric is conversational
> and poetry is rhetoric set to music
> then poetry and music are conversational.

They are so in giving room to conversation and in conversing with each other, and *Let's Make an Opera* is an illustration of this rule. And the word "illustration" is the cue for our conclusion, the *Night Song*, with its onomatopoeic illustrations of nature falling asleep.

R.F.

The idea of the audience songs is discussed between composer and poet very early in the preliminary play. Pragmatic aspects are settled first—they could be used as interludes relating events not practicable on stage, or: will the audience sing?—but soon the professional co-operation of poet and composer in writing an opera comes to the fore. The composer requests a specific form for the Night Song (No. 14): four verses of three lines each (triplets, to be exact) not with a specific metre but of quiet and serene character. The poet suggests "A musical game about the things you might hear in the country at night."[68] Several "things" are named (e.g. "the ripple of the river" or "the chime of a distant church bell") but in the end poet and composer settle on birdsong. Here both language and music imitate nature, even the performance instructions to the singers (which require them to do things a professional singer should never ever do) aim to make the birdsong sound more realistic—and provide more fun for the singers: *nasal* sounds for the herons, rolled Rrrr for the doves and *falsetto* for the chaffinches. The birdsong is musically realized on two levels: the vocal line as well as the piano imitate the birdcall. Each bird gets its own motif in the orchestra—made up of specific harmonic patterns, special articulation, and the use of various percussion instruments. This motif is repeated in a few bars of instrumental music between the stanzas. The penultimate stanza imitates the "competition of birds" and in the refrain all birds sing at the same time though the entries are

not synchronized, which makes the different birdcalls clearly discernible. In the last verse the accompaniment returns to the original version and the tumult of the birds dies down as they, joined by the audience, sing their different songs in their sleep:[69]



NOTES

[1]See Eric Crozier, *Let's Make an Opera! An Entertainment for Young People in Three Acts including* The Little Sweep *A Children's Opera* (Liverpool: Eaton Press, 1949), subsequently quoted as Libretto, 49.

[2]The conversational manner in which we read our paper at the Halberstadt conference on "The Poetics of Conversation in 20th-Century Literature and Criticism" is retained in the printed version.

[3]For at least a small part of the (regrettably rudimentary) stage history of *Let's Make an Opera*, see Maureen Garnham, *As I Saw It: Basil Douglas, Benjamin Britten and the English Opera Group 1955-1957: A personal memoir* (London: St. George's Publications, 1998). Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, op. 45, Full Score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1965) "XIV. The Night Song," bars 15-18. The music is reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes.

[4]This and the following two quotations are from Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, 1st Prologue 23-24 and 8, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. T. W. Craik (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

[5]Literature on *Let's Make an Opera* is minimal. Usually only the third act is discussed with the first two acts, i.e. the preliminary play, just mentioned in a subordinate clause. Notable exceptions are two more recent publications on Britten: Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber, 1992) and Imogen Holst's chapter "Entertaining the Young: *The Little Sweep*" in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber, 1984).

[6]"Kinder- und Jugendmusiktheater," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Sachteil, vol. 5, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1996), col. 43-59; "Schuldrama," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Sachteil, vol. 8, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998), col. 1144-52.

[7]"Britten," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001) 4: 364-402.

[8]*Songs of Innocence*, "The Chimney Sweeper" ("When my mother died I was very young") and *Songs of Experience*, "The Chimney Sweeper" ("A little black boy among the snow"); subsequently quoted according to William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. G. Keynes (1967; Oxford: OUP, 1989), unpaginated. On the influence of Blake's two poems as well as Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* see Carpenter 273-74.

[9]See Eric Crozier in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos*, ed. D. Herbert (London: Hamilton, 1979) 168, and Carpenter 273-77.

[10]See Libretto 7.

[11]Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 3.3.16, The Arden Edition, ed. Agnes Latham (London: Methuen, 1975).

[12]Nicholas Udall, *Roister Doister*, in *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, ed. J. Q. Adams (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1924) 421-68; Udall, who was

headmaster of Eton from 1534-41 and of Winchester from 1554-56, composed the play to make the boys experience in practice how the comedies of Plautus and Terence were made. See Adams 423, note 1.

[13]Beaumont and Fletcher, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, 2.2.572-79, ed. H. S. Murch, *Yale Studies in English* 33 (New York: Henry Holt, 1908). Britten, too, had an affinity to this song by Dowland: in 1950—only a year after *Let's Make an Opera*—he composed a set of variations for violin and piano on the *Lachrimae*-theme and called them *Reflections on a song of John Dowland* (op. 48). Music: John Dowland, *Lachrimae Antiquae*, bars 1-8.

[14]See, e.g., Dane Farnsworth Smith, *Plays about the Theatre in England from* The Rehearsal *in 1671 to the Licensing Act in 1737* (London: OUP, 1936); Dane Farnsworth Smith and M. L. Lawhon, *Plays about the Theatre in England, 1737-1800* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP 1979); Karlernst Schmidt, *Die Bühnenprobe als Lustspieltyp in der englischen Literatur* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1952); J. Paul Hunter, *Occasional Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), esp. ch. 3, "Fielding's Reflexive Plays and the Rhetoric of Discovery."

[15]*Henry V*, 1st Prologue 29.

[16]Wilder did not destroy an already established theatrical verisimilitude but made verisimilitude a target of irony from the very beginning. There never is an attempt to create the illusion of some kind of town but there certainly is an attempt to create the illusion that there is no scenery before the Stage Manager starts pushing a table and some chairs while, actually, the very lack of scenery is the scenery. So illusion is the object under discussion from the primitive emptiness of the stage via the activities of the Stage Manager (alias "Messenger" or Chorus) to the cinematic effect of dramatic action being arrested to form a "tableau." See Thornton Wilder, *Our Town, a Play in Three Acts* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1938), esp. 96.

[17]Wilder is, for instance, left out of the section "American Literature between the wars 1914-1945," in, at least, the Second, Third, and Fourth Edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature.*

[18]Quoted in Carpenter 276.

[19]Harry Kroekel in *Kurier am Morgen*, 27 January 1992. Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "XIV. The Night Song," bars 53-60.

[20]*Opera Magazine*, March 1962, signed A.J.

[21]Herbert 168.

[22]Michael John White in *The Independent*, 13 June 1989.

[23]Harry Kroekel in *Kurier am Morgen*, 27 January 1992. Music: Henry Mancini, *The Pink Panther Theme.*

[24]Michael John White in *The Independent*, 13 June 1989.

[25]J. Michelis in *Berliner Zeitung*, 27 January 1992.

[26]Music: Frederic Loewe, *My Fair Lady*, "No. 7 Song," bars 1-6.

[27]Libretto 27.

[28]Libretto 19-20 and *passim*.

[29]"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." 1659 HOWELL *Eng. Prov.* 12 b., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, rev. by F. P. Wilson (Oxford: OUP, 1970) 916.

[30]Libretto 27.

[31]Libretto 19.

[32]Libretto 24.

[33]Johann Sebastian Bach, *Invention C- Major* (BWV 772), bars 1-4.

[34]Libretto 18.

[35]Libretto 49.

[36]See, for example, the recitative sections of "XVII. Trio and Ensemble."

[37]Libretto, 41-42.

[38]Libretto 41.

[39]Libretto18.

[40]See esp. *De Arte Poetica* 61: ". . . ita verborum vetus interit aetas, / et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque." Horace, *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, with an English trans. by H. R. Fairclough (London: Heinemann, 1961).

[41]Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* I, 9-14: ". . . words came halting forth . . . / Biting my trewand pen . . . / 'Foole,' said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write.'" *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. W. A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: OUP, 1962).

[42]Rose Ausländer: "Weil Wörter mir diktieren: schreib uns. Sie wollen verbunden sein. Verbündete . . . Wir sehen uns an. Wir lieben uns . . . meine Brüder: . . . in diesem Stil rede ich mit ihnen." Eva Zeller, "Laudatio zur Verleihung des Ida-Dehmel-Preises," *Rose Ausländer, Materialien zu Leben und Werk*, ed. H. Braun (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997) 80.

[43]This is a paraphrase of Emily Dickinson's *locus classicus*, 1126 "Shall I take thee, the Poet said / To the propounded word? / . . . The Poet searched Philology / . . . There came unsummoned in — / That portion of the Vision . . . ." *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Th. H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

[44]Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "XIV The Night Song," bars 73-end.

[45]Peter Evans in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980) 3: 300. The article on Britten in the new edition of the dictionary published in 2001 takes over most of the text on *Let's Make an Opera!*, but leaves out this sentence (4: 374).

[46]Libretto 24.

[47]Libretto 21. Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "I. The Sweep's Song," bars 1-5 and 8.

[48]Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "VIII. Aria," bars 19-28.

[49]See Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss, *Ariadne auf Naxos: Oper in einem Aufzug nebst einem Vorspiel*, Studyscore (London: Fürstner, 1916).

[50]See Zerbinetta's recitative and aria in act II ("Großmächtige Prinzessin . . .").

[51]Libretto 14 and 15.

[52]Libretto 9.

[53]Libretto 69. Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "V. Ensemble," bars 24-27.

[54]Libretto 9.

[55]Libretto 18.

[56]Libretto 14.

[57]Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "V. Ensemble," bars 24-27.

[58]Libretto 16-17.

[59]Libretto 17.

[60]All these formal devices converge in the discussion of the Night Song, Libretto 26, ". . . How many verses? . . . Four. Triplets, if you can . . . Any special metre? . . . No—but I want it to be quiet and serene . . . A sort of musical game about the things you might hear in the country at night! The ripple of the river . . . Birds! . . . Tu—whit tu— whoo! . . ."

[61]See Libretto 57 and 80. See also Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "X. Ensemble," bars 51-55.

[62]*Simple Symphony* is akin to *Let's Make an Opera* in more than one respect. See Britten's preliminary "Note": "This 'Simple Symphony' is entirely based on material from works which the composer wrote between the ages of nine and twelve." See Benjamin Britten, *Simple Symphony for String Orchestra* (Oxford: OUP, 1935). Music: Benjamin Britten, *Simple Symphony*, "Sentimental Saraband," bars 65-73; piano reduction by Nina Sandmeier.

[63][Pseudo-Cicero], *Ad C. Herennium: De ratione dicendi (Rhetorica ad Herennium)*, with an English trans. by H. Caplan (London: Heinemann, 1968) IV.28, 38.

[64]Libretto, 35. Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "X. Ensemble," first verse. For the complete music of the "Ensemble" see *The Little Sweep*, 51-55.

[65]See Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 1: 213.

[66]Weinberg 1: 212, note 19.

[67]See *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, with an English trans. by H. E. Butler (London: Heinemann, 1958) III. 4, 10.

[68]Libretto 26.

[69]Music: Benjamin Britten, *The Little Sweep*, "XIV. The Night Song," the last verse. For the complete music of "The Nightsong" see *The Little Sweep* 75-82.