Merging Perspectives: The Open-ended Nature of Britten's Parable Art and the *Cantata Misericordium* Op. 69

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Abstract

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was a pacifist who expressed his beliefs in many works throughout his career. His most important pacifist composition, the *War Requiem* (1961), inserted anti-war poetry by Wilfred Owen between the movements of the Latin Requiem Mass. The *Cantata Misericordium*, scored for mixed chorus, tenor, and baritone soloists, is a musical telling of the biblical story of the Parable of the Good Samaritan with its universal message of brotherly love and compassion. The C*antata*, commissioned for the centenary of the Red Cross in 1963, is Britten's first vocal work composed after the *War Requiem*. While much has been written about the *War Requiem*, no one has examined the open-ended nature of the message of the *Cantata Misericordium Op. 69*.

I will support the position of an open-ended nature of the message of tolerance within the framework of the *Cantata Misericordium* in three stages of discussion: First, I propose to present a comparison of Patrick Wilkinson's Latin libretto with the original biblical story, exploring reasons for the differences. The most significant departure from the simple biblical narrative is the expanded text assigned to the voice of the chorus, who pass judgment on the actions of the Priest and Levite, and at the close of the *Cantata* deliver the message of tolerance. Second, I propose to examine the manifestation of queer identity in the allegorical language and formal musical detail of the work. Philip Brett has shown how pacifism and homosexuality were closely linked in Britten's own life as equally deviant in British society. In the story of the *Cantata*, queer subtexts can be located in the characters of the social outcast (the Traveller) and the compassionate stranger (the Samaritan) who refuses to conform to social expectations. Themes of isolation and conflicting perspectives are also expressed through tonal ambiguity, both within motivic units and in the large-scale tonal plan. Third, I propose to explore Britten's use of the parable format as a didactic tool for the delivery of the open-ended message of the parable. I will draw upon the work of the English musicologist, Philip Rupprecht, who uses speech-act theory to analyze the rhetorical effects of dramatic music. In particular, I will discuss the representation of different characters in solo and chorus voices, in order to examine how the parable works on the listening audience.

Introduction

Benjamin Britten was born on November 22, 1913, in Lowestoft on the Suffolk Coast of England. He was considered a child prodigy, who began piano lessons at the age of 7, and started composing short vocal works before the age of 10. Shortly after graduating from the Royal College of Music, Britten began his professional life as a composer in the film unit of the General Post Office (GPO), where in 1935, as Humphrey Carpenter (1992), Britten's official biographer, explains: "the mildly left-wing tone of its films made it an appealing place for young intellectuals (p. 64)."

It was while working at the GPO that Britten met in his own words "the most amazing man (Carpenter, p. 66)," the English poet, W.H. Auden, whose reputation as a writer, and spokesperson for the left-wing youth was broadly known. As the Britten scholar, Lloyd Whitesell (2003) states, W.H. Auden "was an important mentor and collaborator in the 1930s, early in Britten's career; his views on the social obligations of the artist were especially influential (p. 688)."

It was during this same period that Auden used the term "parable" to differentiate between art for the purpose of propaganda and his preference for a non-coercive form of political art. In his own words:

> You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and particular needs may draw his own conclusions (Johnson, 2003, p. 138).

What Auden is referring to here is what I call the "open-ended nature" of the structure of a parable. This construct can easily be applied to Britten's use of parable art in his musical compositions; specifically his use of allegory in the setting of the parable of the Good Samaritan in the *Cantata Misericordium*. I will speak about this in more detail later.

It was in 1937, while Britten was working and living in London, that he met the young tenor, Peter Pears, who was employed as a chorister with the British Broadcasting Company Singers. Pears, like Britten and Auden, had leftist political inclinations consonant with the young artistic community during the mid-thirties. Christopher Headington (1992), Peter Pears' biographer, states that later in life Pears described his meeting Britten as "a gift from God, something that I don't deserve and didn't deserve (p. 67)." Britten's meeting Pears was the beginning of one of the most influential relationships in the world of twentieth century music. Among friends, the nature of their relationship was no secret

> …such openness was unusual for the time. It is hard to exaggerate the revulsion with which most British people regarded male homosexual feeling, while its physical manifestation was a criminal offence and older people could still remember the shock to society of Oscar Wilde's trial in 1895. Homosexual acts were widely thought of as deliberate perversion…a kind of illness…so that no one could preach tolerance of "the love that dare not speak its name" with out risking his reputation, and E.M. Forester's novel *Maurice*, written in 1914, went unpublished until after his death (Headington, p. 68).

In his article "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet" in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, Philip Brett (1994) refers to secrecy as a component of the proverbial closet, and that the phenomenon of the "open secret," in the words of D.A. Miller, is about "something that we know perfectly well that the secret is known, but nonetheless we must persist, however ineptly, in guarding (pp. 18-19)." It was the existence of an *open secret* coupled with Britten's avoidance of publicly declaring a homosexual identity that allowed him to move through British society, to live openly with Pears, and in recital to perform with Pears songs with texts that were unmistakably homoerotic.

Pacifism and the Homosexual Position

While it is not within the scope of this discussion to deal with the relationship between pacifism and the homosexual position, the British historian and Booker Prize winning novelist, Pat Barker, in her *Regeneration* trilogy makes more than a suggestion that there were many conscientious objectors in the First World War that identified as homosexual. The trilogy is written as a piece of historical fiction and examines the trauma of war on the human condition in the context of lives of war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen by intertwining the themes of homosexual and pacifist expression. In the first decades of the twentieth century, pacifism was viewed by English Empirical society as unpatriotic, even as an embarrassment; additionally, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the pacifist position was seen as somehow less male, a weakness often associated with homosexuality.

Britten's first collaboration with W. H. Auden–*Our Hunting Fathers* Op. 8, (scored for high voice and orchestra, composed in 1938) is a foreshadowing of the rise of European political unrest in the mid-1930s. Together with a liberal application of poetic allegory, parallels are drawn between the hunt of animal and the killing of humans, the outcome of war. Britten's pacifist position began to create within himself a view of "self outside of society," a reoccurring theme that occupies many of his dramatic vocal works. Commenting on the character of Peter Grimes, the title role of the opera by the same name premiered in June of 1945, Britten says: "A central feeling for us [he and Pears] was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones of our own situation [during World War II]. As conscientious objectors we were out of it (Cooke, 1996, p. 17)."

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Britten's musical setting and Patrick Wilkinson's contemporary Latin libretto, based on the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, work together to present an open-ended message of the parable. This can be shown by examining two aspects of the *Cantata*: First, the differences between the biblical story and Wilkinson's libretto, suggesting reasons for these differences; and secondly, the identification of several examples in the scenario supported in the music that sustain an allegory for queer overtones in the parable.

The most significant difference between Wilkinson's text and the biblical original is that the *Cantata* text is over double the length of the original biblical story. Wilkinson's additions fall under three distinct categories: moral teachings, narrative expansion and commentary, and dramatic dialogue. The moral tone of the *Cantata* is established in three statements from the prologue: "Blessed are the merciful," the seventh Beatitude from the Gospel of St. Matthew; "God is man helping man," a quotation from Pliny, a Roman scholar from the first century CE; and concluding with "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," the proclamation central to the message, and the text that frames the parable in the Gospel of St. Luke.

The Existence of Queer Allegory?

It could be argued that Britten's inclusion of a homosexual perspective in his musical treatment of parable art began in the 1930s through his close artistic and personal association with Auden. I believe that the open-ended nature of the parable form in Britten's capable musical hands is broad enough to support the inclusion of pacifist and queer persons, echoing

his own experience as a pacifist and homosexual. I would like to examine the nature of the characters in the parable–specifically with regards to social status–as a method to understanding their expected, or in some cases unexpected, response to the situation at hand.

The Traveller is the first character that we encounter on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. His nationality is not identified, but we are to assume that he is a Jew. From Wilkinson's expanded text version, the listener learns that he is afraid of the solitude and the silence around him:

> *Ah quam longa est haec via, quam per deserta loca.*
> *Terret me solitudo, terret omnis rupes, omne arbustum.*
> *Solitudo ubique, solitudo et silentium.*
>
> Ah how long this way is, how desolate the country!
> I am afraid of the solitude, of every rock, of every shrub.
> Solitude everywhere, solitude and silence.

These text excerpts position the Traveller as one alone, outside the company and protection of society. The audience is asked to empathize with this depiction of the Traveller as social outcast from the very beginning of the story. The Traveller's fear of solitude is described in two different contexts: the first is his solitude on his journey, and the second, a little further along in the story, is sung by the chorus, after the Traveller's beating when he is left alone at the side of the road. The libretto's notion of solitude is a fitting allegory for any person or peoples who have been marginalized by society and who have been made to experience solitude through an existence on the fringe of social exclusion.

> *Hic quoque conspexit iacentem, praeteriit, acceleravit gradum.*
> *Timetne cadaveris ne tactu polluatur?*
> *I nunc sacrosancte Levita, legis tuae praescriptiones inhumanas observa.*
>
> Oh the hard hearts of men! This one too saw him lying there, passed by and hastened his pace. Is he afraid of being polluted by touching a corpse?
> Go on, sacrosanct Levite, observe the inhuman prescription of your law.

The Levite's refusal to touch the beaten, bloodied "polluted" body of the Traveller can be seen as an allegory of modern society's views of the unclean homosexual in our day. The chorus comments on the action of the Levite through the use of vocal portamenti that colour the text and establish the emotion of anger at the Levite's lack of compassion for the Traveller. It could be argued that the addition of the text "*praescritiones inhumanas*" or inhumane precepts adds a more poignant queer dimension, alluding to the British laws of the 1960s towards gay people: Laws that, until amendments to the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, made same sex relations illegal in Britain.

> *Ecce, tertius apparet–sed languescit spes auxilii: nam propior videtur esse contemptus Samaritanus: Quid interest Samaritani Iudaei negotia suscipere molesta?*

> See now, a third is appearing–but hope of relief is fading: for from near he is seen to be only a despised Samaritan. What interest has a Samaritan in taking up the troublesome affairs of a Jew?

Northrop Frye (1991) in his last published collection of essays entitled *Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* notes that it is impossible to argue against the human compassion of the parable of the Good Samaritan, that: "ascribes a genuine charity toward someone outside both the Jewish and the embryonic Christian communities (p. 78)." In Jesus' time the Samaritan were a religious sect living outside of the privileges of Jewish society: suffering ridicule and social persecution in part because they did not embrace all of the practices of Jewish religious law. Additionally, unlike the Jewish people, the Samaritans demonstrated considerable tolerance toward the Gentiles. In Jesus' parable, the Samaritan demonstrates neighbourliness to the Traveller and in doing so bravely goes against social expectation. In Wilkinson's extended version of the biblical text, the character of the Samaritan easily embraces the outcast position of queer people. And, as in the biblical story, his actions go against all expectation as the chorus asks: "What interest has a Samaritan in taking up the troublesome affairs of a Jew?" Previously, the chorus welcomed the approach of the Priest and the Levite with enthusiasm and expectation, only to be shocked and disappointed by their contempt and neglect.

> *Optime hospitum, quis es? Unde es genitum?*
> *Quis sim, unde sim genitum, parce quaerere. Dormi nunc, amice, dormi: iniuriarum obliviscere.*
>
> Best of strangers, who are you? From what people do you come?
> What I am, and what people, ask no more. Sleep now, my friend, sleep: forget your injuries.

This exchange does not appear in the biblical story. Wilkinson's fabricated dialogue between the Traveller and the Samaritan creates the most convincing example of queer allegory. The Samaritan's refusal to identify himself to the Traveller implies that he is aware of the potential for prejudice. He also remains a stranger to the Traveller. In his examination of the operas of Britten, Whitesell (2003)–in his article "Britten's Dubious Trysts" has convincingly shown the ways in which "Britten positions the listener to interact with a deviant perspective…often signaled by the appearance of a stranger…hail[ing] from a different country, a different social status…(p. 643)." Furthermore, Whitesell explains that Britten's strangers "act as figures of initiation in their dealings with the protagonist. The unexpected enlightenment they offer is dramatized in one of two ways: as a threat or as a consolation (p. 645)." In Wilkinson's exchange, the character of the Samaritan fulfills two of Whitesell's requirements for a "deviant perspective:" he is of a different social status to the Traveller, and his unexpected expression of mercy and compassion brings about consolation and healing for the Traveller and perhaps in the minds of the audience as well.

In Conclusion: "Who is my neighbour?"

The question "Who is my neighbour?" is a pivotal statement from which the entire drama of the biblical story and the *Cantata* is derived. Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus

responds by telling a parable in which the social outcast is truly moral, and the religious citizens behave in a negligent way. The parable is meant to expand the listener's notion of neighbour to include the social outcast: for the purpose of easing this shift in thinking, Jesus makes a model of the Samaritan. Wilkinson's contemporary setting of the parable asks the audience to first empathize with the outcast and then to expand their understanding of outcast to include a deviant, queer perspective. Once again, quoting Frye (1991) who offers this observation about the reading of the parable:

> We begin to suspect that there may be two readers [listeners?] within us, and that one is beginning to form a larger vision that the other has only to attach itself to. That is, we are moving from a single or natural vision to a double or spiritual one (p. 78).

In the closing moments of the *Cantata*, as the Traveller begins down the road to recovery, we begin to hear the workings of a tonal resolution. It is in the *Dormi nunc* or Sleep now passage where the two seemingly opposite two tonal worlds come together in the form of a lullaby sung by the Samaritan in F sharp major against the men of the chorus in the Lydian mode starting on D. Evans (2002) describes this event as follows: "This resolution of a conflict not by banishing differences but by accepting them in a new and rarefied state of tonal equipoise is quintessential Britten, and the moment of illumination towards which the whole work has been directed (p. 444)."

Britten's use of tonal ambivalence cleverly supports the symbolic duality of two different perspectives, or readings of the parable. This further strengthens the notion of an open-ended parable where it is possible for audience members to come away with an individual–and one can only hope expanded–interpretation of "neighbour." Britten's setting of the parable makes room for dual perspectives, including pacifist, queer, or any other socially marginalized member of society. Furthermore, the working out of a tonal conflict as a means of expressing the conflict of the drama is, in the words of Peter Evans, "quintessential Britten." Additionally, both the biblical story and the *Cantata* text hold mercy and compassion as socially desirable qualities. Jesus' parable, supported by Britten's musical setting, tells us that if a lowly Samaritan, an outcast living on the fringe of society is capable of extending mercy and compassion, then surely we are all capable of doing the same.

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