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An Analytical Study of the Britten Violin Concerto, Op.15

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AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE BRITTEN VIOLIN CONCERTO, OP.15

by

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Britten is known for his opera, vocal and symphonic works. His violin concerto was composed around the time of the second world war. During that time, there were many great violin works produced by composers such as Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Barber, etc., and their violin concertos are still considered staples of the violin repertoire. However, Britten's violin concerto is not performed as often as other twentieth-century violin concertos. Although the popularity of his violin concerto is increasing in recent years, there is relatively little scholarly work devoted to it. The goal of this paper is to provide guidelines for performers that wish to approach this work. After providing background information on the concerto's composition, I discuss the tonal structure, motives, and some left-hand techniques applied in the concerto, as well as some technical problems. Lastly, I examine Britten's use of the *passacaglia* form as an example of his fascination with Baroque music. The purpose of this document is to introduce violin works by Britten to performers and raise awareness for Britten's violin concerto.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

Benjamin Britten is best known for his operas and vocal music. He began work on his first and only violin concerto in 1938 in England,¹ soon after finishing his piano concerto. During the composing process, Britten traveled to North America due to his disappointment in the political situation at the time, and completed the score in Quebec, Canada in 1939. The premiere took place in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic under John Barbirolli's baton, featuring Antonio Brosa as the soloist in March 1940. Britten worked closely with his friend, Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa, with whom he had consulted about violin techniques in the past. The relationship between the two can be traced back to 1936 in Barcelona, where they gave the first performance of the complete version of Britten's first solo violin work, Suite, Op.6 at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival. Britten's admiration for Brosa can be seen in his interview after giving the performance, "Toni playing like the God of a fiddler he is."² Britten also dedicated his virtuosic violin piece "Reveille" to Brosa.

As Britten was composing the violin concerto, the turmoil in Europe caused Britten and Peter Pears to flee their beloved country. Although the degree to which his pacifist views influenced his violin concerto remains unknown, his frustration at the time

¹ Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letter and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1939*, vol. 1, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 597.

² *Ibid.*, 415.

toward war is clear. As he stated in his letter, “[I] just completed the score of my violin concerto . . . that work is so important—that humans can think of other things than blowing each other up.”³

The premiere of the violin concerto in New York was successful and received mostly positive reviews. However, the first performance in England did not seem to thrill the critics. The first English performance took place at Queen’s Hall, London in 1941 with Basil Cameron conducting the London Philharmonic orchestra, featuring the leader of the orchestra, Thomas Matthews as the soloist.⁴ Britten was still in America during the English performance. The composer was not pleased when he received the letter from Ralph Hawkes describing the concert and the rehearsals, “One rehearsal had been largely wasted . . . another rehearsal would undoubtedly have improved things . . . Thomas Matthews played the solo part as well as he could but I could never say that he is a ‘Brosa.’”⁵

Despite the harsh reviews from the critics in England, the concerto itself is undoubtedly an important large-scale violin concerto in Great Britain. The most played English violin concertos are those by Elgar, Walton, Vaughan Williams, and Britten. Britten’s Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 15 is approximately thirty-one minutes long and calls for a comparatively large orchestra. Alongside the standard string sections, it requires three flutes (with second and third doubling piccolos), three oboes (with second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, triangle, whip, side drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, and harp. The number of brass and percussion is considerably large even

³ Ibid. vol. 2, 702.

⁴ Ibid., 922.

⁵ Ibid.

for a twentieth-century violin concerto. The title of the concerto states “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 15.” Britten did not specify the key of the work, nor did the publishers put any key in the title. This causes some confusion. In the program for the first performance in New York, 1940, the title of the work was “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D minor, Op. 16.”⁶ The title was corrected to “Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op.15” in the British premiere.⁷

The formal structure of the concerto consists of three movements: Moderato con moto, Vivace, and Passacaglia. Britten marks *attacca* at the end of both the first and second movements, with the written-out cadenza placed at the end of second movement and carrying through the last movement. The slow-fast-slow movement outline is Britten’s modern take on the structure of the violin concerto. There is no significant break between the movements, which can be physically demanding for both orchestra and the soloist. Even though there is limited information directly from Britten addressing the analysis of his violin concerto, one can still try to gather the thoughts of the musical or environmental influences in his music. In his letter to Albert Goldberg, he gave a brief description of the character of the violin concerto: “Perhaps some other time you may have an opportunity of hearing those dazzling scales, luscious harmonies, and heartfelt melodies that always characterize my music.”⁸

Britten adapts the sonata-like form in the first movement with a three-part structure. The concerto opens with a soaring, lyrical first theme announced by solo violin just eight measures after the short timpani introduction. The use of a short introduction is quite common among composers in the early twentieth century, such as in the concertos

⁶ Ibid., 790.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 787.

of Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Webern. Even the British composers, such as Walton, Vaughan Williams adapted this trend in their violin concertos. Instead of a grand Tchaikovsky or Brahms-like introduction, which was widely used in the romantic period to set the character of the concertos, composers in the early twentieth century shortened the length of the introduction and announced the themes immediately.

Tonality

In the violin concerto, tonal ambiguity can be seen throughout the movements. The tonal puzzles Britten creates are rarely solved. His use of the twentieth-century tonal language in the concerto is not based on a rigorous system, as opposed to those serial works by the second Viennese school. British composers from the early to mid-twentieth century chose to use traditional forms and national English elements in their music to free themselves from German influence.⁹ Britten's admiration for Berg is significant, and is made clear multiple times in his diary: "The first half of programme is completely swamped by a show of Berg's last work Violin Concerto (just shattering-very simple & touching) & the *Wozzeck* piece—which always leave me like a wet rag."¹⁰ While attending the ISCM Festival in Barcelona, 1936 (where Britten and Brosa gave the first performance of the Suite, Op.6), Britten had the chance to hear the premiere of Berg's violin concerto. He did not miss any opportunity to attend more concerts featuring Berg's violin concerto, even purchasing the music.¹¹ Although his enthusiasm for Berg's violin concerto is clear, Britten elected not to use twelve-tone techniques in his own concerto.

⁹ Eric Roseberry, "Old songs in new contexts: Britten as arranger" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 292.

¹⁰ Donald Mitchel and Philp Reed, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 1, 426.

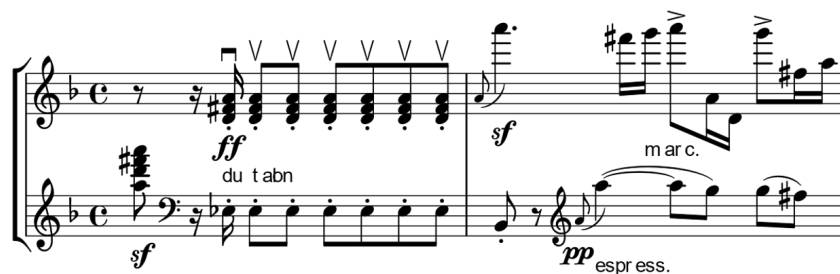
¹¹ *Ibid.*, 422.

The published title of the concerto contains no key designation. The first movement key signature is marked with one flat, suggesting F-major or D-minor. In m.7, an F-major tonality is implied (Ex.1.1). The F-major quality continues for four measures and only returns occasionally in the rest of the movement. There is tonal ambiguity throughout Britten's violin concerto; as the direction of the key constantly changes, it creates an unstable environment throughout the piece. With the three-part sonata form, the recurring theme in the recapitulation should be set in the tonic key. Britten's treatment of the key does not use this convention. The tonal organization of the three-part first movement involves moving back and forth between the relative keys. Part I (theme 1) opens with the F-major triad (see Ex.1.1), but soon the tonality starts to move and remains unstable until Part II (Ex.1.2).

Ex.1.1¹²



Ex.1.2¹³



¹² Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto Op.15* violin and piano reduction. (London, New York: Boosey & Hawkes 2006), movement 1, m. 7. © Copyright 1940 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.

¹³ *Ibid.*, mm. 42-43.

In the rhythmic Part II, Britten does not change the key signature, yet the announced tonality is a clear D-major in the violin part (see Ex.1.2). Although the violin part implies a tonal center of D-major, Britten refuses to confirm it, adding an odd E-flat timpani rhythmic figure that synchronizes with the violin's rhythm. In a larger tonal scheme, Britten's connecting musical bridges are more chromatic, and the tonality is obscure until the return of the main theme in rehearsal 8 (Ex.1.3). The tonality of the long bridge before the recurring theme 1 is unstable due to the chords given in the music (Ex.1.4). As seen in the example, the orchestra is given two different chords: B-minor and B-diminished. The conflicting F and F-sharp provide an uncertain quality to the passage. However, subtle guidance lies in Britten's use of the sixteen-bar chromatic progression that leads the music to a temporarily stable place, with the sustained notes starting from the high C and gradually descending to A (dominant of D-major) (Ex.1.5).

Ex.1.3¹⁴

The musical score for Ex. 1.3 consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the violin, and the lower staff is for the piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The violin part begins with a dynamic marking of *p* and includes performance directions for *pizz.* and *arco*. The piano accompaniment features sustained chords in the left hand and moving lines in the right hand, with a dynamic marking of *f marc.* and a *pizz.* marking.

Ex.1.4¹⁵

The musical score for Ex. 1.4 shows two chords in a piano accompaniment. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The first chord is B-minor (B2, D3, F3) and the second chord is B-diminished (B2, D3, F#3).

¹⁴ Ibid., mm. 125-126.

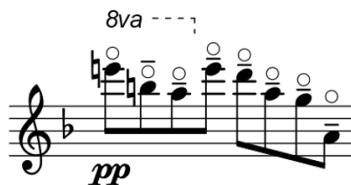
¹⁵ Ibid., m. 100.

Ex.1.5



What makes this section more unstable is the last four measures before recurring theme 1. Britten does not confirm the tonality by giving the A-major triad its C-sharp (A, C-sharp, E). He keeps the A, as stated before, that functions as the dominant of D-major (note the key change from one flat to two sharps) (see Ex.1.3). The ambiguous tonal direction is also generated by his use of G-pentatonic in the solo violin’s recitative-like melody before the key change (Ex.1.6). The sustained A that served as a preparation for the upcoming D-major, is interrupted by the exotic G pentatonic scale. This odd combination enhances the tension before the grand return of Theme 1, where the harmony is stabilized. Even with the unusual addition of the pentatonic scale and the chromatic scale, the modulation and its functioning feature is a signature of Britten’s own musical language, which, despite the high dissonance, remains functional.

Ex.1.6¹⁶



At the end of first movement, the key signature reverts to one flat, which is the same as the opening. However, Britten adds a surprising twist to the tonality, with a firmly D-major chord played by both solo and orchestra (Ex.1.7).

¹⁶ Ibid., m. 124.

Ex.1.7¹⁷



The key signature suggests a return to D-minor, but the sounding pitches imply the parallel key of D-major. The second movement is marked one sharp, which implies G-major, however, the D-major sonority continues through the opening of the second movement (Ex.1.8).

Ex.1.8¹⁸



The D-major ending can be viewed as the dominant of the upcoming G-major, which connects the first movement to the second. Further, the *attacca* marking at the end of the movement and the cadenza that serves as a bridge to the last movement both imply that the three-movement concerto can be seen as a through-composed work. The unexpected twist from D-minor to D-major also generates an unfinished atmosphere to prepare for the upcoming, relentless second movement. Britten's tonal arrangement transforms the character from pensive, lyrical singing to an unknown, surreal world. The D-minor key with a D-major ending is effectively a Picardy third, which calls to mind Britten's fascination with early music. The large-scale continuity of the work is not immediately

¹⁷ Ibid., mm. 175-176.

¹⁸ Ibid., movement 2, mm. 3-4.

obvious. However, analysis of the underlying harmonic details leads to a greater sense of cohesion within the concerto.

The first movement opens with the distinctive rhythmic subject that was announced by the timpani in the key of F-major (see Ex.1.1). This one-measure fragment is carried throughout the movement by different instruments. On the surface, there is a sense of disruption of the prevailing tonality because of the constantly changing harmonies. However, the ostinato-like figure (see Ex.1.1) operates as a connecting tonal bridge which stabilizes the tonality. At the end of the first movement, the solo violin is given a lyrical quality with unpredictable harmonic features. The accompaniment's ostinato figure, starting from the last key change, acts as a kind of tonal compass, pointing the way toward the original key (one flat, F-major or D-minor) (Ex.1.9). Moreover, this rhythmic element is firmly set in D-minor for the rest of the movement which creates an opportunity for the parallel key (D-major) to form, and would make a plausible connection to the D-major entrance in the second movement. The minor-to-major alternation is one of the significant tonal features of the concerto. While this juxtaposition creates harmonic conflict, it also serves as basis for connecting musical sections.

Ex.1.9¹⁹

The musical score for Ex. 1.9 is presented in a grand staff format. The top staff is for Brass, the middle staff is for Cym b. (Cymbal), and the bottom staff is for Tim p. (Timpani). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The Brass part begins with a fortissimo (pp) dynamic and a chord of F major. The Cym b. part has a single note with an accent (>) and a fermata. The Tim p. part has a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: F, B-flat, D, F, with a fermata over the final F.

¹⁹ Ibid., movement 1, m. 157.

CHAPTER 2

MUSICAL ELEMENTS

Britten's musical language is distinguished by his use of musical elements. In Britten's music, thematic concepts that convey certain objects or characters are often repeated. These thematic figures are associated with a specific character through rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic ornamentation in his operas and film music. In the case of the violin concerto, there are three main musical elements that appear throughout the first movement. Each can be played by different instruments, set in different keys, and can be played alone or in combination with others. The first noticeable element is the five-note timpani rhythmic figure that opens the whole piece (Ex.2.1). This five-note element is carried first by timpani, and passed to other instruments (such as bassoons and strings) as the lyrical theme 1 is being announced by solo violin (Ex.2.2).

Ex.2.1²⁰



Ex.2.2²¹



²⁰ Ibid., movement 1, m. 1.

²¹ Ibid., mm. 9-12.

This distinctive rhythmic fragment serves not only as a motor that gives a general flow to the first movement, but also as an element that unifies the tonality. Rhythmic element 1 is treated almost always as an underlying accompaniment to Theme 1. In part I of the first movement (beginning to rehearsal 3), the musical structure consists of two main elements: rhythm and lyric, with the addition of chromatic transitions in the solo violin. Britten's treatment of the two elements is simple: the two always appear together, with sparse orchestration allowing the "hidden" five-note rhythmic fragment to be heard.

Britten is always aware of the violin texture. When the violin is given an expressive singing melody, it is always in the most beneficial register, which is on the E string. In addition, the supporting harmony and rhythm are kept straightforward, always underneath the melody. The harmonic accompaniment moves slowly with long chords that provide a full sound without overpowering the soloist. Even though the march-like rhythmic element 1 is common throughout the work, the quality of the texture remains transparent. This ensures that it serves only as a decoration for the melody, rather than as a competing melodic idea.

Part I of the concerto (opening to a few bars before rehearsal 3) is given a heartfelt lyrical character, and part II (rehearsal 3) features a contrasting percussive and virtuosic character. Like part I, part II can also be divided into two major elements. Part II is naturally given a solely rhythmic style; the elements, without a doubt, are more rhythmic than melodic. The first element that distinguishes the musical character from the previous singing style is the D-major triad introduced by the solo violin (see Ex.1.2). The new character is released, almost abruptly, by the percussive nature of the violin chords. This surprising element is the rhythmic element 2, the first three-note figure of

which (Ex.2.3) can be separated and presented alone. The treatment of this rhythmic element is like element 1 in part I, which is carried through part II. The other rhythmic element introduced in Part II is the rhythmic element 3 (Ex.2.4), and this element is introduced only one measure after element 2. Despite the notes that are assigned to element 3, the rhythmic figure (first three notes) is presented repetitively as a decorative ostinato.

Ex.2.3²²



Ex.2.4²³



The two main rhythmic ideas are ubiquitous in part II. They are repeated in various forms and tonal centers, and both elements are presented as the short, three-note fragments instead of the full, one bar rhythmic feature (Ex.2.5, 2.6). These two simple elements are the basis of the thematic material of part II, and are given equal emphasis, instead of one being superior to the other. Both elements are introduced by solo violin in two consecutive measures.

The orchestra later picks up the elements, and passes them between different instruments. The solo violin's thematic material in part I is primarily melodic, while its thematic material in part II is primarily rhythmic. One might expect the orchestra to take over the melodic material; however, the character of part II is entirely rhythmic in both

²² Ibid., m. 42.

²³ Ibid., m. 43.

the orchestra and solo violin. The three-note fragments form the basis of larger thematic elements. While these elements are primarily rhythmic, they are presented with a triadic harmony that serves to advance the harmonic progression of this section (see.Ex.1.2).

Ex.2.5

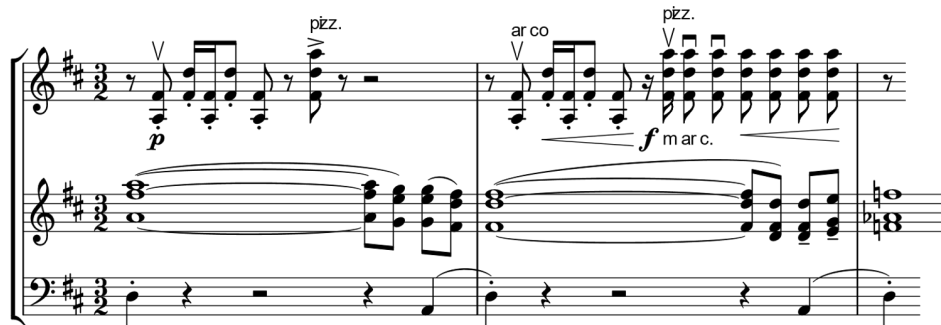


Ex.2.6



Britten marks three stylistically distinctive parts in the first movement with great contrasts between all three. Especially distinctive are the first two parts where he introduces the rhythmic/melodic dichotomy. Part III can be viewed as a unification of all the elements to move toward a conclusion. After presenting new material in the first two parts, Britten combines these elements in part III. At the beginning of part III, melodic theme 1 (see Ex.2.2) is set in the orchestra strings while the solo violin carries rhythmic element 1 and 2, with the underlying A-D ostinato in the bass part (Ex.2.7).

Ex.2.7²⁴



²⁴ Ibid., mm. 125-126.

The ground bass ostinato also provides a sense of stability while the upper voices change the harmony constantly. The roles switch as the lyrical main theme is sung by the orchestra, with solo violin as an accompaniment in rehearsal 8. The lyrical theme and rhythmic elements 1 and 2 almost always occur together throughout the first movement, even when the violin takes over the melodic material again in rehearsal 9.

In the last eight measures of part III, the final statement of rhythmic element 2 is treated as concluding material, but also as a preparation for the upcoming new subject (in the second movement). Unlike the standard cadential figures typical of the end of most concerto movements, the final statement here is given an ethereal quality with high-pitched harmonics in the solo violin. Moreover, the final announcement of element 2 is set on a persistent D-major chord toward the end (Ex.2.8), which is not in the marked one-flat key scheme. The concluding harmony for this movement is ambiguous. Ending a minor key movement in the parallel major suggests finality as it calls to mind the Picardy third so common in earlier music. However, this parallel major simultaneously functions as the dominant of the upcoming G-major movement, suggesting transition as much as conclusion.

Ex.2.8²⁵

The musical notation for Ex. 2.8 consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves are in common time (C). The top staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note G4, and a quarter note A4. Above the staff, the marking 'pizz.' is written. The top staff then contains a series of chords: a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4), a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4), a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4), a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4), a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4), and a D5 chord (F#4, G4, A4). The bottom staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note D3, and a quarter note D3. The bottom staff then contains a series of chords: a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3), a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3), a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3), a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3), a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3), and a D3 chord (D3, E3, F3).

²⁵ Ibid., mm. 169-170.

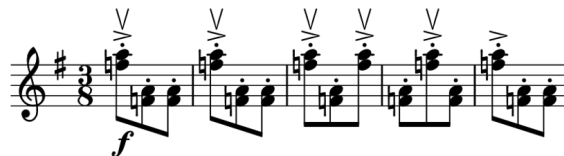
The structure of the second movement is straightforward. Although, with the preparation in the previous movement, the effect is still comparatively surprising. The second movement is mostly rhythmic with its relentless running eighth notes (see Ex.1.8). There are three different parts in the second movement that are isolated by distinctive characters, with a full violin cadenza as the ending. Parts I and III are the virtuosic, *moto perpetuo* character, perhaps requiring the most demanding violin techniques in Britten's violin concerto. Part II consists of a Gypsy-sounding melody in rehearsal 19 (Ex.2.9) which provides a lyrical character in the second movement before returning to the constant forward motion.

Ex.2.9²⁶



In part I of the second movement, Britten introduces the three straight eighth-note figure that serves as the primary motive (Element 1). Britten's addition of the accents reinforces the sense of agitation. He places the accents on higher notes of the violin, which are not always on strong beats. This creates a sense of syncopation (Ex.2.10).

Ex.2.10²⁷



²⁶ Ibid., movement 2, mm. 212-215.

²⁷ Ibid., mm. 10-14.

The addition of multiple instruments playing accents on the weak beats enhances the sense of syncopation. The second main motive (element 2) in part I is the three-note figure (Ex.2.11).

Ex.2.11²⁸



This element is derived from the rhythmic figure in the first movement (see Ex.2.6). Britten reuses the element that is shown before but disguises it with different a character and tonality. Intriguingly, this element was announced in part II of first movement; however, unlike the other elements, it did not make an appearance at the end of movement 1. Britten skillfully uses this element by delaying its appearance until the second movement. This element effectively propels the stubborn, nonstop eighth notes. The mysterious gypsy melody in part II is a rest for the violin and orchestra (see Ex.2.9). This new thematic material is unrelated to the elements that came before. Britten's treatment of this expressive melody is like the first movement in that it is paired with a sparse orchestral accompaniment. Up to this point in the second movement, the orchestral texture is relatively thick, which is necessary to produce a tumultuous effect. As stated before, Britten is always conscious of the range of the violin and adjusts the orchestral accompaniment to accommodate it. Because of Britten's awareness of the characteristics of the violin, the orchestra is never given an opportunity to bury the solo violin.

²⁸ Ibid., mm. 47-50.

The orchestra re-introduces the gypsy melody at rehearsal 30 with the orchestra playing in unison prior to the violin cadenza. This orchestra *ripieno* consists of two ostinato parts: the looping gypsy motive and triplet arpeggios in the harp (Ex.2.12).

Ex.2.12



Unlike the grand orchestral interludes of other concertos which prepare the upcoming cadenza Britten's looping treatment of this section creates ambiguity. Because the melodic fragment repeats every four eighth notes within the triple meter, the sense of pulse is lost in this section. The only directional element that leads to the cadenza is the ascending chromatic scale in the brass section. The conflict between motion and stillness in the orchestra solo can be deceptive to the audience. Britten's timing of the entrance of violin cadenza also adds another surprise to the piece. Typically, in earlier classical music, there would be a sustained second inversion tonic triad that prepares the audience for the cadenza. However, Britten begins the cadenza with the violin joining the orchestra in the hypnotic, looping gypsy theme. Only after taking over this theme does the violin finally descend to its own solo sustained *fermata*. (Ex.2.13).

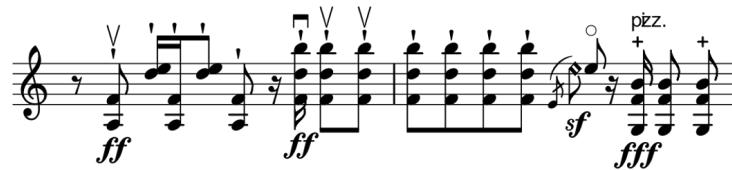
Ex.2.13²⁹



²⁹ Ibid., mm. 476-479.

The unusual placement of the cadenza not only surprises the audience, but serves to connect the second movement to the third. The most common placement for cadenzas in earlier concertos is in the first or third movements, and Britten's placement at the end of the second movement is unusual. (this method is also used by Britten's friend, Aaron Copland in his two-movement clarinet concerto). The cadenza is, surprisingly, not as virtuosic as the previous sections in the second movement. Instead, it is given a narrative style with marching percussive drumroll like elements in preparation for the next movement. Similar to the end of first movement, the "conclusion" part is formed by previous elements: the gypsy motive (see Ex.2.13), rhythmic elements 1 and 2 from the first movement, and the lyrical theme 1(Ex.2.14).

Ex.2.14³⁰



In Britten's violin concerto, conclusions are rarely final since they always seem to move in a new direction. This lack of resolution creates a sense of ambiguity and, more importantly, a sense of continuity between sections. Although there is no title or text to convey the obvious conflict in the violin concerto like his operatic works, the sense of conflict can be expressed by musical content through competing tonal gestures and musical directions. Britten's treatment of musical elements is simple. and can be broken down to a few notes. The underlying simplicity is belied by its complex veneer. The treatment of simple elements forming the base of large-scale work is similar to the violin

³⁰ Ibid., mm. 501-502.

concerto by Beethoven (which mainly consists of simple D-major scales and arpeggios). Although the concerto can be simplified with just a few simple, repetitive elements, its complex, chromatic appearance can be deceptive for the performer.

CHAPTER 3

LEFT-HAND TECHNIQUES IN THE CONCERTO

Britten's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra is one of the most difficult violin concertos in the violin repertoire. It is highly technical for its entire thirty-minute duration, perhaps thanks to the virtuoso violinist Antonio Brosa. Britten consulted Brosa during the composition, and asked him to edit the violin part. In a letter to Ralph Hawkes, Britten writes, "I have written to him, asking him to be honest and tell me what passages are ineffective and what alterations he suggests. Also I am hoping that he will finger and bow the part for the edition ("edited by Antonio Brosa")."³¹ According to the editors of *Letters From A Life*, "Brosa did indeed edit the original solo violin part, but perhaps rather more extensively and ambitiously than the composer had originally intended... Britten [later] took out Brosa's virtuoso accretions, which were no longer to his liking."³² Britten's later revision of the concerto took out part of Brosa's virtuosic passages with the help of violinist Manoug Parikian.³³ The violin concerto is revised twice:

The first batch of revision was made in October 1950, and included some minor structural changes (e.g. the outer movements are both shortened by one bar and the second movement by three) and more extensive alteration to the violin part. In 1954, further revisions to the violin part (removing much of Brosa's editing and simplifying some of the figuration).³⁴

³¹ Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letter and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1939*, vol. 1, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), vol. 2, 735.

³² *Ibid.*, 737.

³³ *Ibid.*, 487, 737.

³⁴ Paul Banks (ed.), *Benjamin Britten: A Catalogue of Published Works*, (Aldeburgh: The Britten-Pears Library, 1999), 49.

Britten seeking Brosa's help for the violin writing reflects the ambitious nature of the work. The violin concerto as a product of a good composer-violin virtuoso relationship is common since the beginnings of the genre. Virtuosos from different eras often served as inspirations for the violin works of their contemporaries. In the twentieth century, also known as "the golden age of violin playing", the rise of extraordinary violin virtuosos motivated composers to write remarkably virtuosic concertos. With many great virtuosos that could perform exceptional violin techniques, there is almost nothing "impossible" for them play. The reviewer of the British premiere of the concerto stated:

Many of these musical notions spring from the necessity of providing difficult, tricky and bright things for the soloist to do Whether these technical transcendencies overstep the Paganini line it is not for this pianist to guess. The fact that Antonio had acted as consulting specialist suggests a search for the limit of the possible; it also helps to explain how it is that all Britten's solo writing escapades, however new or far-fetched, are effective.³⁵

There are many extended violin techniques in the Britten violin concerto, which limit the number of performers that are able to execute this work. The musical language used in his violin concerto is generally idiomatic. Although Britten simplified some of the violin passages in the revised edition of 1958, the extended violin techniques in the concerto are still incredibly difficult. The techniques are mostly challenging for the left hand. A few types of techniques that Brosa suggested are finger extensions, fast passages that require double stops, double harmonics, and high positions.

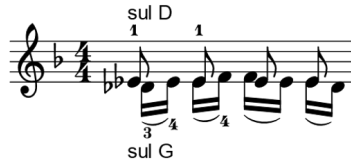
Finger Extension

Finger extensions have been suggested since the seventeenth century to avoid the string crossing by extending the fourth finger. It is a common technique in violin music, especially broadly used by great virtuosos such as Paganini. It became more prominent in

³⁵ "London Concerts," *The Musical Times* 82, no.1179 (May 1941): 198-199.

later violin works. The finger extension is perhaps one of the most frequently used techniques in Britten's violin concerto. The first example appears two measures before rehearsal 2.

Ex.3.1³⁶



With two or more voices on different strings, the suggested fingerings are to extend the third and fourth fingers in order to play the required notes. There are two main types of extensions in Britten's violin concerto: two-string interval extension, and three-string chord extension. The two-string extension features mostly unisons and major seconds, and the extension is as if the first and fourth fingers played a major sixth on the same string in the first position. Extensions on different parts of the violin can differ depending on the position. With the same interval, lower position (position 1-3) extensions are, under normal circumstances, wider the higher the position. In order to achieve this extension, violinists should seek the assistance of the elbow. A similar figure of lower position extension lies toward the end of the first movement (Ex.3.2).

Ex.3.2³⁷

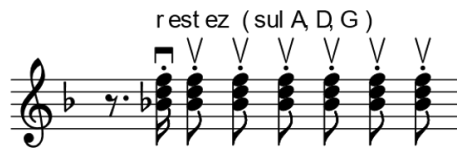


³⁶ Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto*, movement.1, m. 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, mm. 166-167.

Another type of finger extension is the three-string extension, like the interval extension, but with one extra finger being assigned the extension duty. One extra finger could potentially increase the tension level on the left hand due to the extra stress that must be put on the fingers that are not naturally as strong as the first two fingers. The figure is first shown in measure fifty-one of the first movement (Ex.3.3).

Ex.3.3³⁸



Britten uses chords in this violin concerto frequently. Some of them fit into one position, and some require extra lengths from the fingers. Finger extension is one of the techniques that people are more familiar with, and it requires a certain amount of finger preparation (stretching) for the performer to execute it sufficiently. For handling a passage that requires a wider finger stretch, performers should allow the unused fingers to assist the extensions. Keeping a good hand shape for the extensions can be helpful for the performers to accomplish the extension more efficiently.

Double Stops

Double stop is a staple in the violin repertoire, and has been in use since the development of violin virtuosos in the eighteenth century. Francesco Geminiani explored the possibility of double stops—although they might have been played simultaneously.³⁹ The extensive use of double stops can be seen regularly in Tartini, Bach, and other

³⁸ Ibid., m. 51.

³⁹ David D. Boyden, “Violin and its Technique in the 18th Century,” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no.1 (Jan., 1950): 24.

composers' violin works. Thirds and sixths are common, and more accessible to the violinist. Consecutive octaves and tenths are not uncommon and are considered part of the extension techniques. The virtuosos of the nineteenth century such as Vieuxtemps, and later, Paganini, use them extensively in their concertos.

Octaves

In Britten's violin concerto, with a virtuoso like Brosa, he loses no opportunity to show off his admired violinist. The first use of moving octaves is shown two measures before rehearsal six (Ex.3.4).

Ex.3.4⁴⁰



The descending chromatic octaves are not too difficult to play. As the passage switches from string to string, performers are required to have a firm grip for the moving octaves. When moving from higher positions to lower positions, even with the same interval, the shape would change accordingly (When in higher position, the shape is narrower, and *vice versa*).

The second example illustrates various advanced fast moving intervals within one page. Passages from rehearsal fifteen to eighteen show a combination of ascending thirds, sixths, octaves, and tenths. One example is the octave statement from rehearsal fifteen to sixteen. The solo violin is given an octave feature with big leaps repeatedly jumping from low to high. When executing ascending octaves in a fast tempo, there are two fingering

⁴⁰ Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto*, movement 1, mm. 86-88.

options for performers to choose from. One is the finger octave, and another is simply to use the same fingers to slide up. Each has its own benefits and disadvantages. If only using the same fingers, the passage could be more immediately accessible for its simplicity of movement. However, it is common that the octaves played this way are not as clean because the finger and right hand movements are not well aligned. Finger octaves can move the octaves precisely, yet it takes more preparation when first learning the passage. In order to achieve a clean finger octave, it is necessary to stretch and build up the strength and flexibility for the fingers to be more comfortable with the passages.

Some details should be considered when attempting to execute this relentless passage full of moving octaves. Aside from a firm hand grip, when moving from low to high, it can be beneficial for the performer to feel the touch of their palms on the violin body. One more thing to keep in mind is the left thumb should be relaxed and move smoothly with the hand. It should be one motion from thumb, fingers, hand, and forearm.

Thirds and Sixths

The second feature in this passage is the thirds and sixths between rehearsal seventeen and eighteen. Thirds and sixth alone are not so problematic (Ex.3.5, 3.6). However, at the racing speed like in the second movement (*Vivace*), it becomes riskier for the player to play the passage precisely.

Ex.3.5⁴¹



⁴¹ Ibid., movement 2, mm. 165-168.

Ex.3.6⁴²



Tenths

Britten's virtuosic violin writing does not stop here. He throws in the tenths to increase the technical level on top of all the exhausting finger exercises (Ex.3.7).

Ex.3.7⁴³



As stated before, there are many finger extension passages in Britten's violin concerto. Ex. 3.7 shows the tenths that must be played at a certain tempo. Moreover, it is set after successive left hand techniques (thirds, sixths, and octaves) that could already exhaust the fingers. These individual interval techniques are manageable when played separately. When being arranged continuously one after another, it could be daunting for the performer when first approaching it. Britten is aware of the passage being too difficult, and included a simplified version of the passages on the side to be played at the performer's discretion.

Harmonics

There are two types of harmonics: one is the natural harmonic, and the other is the artificial harmonic. The natural harmonic is produced by gently pressing the fingers on certain spots on the open strings and letting it produce its natural resonance from the string (using open strings as the fundamental notes). The artificial harmonic is created by

⁴² Ibid., m. 169.

⁴³ Ibid., mm. 174-175.

firmly pressing one finger on the string with another finger lightly touching the same string. Harmonics have been used since the eighteenth century. In Jean-Joseph de Mondonville's *Les Sons Harmoniques*, he demonstrates the first extensive theory of natural harmonics.⁴⁴

Harmonics are not usually considered an especially difficult technique. In Britten's violin concerto, he boosts the difficulty of harmonic passages by setting them at a fast tempo, and right after consecutive finger extension passages (Ex.3.8). In the example, the passage features a large leap from eighth position down to first. The first harmonic passage is in quintuplets followed by seven measures of double harmonics (Ex.3.9).

Ex.3.8⁴⁵



Ex.3.9⁴⁶



Double harmonics were first famously used by Paganini; they can be played in a few different ways: with both natural harmonics, both artificial harmonics, or a combination

⁴⁴ David D. Boyden, "Violin and its Technique in the 18th Century," *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no.1 (Jan., 1950): 28.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto*, movement 2, mm. 363-365.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, mm. 367-370.

of one natural and one artificial harmonic.⁴⁷ Britten shows all three possible combinations of double harmonics in this short passage (see Ex.3.9). This passage alone contains many technical problems. From the second interval of double harmonics, the passage requires two artificial harmonics. All four playing fingers will be used, and stretched in order to achieve this interval. Even if the performers manage to play the passage, the inner harmonic can be difficult to hear at the marked tempo (dotted quarter = 104). Britten's advanced use of the double harmonics is even more difficult than what Paganini used in his own concertos. It is common for composers to make some less virtuosic adjustments for some of the troublesome passages in violin concertos. In this troublesome passage, Britten writes out the simplified version of the double harmonics (he made an optional line of just single harmonics for performers to choose from). There are more passages in the concerto that include double harmonics, but this passage is physically the most challenging one.

Left-Hand *Pizzicato*

There are some more advanced modern violin techniques Britten uses in his concerto, such as using the left hand *pizzicato* for chords. Moreover, he uses the left hand *pizzicato* as an added secondary voice underneath the ongoing melody to create special sound effects. (Ex.3.10)

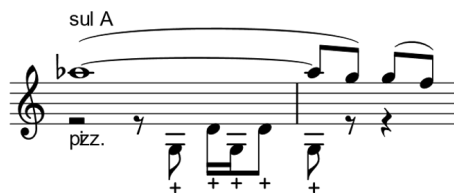


⁴⁷ Paul Zukovsky, "On Violin Harmonics," *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 6, no.2 (Spring-Summer 1968): 176.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto*, movement 2, mm. 502-503.

In Ex.3.10, Britten specifically marked left hand *pizzicato* on top of some chords and alternates the *pizzicato* between left and right hands. The chords are given a triple forte dynamic. A problem occurs with using the left hand to pluck due to the limited finger choices. Half of the fingers of the left hand are preoccupied with holding down the notes. Performers are forced to decide between the weakest fingers to pluck (third or fourth). Matching the volume of the right-hand *pizzicatos* will be a noticeable issue, since it will be more likely to be softer than the right hand and hence creates an unwanted soft-loud-soft-loud effect. To generate an equal *pizzicato* from the weak fingers, the performer will need to be aware of the speed of the left hand. Moreover, the angle of the left hand for this passage can be crucial in determining whether the top note of the chord (on the A string) will project. The top note of the chord is more disadvantaged for the left hand *pizzicato* since the strength of the finger gets weaker when it goes toward the palm, and the second finger on the D string can easily touch the A string, stopping the sound. Furthermore, when the A string is being pressed down toward the fingerboard, depending on the individual violin, sometimes it can be difficult to sound when plucking. Some performers do revise this passage to be all right-hand *pizzicato* to achieve the desired sound effects. Another example of the left-hand *pizzicato* is shown at the end of the cadenza (second movement) (Ex.3.11).

Ex.3.11⁴⁹

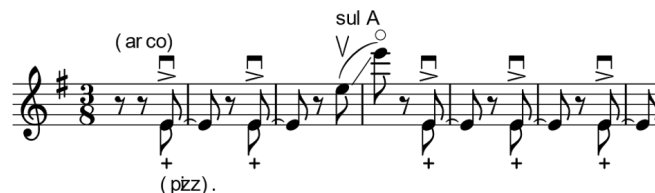


⁴⁹ Ibid., m. 520.

Ex.3.11 is the simple version of Britten's left hand *pizzicato*, added while another voice is being playing on the violin. This example shows a clear singing violin line on the top, with the *pizzicato* announcing the marching element from the first movement. The addition of *pizzicato* to the existing voice is common, and is not as advanced as Britten's other violin techniques. However, it reveals his creative arrangements of the themes and motives in an unpredictable way.

More advanced use of the left-hand *pizzicato* can be found between rehearsal twenty-seven and twenty-eight in the second movement (Ex.3.12).

Ex.3.12⁵⁰



This unusual passage looks innocent; however, the odd placement of the left-hand *pizzicato* appears to be happening at the same time as the playing notes. On the other hand, the one note figure is given two different articulations. Britten's use of the left-hand *pizzicato* trait is a tool to create a sound effect rather than as a vehicle for displaying virtuoso technique. This contrasts with other uses of left-hand pizzicatos by composers such as Paganini and Sarasate, which were primarily displays of virtuosity. The double articulation creates a unique and subtle effect on the violin. When the bow contacts the string that is being plucked, the plucking does not project the note. For the *pizzicato* notes to sound, the strings must be vibrating. Once the vibration stops, the note would stop sounding. In the example, the plucking and bow should happen simultaneously. However, this notation generates conflicting information. When the bow touches the

⁵⁰ Ibid., mm. 388-393.

string, the vibration will stop immediately; hence, the plucked note will only appear to be a drumming sound rather than the sounding E, and the most dominant sound will be the bowed E. In various recordings, the effect of double articulation is very subtle and barely audible. From the audience's perspective, it can sound just like the normal bowed E with a slight plucking sound.

CHAPTER 4

BRITTEN'S VIOLIN LANGUAGE AND ANTONIO BROSA'S INFLUENCE

There are many virtuosic passages in Britten's violin concerto, and it is unclear what passages were Brosa's suggestions and what were under Parikian's advisement. It is plausible to assume that most of the printed bowings and fingerings were edited by Brosa. There are some common characteristic features in Britten's violin works that seem to be typical of Brosa—the frequent use of finger extension, even in the parts that do not require fingers to stretch, and the use of high positions (fourth position and up). In many passages that are not as technically challenging, it appears that Brosa (or possibly Britten) preferred to elevate the technique, presumably to create his desired timbre. The violin part is provided with detailed instructions, such as what strings to use and specific fingerings (positions) to follow. This guidance is valuable when learning Britten's violin concerto. With the concerto's complicated outline, instructions can be beneficial for performers to comprehend the composer's intention.

Ex.4.1⁵¹



⁵¹ Ibid., movement 1, mm. 58-60.

Ex.4.1 demonstrates Brosa's virtuosic revision of the simple passages. The passage is indicated to be played *sul G*, which requires performers to make large leaps from lower positions to higher positions (first to sixth or seventh position), when it could be effortlessly played on two different strings and less risky for the intonation. One more example could be found in Ex.4.2.

Ex.4.2⁵²



This simple three-note motive could be played on both the G and D strings, which would be in the same position and can be played easily. Brosa's fingering suggests that the performer extend the fourth finger play on the same string to avoid string crossing. There are many effective suggestions from Brosa that transform Britten's musical language to be tailored for the violin. Although there are many technically challenging passages in this concerto, Brosa did indeed contribute useful guidelines for the performers (such as what positions might be the most accessible). There are various passages that require performers to stay in higher positions in preparation for the upcoming high positioned passages. The use of high position can be found in various passages in the concerto, and moreover, in Britten's earlier violin writing.

Prior to his violin concerto, Britten wrote two works specifically for solo violin and piano, Suite No.6 and "Reveille" (not counting his double concerto for violin and viola). The Suite, as stated before, was the piece that formed the relationship between

⁵² Ibid., mm. 100-101.

Britten and Brosa. It was composed before he met the violin virtuoso, unlike his second work, “Reveille.” However, there are still some similarities in his violin writing that carried through his other violin works. Characteristic features are the soaring melody on the E string that is built upon high positions and the use of harmonics (Ex.4.3, 4.4).

Ex.4.3⁵³



Ex.4.4⁵⁴



Britten is skilled at exhibiting the soprano quality of the violin. His frequent construction of melodies from position six or higher in his violin works is a signature aspect of Britten’s violin language. The harmonic features create an ethereal environment, which coincides with the composer’s staple musical language of his operas. Certainly, there are no specific characters or stories that are assigned to the violin works, as the musical forms are different in principle. Nevertheless, Britten’s symbolic musical language is displayed consistently in various forms and works.

The other technical features in Britten’s violin works are the big leaps that demand the performers to make significant shifts from lower position to higher positions, or *vice versa*. In Britten’s earliest work for solo violin, Suite, there are many passages

⁵³ Benjamin Britten, *Three Pieces from the Suite, Op. 6*, (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2006), “Lullaby,” mm. 16-18. © Copyright 1935 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, “March,” mm. 68-71.

that show this feature, as in his violin concerto. In Britten's violin works (Suite, "Reveille," and the violin concerto), Britten's violin writing is fairly consistent. Interestingly, the three works are progressively more challenging in terms of violin technique. The Suite was first composed during 1934-35, early in Britten's career. Even his earliest violin work demonstrates his persistent use of some violin technique, only subtler. His second work for solo violin and piano, "Reveille," dedicated to Brosa, was composed in 1937 only a year after Britten and Brosa's premiere of the Suite at the ISCM Festival in Barcelona. The premiere took place in London, with Brosa on violin, accompanied by Franz Reizenstein. This virtuosic piece, unlike the Suite, is purposely to show off the violin technique as a virtuosic study, with the piano as an accompaniment providing simple rhythm and harmony (the piano part in the Suite provides more variety in rhythm and character, and is given a comparable role to the violin). The title "Reveille" is a joke aimed at Brosa. As the editors of *Letters from a Life* note, "Brosa was a notoriously late riser, hence the title of the piece, and also Britten's unusual tempo indication, *Andante – rubato e pigro* (*pigro* = 'sluggish, lazy')." ⁵⁵

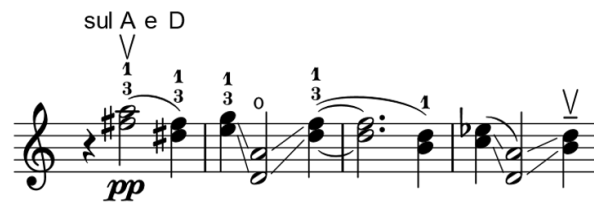
With the intention of a virtuosic concert study, the violin part displays the ability for violinists to perform Paganini-like passages. Compared to its predecessor, "Reveille" shows more advanced techniques that would be appropriate for Brosa. The violin techniques show great resemblance to Britten's violin writing in the concerto. This showpiece is approximately five minutes long, and demonstrates great left hand techniques in its short duration. Although it is not as large a work as the violin concerto, the two works share similar violin languages, such as Britten's love for high positioned E

⁵⁵ Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letter and Diaries of Benjamin Britten, 1913-1939*, vol.1, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 483.

string violin singing, left-hand pizzicato, finger extensions, harmonics, and extended use of higher position on the strings.

Similar to other violin works of Britten, there are detailed instructions in the violin part; however, there is no indication of which edits were directly from Brosa or from other later editors (Violinist Hugh Maguire helped the publishers to edit the violin part of “Reveille”). One could assume that most of the virtuosic editing may be from the hand of Brosa, or at least, from Britten’s own writing because of the identical violin style. In “Reveille,” the first three lines are clearly indicated to be played at higher positions of the D and A strings, even the double stops (Ex.4.5).

Ex.4.5⁵⁶



As a result of having a virtuosic nature, as well as Britten’s humoristic depiction of Brosa’s laziness, the double stops passage is placed solely on the A and D strings instead of the easier option of E and A strings. In other words, the passage is suggested to be played in seventh position when it could easily be played in third position. Moreover, Britten combines the big leaps in this passage for violinists to slide up and down the fiddle, followed by the later harmonic figures (Ex.4.6).

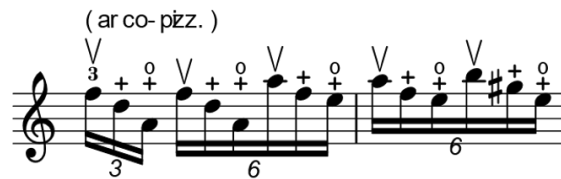
⁵⁶ Benjamin Britten, *Reveille: Concerto Study for Violin with Piano Accompaniment*, 1937, (London: Faber Music, 1983), mm. 11-14. © Copyright 1983, 2005 by Faber Music Ltd, London, Reproduced by kind permission of the publishers.

Ex.4.6⁵⁷



The use of harmonic passages is seen frequently in all of Britten’s violin work. In this passage, Britten marks an extra line indicating the sounding notes of the harmonics, which is helpful for the performers to follow. The statement of the sounding note along with the harmonic passages is also used extensively in his violin concerto. As a concert study for the performers, one essential left-hand technique that cannot be neglected is the left-hand *pizzicato* (Ex.4.7).

Ex.4.7⁵⁸



This passage shows Paganini-like technique with the fast left hand. The same *moto perpetuo* like passage can also be found in many of Paganini’s compositions such as in his “Caprice” No. 24, and those of other violinist-composers such as *Zigeunerweisen* by Sarasate. As shown in previous examples, Britten employs certain essential techniques in all his violin works.

There is one unique technique that only appears to be in “Reveille” and not in the Suite or his violin concerto, that is the continuous trill (Ex.4.8, 4.9).

⁵⁷ Ibid., m. 20.

⁵⁸ Ibid., mm. 43-44

Ex.4.8⁵⁹

(always whole t one)

sul A

(gssando)

fp

Ex.4.9⁶⁰

fp

sul D e A

sul A

3

Ex.4.8 demonstrates the connected trill. In fact, the trill must be played for four lines without stopping. Britten gives specific direction in this long trill passage, that the trills are always a whole tone from the starting note. In example 4.9, Britten added a new voice on the top as the melody, while the bottom notes are continuously trilling. This feature of the double voice trill is similar to the famous “Devil’s Trill” by Tartini. There is very little description of the piece from the composer himself; however, this use could be an implication of Britten’s deep understanding of violin writing. Although there is no direct link to the source of his inspiration, the trill features do share some similar qualities between Tartini and Britten. The trills are placed solely on the second finger during the double stop passages, with first and third (possibly fourth instead of third) fingers pressing down for the double stops. Moreover, Brosa suggests performers to slide from fifth position to tenth position on the E and A strings. This passage is demanding for the single finger (second or third) to complete all the trills.

The level of technical difficulty is increased in Britten’s later violin works. With simple use of the similar left hand techniques, Britten manages to create a great diversity

⁵⁹ Ibid., mm. 29-30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., mm. 33-34.

of works that suits performers with different skill levels. He completed his first two violin works in his early twenties; however, Britten shows his ability and familiarity with violin writing even from his earlier complete violin works. The earliest work, the Suite, is the most accessible introduction; “Reveille” is the intermediate level virtuosic study; and the violin concerto is a grand culmination of all the advanced techniques.

Antonio Brosa’s edition illustrates his ability to accomplish all the arduous violin techniques for later generations to follow his footsteps. His edition (or perhaps later editors) also provides useful guidelines and suggestions for the passages to fit the violin. There is no doubt that Britten’s violin writings are challenging for the performers, yet there is not a passage that makes one question Britten’s ability to write for the violin. Intriguingly, the left-hand techniques in Britten’s violin works are essentially the same, especially in “Reveille” and the violin concerto. The editing in both pieces features Brosa’s structural insight on how to execute the technical passages. It can be filed into a certain category of Brosa’s preferred solutions. According to the provided fingers and position suggested in the violin part, Brosa’s edition suggests staying in the higher position in preparation for the upcoming high notes. Moreover, his suggestions also indicate for performers to avoid string crossing and use extended fingering instead.

CHAPTER 5

INFLUENCE OF EARLY MUSIC IN BRITTEN'S PASSACAGLIA

Britten's adoration for Baroque music is undoubted. His attraction to Purcell, Bach, and Mozart is transformed into his music, through his early use of musical forms, especially the *Passacaglia*. We can often see Purcell's influence on Britten's music through his Purcell realizations and other compositions.⁶¹ His neo-Baroque application of the *passacaglia* is significant in his pieces, such as his operas, vocal pieces, and instrumental works. Britten's violin concerto consists of the standard three movements, but with unconventional forms. Instead of having the tempo-derived movement marking, he ends the concerto with a *Passacaglia*.

The twentieth-century influences in his music inform not only the musical trends of the day, but the political situations as well. The Spanish Civil War caught his attention as he was sketching his violin concerto. He was concerned about the dreadful events in Spain; however, there is no direct evidence showing the connection between his violin concerto and the war through his diary. His Spanish friend, Antonio Brosa, was convinced of the connection, though, because of the Spanish flavor in the concerto. Brosa stated in an interview that the percussion's opening rhythm was of Spanish origin, and that the nature of the work was a musical response to the Spanish Civil War.⁶² The

⁶¹ Eric Roseberry, "The Purcell Realizations," in *The Britten Companion*, Christopher Palmer (ed.), (New York: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1984), p. 356.

⁶² Eric Roseberry, "The concertos and early orchestral scores: aspects of style and aesthetic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 238-239.

impact of the Spanish war on Britten as a person is enormous, as he frequently addresses the situation in his letters and diaries. As Eric Roseberry explicitly connects the Spanish style of the concerto with the Spanish Civil War: “The use of imagery with Spanish associations (castanet rhythms, flamenco-like guitar sonorities, the slow sarabande rhythm . . .) together with pre-echoes of the War Requiem . . . would seem to point towards a Spanish Civil War subtext.”⁶³

There is no evidence in Britten’s letters and diaries that shows how he describes the Spanish Civil War, or his stance thereupon, in his violin concerto. However, the Spanish flair of his violin concerto is not only shown through the rhythmic elements, but is also revealed in the *passacaglia* form of the last movement. Britten’s frequent use of the *passacaglia* can be found in many of his works, and the *passacaglia* in the violin concerto is his first use of the form. Britten’s use of *passacaglia* can also be seen in his other instrumental works, such as in the piano concerto, Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, and his String Quartet No.3.

The *passacaglia* originated in Spain in the early seventeenth century, and is often associated with the chaconne. In the 17th century *Passacalle* was normally a brief improvisation played by guitarists between song strophes, or dances.⁶⁴ The form features the obstinate ground bass with a set of variations. It is largely used during the Baroque period, notably in Henry Purcell’s *King Arthur* and *Dido and Aeneas*,⁶⁵ and also widely used in Bach’s music. *Passacaglia* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries generally consists of a set of ostinato figures on a short, repetitive thematic pattern. It is given a

⁶³ Ibid., 239.

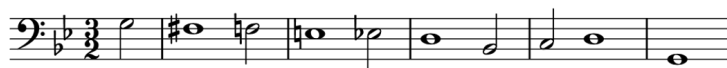
⁶⁴ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 7th ed., (New York: Norton & Company, 2006), p. 350.

⁶⁵ Eric Roseberry, “The Purcell Realizations,” p. 356.

more flexible role, and the ostinato feature is usually, but not always, set on the bass. Composers in the twentieth century arranged the old form and set the melodic material on top of the ostinato feature with modern musical languages. The rules are less rigid than in the Baroque era, and there is more variety of the tonality and forms of repetition. Some famous uses of the *passacaglia* in violin music can be found in Johan Halvorsen's *Passacaglia* for violin and viola (or cello), Shostakovich's first violin concerto, and Britten's violin concerto.

The *passacaglia* in both of Purcell's pieces demonstrates the traditional *passacaglia* treatment: the repeated ground bass, triple meter, and the similar harmonic progression set in G-minor. Purcell sets "Dido's Lament" in a five-bar structure with descending chromatic ground bass (Ex.5.1). Purcell uses the traditional treatment of *passacaglia*; in this lament, the soprano phrase is freely composed upon the ostinato bass. Instead of lining up with the five-bar ground bass routine, Dido's line is set on a nine-bar structure (Ex.5.2).

Ex.5.1⁶⁶



Ex.5.2⁶⁷



⁶⁶ Henry Purcell, "Dido's Lament," from *Dido and Aeneas*, in *The Works of Henry Purcell, Vol. III*, (London: Novello, 1889), mm. 9-14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, mm. 14-22.

Moreover, Purcell combines the chromatic and diatonic scales in this lament. The continuous D in the soprano line gives a vague harmonic direction, and the soprano line resolves diatonically. The full chromatic G-minor scale is given in the treble, and is only used when Dido dies to create the climax of the opera.

The title of the third movement in Britten's violin concerto shows his fascination with this particular Baroque form. Instead of using rhythmic terms in the title (as in his first two movements and most of other violin concertos), the nature of *passacaglia* indicates the slower tempo. Britten applied the *passacaglia* form just as his predecessors, in a set of variations, and the sequence of the variations are set mostly, but not strictly, in the ground bass. The *passacaglia* theme is first introduced by three trombones, the first appearance of the trombones in the entire concerto. The violin solo part continues from the previous movement without pausing, and the grand entrance of the trombones brings forth this new theme that weaves throughout the third movement (see Ex.5.3). A *passacaglia* is frequently set in a minor key (in both *King Arthur* and "Dido's Lament," and Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue*). Britten's treatment of tonality in this concerto is flexible, as he alters the tonal center between major and minor constantly. In the opening of the third movement, Britten gives no key signature, and the trombone entrance confuses the audience with uncertain-sounding tonalities. Furthermore, the entrances of the *passacaglia* theme (each played by different instrumental groups, and with slightly altered rhythms) are in different tonal regions. The tonality stays unsecured until the violin entrance in the next section. Britten sets the tonality around D, and the tonal center changes to its related keys such as A and G; moreover, he often switches between major

and minor keys and slowly resolves the key to D-major in rehearsal forty-three. The uncertainty of the tonality produces an ambiguous musical language.

Ex.5.3⁶⁸



The triple meter *passacaglia* is given more freedom in the twentieth century. For instance, Britten sets the ostinato on duple meter in the third movement (see Ex.5.3), and this alteration does not lessen the solemn, yet powerful hymn-like character. Compared to Purcell’s triple-meter *passacaglias*, the duple meter (4/4) in Britten’s violin concerto enhances the heaviness of the *passacaglia*, since the original *passacaglia* is given a more serious character. In previous examples (Ex.5.3, 5.4), Purcell sets both of his *passacaglias* in the dramatic points, especially in “Dido’s lament.” His triple-meter setting shows the dance music quality in the most heart-breaking moment in the lament. Britten’s use of duple meter in the third movement connects the pensive violin cadenza and guides us into the dark march. Britten’s *passacaglia* motif consists of major and minor seconds. The first part of the motif (mm.1- 3) (see Ex.5.4) features the ascending octatonic scale with a mixture of major and minor seconds. The second part (Ex.5.5) consists of descending A-flat natural minor.

Ex.5.4⁶⁹



⁶⁸ Benjamin Britten, *Violin Concerto*, movement 3, mm. 1-6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, mm. 1-3.

Ex.5.5⁷⁰



Britten models the five-bar ground bass structure after Purcell’s *passacaglia* in “Dido’s lament.” Dido’s ground bass repeats regularly throughout the song, and the theme is applied only in the continuo part, with treble strings taking over Dido’s melody. In Britten’s third movement, the ostinato motive carried by trombones is interrupted by the strings’ entrance. Each entrance comes in before the previous one finishes, and this canonic treatment of the theme clarifies the *passacaglia* motif. The first two measure of the motif unify the third movement, and it is presented with various instrumentations. The violin writing in the third movement can be seen as an individual part, as Britten rarely gives the *passacaglia* theme to the solo violin. Throughout the movement, the ostinato is played by almost every instrument in the orchestra, whereas the violin solo characterized with its own soaring, yet virtuosic character. The *passacaglia* theme given to the violin solo only appears once in the entire movement (Ex.5.6).

Ex.5.6⁷¹



⁷⁰ Ibid., mm. 3-6.

⁷¹ Ibid., mm. 148-152.

In order to bring out the motif on violin, Britten thins the texture by having most of the instruments rest; in addition, he lowers the register of the accompanying instruments to create contrast. The strong *ff* violin entrance not only introduces the theme, but also plays an important role to bring the piece back to the tonal center of D. This is also the first appearance in the whole movement that the key signature arrives at D-major. This remarkable entrance confirms the tonality and changes the mood away from the dark, unstable chromaticism. The firmly established D-major is confirmed by an instrumental *ritornello* in rehearsal forty-three, which clears out the tonal ambiguity, at least for a moment.

The most prestigious *passacaglia* of Britten is in the orchestral interludes of his Opera, *Peter Grimes*. The *Passacaglia* was published separately as Op. 33b, and can be performed together with other *Sea Interludes* or by itself. Among all six interludes in *Peter Grimes*, the *Four Sea Interludes* are the most popular concert work. The interludes capture the landscape surrounding Borough's life. They also link with the on-going drama, and portray Grimes' mental state. Each of the four sea interludes (Op. 33a) has its own title: "Dawn", "Sunday Morning", "Moonlight", "Storm", and "the Passacaglia". The *Passacaglia* is set as the bridge between the two scenes of Act II. The motif of the *passacaglia* is established on Grimes' motif when he strikes Ellen in the church scene and sings "And God have mercy upon me".⁷² This theme is described by Stephan Arthur Allen⁷³: the motif that, in melodic form, will mark the doom of their relationship in Act II scene I.

⁷² Michael Kennedy, *The Master Musicians Britten*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 163.

⁷³ Stephen Arthur Allen, "He descended into Hell: Peter Grimes, Ellen Orford and salvation denied" in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 85.

unusual instrumentation of this theme is that the harp takes over the theme when the lower strings rest. The ostinatos in this *passacaglia* are treated steadily within certain instrumentation. Like Purcell's use in his *passacaglias*, the ostinato theme only appears in the continuo part. Moreover, Britten inherits the traditional treble-dominated melody from his predecessors, and the melody is frequently placed in the treble strings and woodwinds. Like the violin concerto, this *passacaglia* is in 4/4 meter. Britten alters the ostinato statement in the concerto, and changes rhythmic elements as the theme is announced by different instruments. Instead of retaining the five-bar original motif, Britten only brings back the first four notes. However, in the Grimes' *passacaglia*, Britten keeps the original theme and only switches the instrumentation.

The key signatures in both of Britten's *passacaglias* are vaguely given. Although Britten provides the key signature in the music, the tonality stays unstable even at the end of the violin concerto. There are signals in the music that try to stabilize the tonality; however, Britten tends to give an unexpected enigmatic ending. Britten marks two sharps in rehearsal forty-three that confirms the D-major trait, and the key signature stays until the end of the movement. Instead of having a D-major happy ending, Britten slowly twists the tonal center back to a minor environment. The orchestra is given only open fifths set on the tonic (D-A), and the third is placed in the violin solo with the questionable F-natural (instead of F-sharp in a D-major chord). The contradicting information in the key signature and the actual chords makes the work remain unsolved.

Britten's treatment of mixed tonalities is a signature often shown in his works, and the instability of the tonality produces an ambiguous nature in the music. In the *passacaglia* interlude, Britten retains only the bass drum, viola solo, and lower strings.

Most instruments end with C-natural, which provides an indication of the tonality of this piece; however, Britten arranges the bass with a sustained long note on harmonic C-sharp. The C-sharp stands out and clashes with the C, creating a semitone effect. Both of Britten's *passacaglias* end with uncertain tonalities as a conflict in his music.

The remarkable viola solo in the *passacaglia* interlude is rarely seen in the orchestral repertoire. The role that the viola solo and violin solo play in these two *passacaglias* is similar. Both are built upon individual lines that carry their own characters; moreover, the lyrical melodic line contrasts with the ground bass ostinato. Britten's familiarity with the string instruments can be seen in his writings for solo violin and viola in the two *passacaglias*. He takes advantage of various sonorities and tailors the music for the instruments. In the concerto, the violin is given high-register passages, and it shines through the dark background; the interlude's opening viola solo features the middle-register voice. Although it goes up into the violin register towards the end, it flows back to its most beneficial register at the very end. Britten did not give any indication of what the violin solo was to portray, but, in Grimes's solo, the relation between music and character is well known. The interludes in *Peter Grimes* are often associated with his mental struggle and his connection to the sea.

The most famous use of a long viola solo in orchestral repertoire is possibly Berlioz's *Harold en Italie*. This particular solo was written for the great virtuoso in the nineteenth century, Paganini. Berlioz's writing for viola is to represent Harold, and the solo is given as an individual character. Britten seems to mirror this model. The similarity of the two pieces symbolizing the characters by this instrument is significant. In Britten's *Peter Grimes*, although the miserable character (the apprentice) is given a silent role,

Britten uses viola to articulate his poignant fate. The variations in the *passacaglia* interlude contain various musical characters, to represent the unstable inner struggle of Peter Grimes. The dialogue between viola solo and ground bass at the beginning shows Britten's operatic writing, and can be considered as the imaginative dialogue between Grimes and his apprentice.

At the end the *passacaglia* interlude, Britten leaves out the ground bass ostinato, and substitutes with celesta arpeggios and sustained fifths in the lower strings. Britten ends both pieces with unpredictable intervals to intensify the ambiguity. His mixing major and minor chords often shows in his other works. The semitone ending in the interlude features unresolved intervals, and perhaps the unresolved situation for Grimes. The *passacaglia* from the seventeenth century is treated as a serious character, and composers often chose minor keys to fit with its heavy-hearted nature. Bach set his Passacaglia and Fugue in C-minor, Purcell's *King Arthur passacaglia* and "Dido's Lament" are all in G-minor. Furthermore, the *passacaglia* in both of Purcell's works are associated with death. In Britten's works, the *passacaglia* is often set as a finale, such as *The Little Sweep*, *The Turn of the Screw*, violin concerto, and many other works. His application of this form retains *passacaglia*'s original character in his music. He uses the *passacaglia* in *Peter Grimes* to portray a struggle, and shows the relation between death and *passacaglia* in *The Turn of the Screw*, and as Gods' law in *Noye's Fludde*. Britten's concern with serious issues appears in most of his works, and he chose to use the *passacaglia* to convey these issues. The issues are hidden in the relentless ground bass, and in the heavy rhythm. The contrast between a repeated ostinato and beautiful treble melodies produces a conflicting quality in the music, as with the conflicting issues that

the music addresses. Moreover, the tonality does not resolve in either the violin concerto or the *passacaglia* interlude. There is always a sense of unsettlement and conflict in Britten's music through his musical treatments, and the arrangement of questionable harmonies mirrors the ambiguous ending in his operas, which leaves us an imaginative dimension to find our own answers.

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APPENDIX A- LIST OF RECORDINGS

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	Album Title	Soloist	Orchestra	Label	Catalog Number	Note
2016	Britten, Korngold: Violin Concertos	Vilde Frang	Frankfurt Radio Symphony	Warner Classics	0825646009213	
2016	The Menuhin Century	Yehudi Menuhin	London Symphony Orchestra	Euro Arts/ Warner Classics	555050	Disc 46. Menuhin has performed the concerto with Britten conducting at the Edinburg Festival in 1968.
2016	The Menuhin Century: Live Performances and Festival Recordings	Yehudi Menuhin	London Symphony Orchestra	Warner Classics	0825646777044	This is the same recording as “The Menuhin Century”.
2015	Delius, Britten & Milford: Violin Concertos	Philippe Graffin	Philharmonic Orchestra	Dutton Epoch	CDLX7320	
2014	1930’s Violin Concerto, Vol.1	Gil Shaham	Boston Symphony	Canary Classics	CC12	Disc 2.

			Orchestra			
2014	Benjamin Britten, Mieczyslaw Weiberg: Violin Concertos	Linus Roth	Berlin Symphony Orchestra	Challenge Classics	CC72627	
2013	Britten & Shostakovich	James Ehnes	Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra	Onyx Classics		
2013	Britten: Piano Concerto; Violin Concerto	Tamin Little	BBC Philharmonic Orchestra	Chandos	CHAN10764	
2013	Britten: The Complete Works	Mark Lubotsky	English Chamber Orchestra	Decca	4785364	Disc 51. Reissued 1989 recording.
2013	Britten: The Masterpieces	Janine Jansen	London Symphony Orchestra	Decca		Disc 4. Reissued 2009 recording.
2013	Britten: Violin Concerto; Four Sea Interludes	Seikyo Kim	Flanders Symphony	Oehms Classics/ Orchid Classics	ORC 100037	

			Orchestra			
2012	Britten: Piano & Violin Concertos	Sergei Azizian	Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra	Alto	1152	Reissued 1998 recording.
2012	Britten: Violin Concerto; Double Concerto; Lachrymae	Anthony Marwood	BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra	Hyperion	CDA 67801	
2012	Daniel Hope: The Warner Recordings	Daniel Hope	(BBC Symphony Orchestra)	Warner Classics	2564660542	Disc 3. Reissued 2004 recording.
2011	Britten: Piano Concerto; Violin Concerto	Mark Lubotsky	English Chamber Orchestra	Decca		Reissued.
2011	Britten Violin Concerto, Tchaikovsky Symphony No.4, Moniuszko Mazur	Wanda Wilkomirska	Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra	Orchestral Concert CD	CD12-2011	Recorded live in 1967.
2009	Beethoven, Britten: Violin Concertos	Janine Jansen	London Symphony	Decca	13281	

			Orchestra			
2009	Britten, Szymanowski: Violin Concertos	Frank Peter Zimmermann	Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra	Sony Classical	886974399992	
2008	Benjamin Britten Collector's Edition	Ida Haendel	Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra	EMI Classics/ Warner Classics	5099921752	Disc 3. Reissued 1992 recording.
2007	Britten conducts Britten	Mark Lubotsky	English Chamber Orchestra	Decca	4756051	Disc 1. Reissued.
2007	London Philharmonic Orchestra: 75 th Anniversary, Vol.2	Rodney Friend	London Philharmonic Orchestra	LPO	98	Disc 1. Reissued 1995 recording.
2006	Britten Violin Concerto, Simple Symphony, Prelude & Fugue For Strings	Boris Gutnikov	Saint-Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra	Manchester Files	CDMAN180	Recorded between 1972-81.
2006	Berg, Britten: Violin	Daniel Hope	BBC Symphony	Rhino		Reissued.

	Concertos		Orchestra			
2005	Britten: Violin Concerto	Lorraine McAslan	English Chamber Orchestra	Naxos	8557198	Reissued 1991 recording.
2004	Berg, Britten: Violin Concertos	Daniel Hope	BBC Symphony Orchestra	Warner Classics	60291	
2003	Benjamin Britten, William Walton: Violin Concertos	Sergei Azizian	Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra	Scandinavian Classics	220544	
2003	Britten: Serenade for tenor, horn & strings; Violin Concerto; Tippett; Concerto for double string orchestra	Rodney Friend	London Philharmonic Orchestra	EMI Music Distribution	575978-2	Reissued.
2003	Britten: Violin Concerto; Walton: Viola Concerto	Maxim Vengerov	London Symphony Orchestra	EMI Music Distribution	57510	
2002	A Barbirolli Collection	Theo Olof	Hallé Orchestra	EMI Music	75790	Disc 9. Reissued 1997 recording.

				Distribution		
2001	Veale, Britten: Violin Concertos	Lydia Mordkovitch	BBC Symphony Orchestra	Chandos	9910	
1999	Britten: Violin Concerto; Cello Symphony	Rebecca Hirsch	BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra	Naxos	8 553882	
1998	Benjamin Britten, William Walton: Violin Concertos	Sergei Azizian	Copenhagen Philharmonic Orchestra	Classico	233	
1997	Britten: Violin Concerto (original version); Rubbra: Symphony No.5; Michael Mehing: Threnody for a Soldier Killed in Action	Theo Olof	Hallé Orchestra	EMI Music Distribution	566053-2	
1997	Gail Kubik, Benjamin Britten, Benjamin Lees: Concertos	Ruggiero Ricci	Southwest Germany Radio	One-Eleven	96020	

			Symphony Orchestra			
1995	The Best of England	Rodney Friend	London Philharmonic Orchestra	EMI Music Distribution	CD-CFPSD4754	Disc 2.
1992	Britten, Walton: Violin Concertos	Ida Haendal	Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra	EMI Classics	Digital Download	
1991	Britten: Piano Concerto, Op.13; Violin Concerto, Op.15	Lorraine MacAslan	English Chamber Orchestra	Collins Records	13012	
1989	Britten: Piano Concerto; Violin Concerto	Mark Lubotsky	English Chamber Orchestra	Decca/ London	417308	