A SURVEY OF THE HARP WRITING OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN WITH AN
EMPHASIS ON
A CEREMONY OF CAROLS, SUITE FOR HARP, AND A BIRTHDAY HANSEL

by

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I hereby recommend that this document prepared under my direction by Christine M. Vivona entitled A SURVEY OF THE HARP WRITING OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN WITH AN EMPHASIS ON A CEREMONY OF CAROLS, SUITE FOR HARP, AND A BIRTHDAY HANSEL be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Britten has written solo and chamber works for the harp which extend harp technique and contribute to a twentieth century public awareness of the instrument. Unlike the majority of harp composers, Britten was internationally known and not a harpist himself. His works form a large part of all contemporary harp literature, yet his solo work and composition for harp and high voice are rarely played because of their difficulty. An examination of A Ceremony of Carols (1942), Suite for Harp (1969), and A Birthday Hansel (1975), will illustrate his contribution to harp performance and technique, and will serve as a valuable resource for harpists.

Benjamin Britten was born in Suffolk, England in 1913 and died in Aldeburg, England in 1976. He was the youngest of four children. His father was a dental surgeon and his mother was an Honor secretary of the Lowestoft Choral Society. It was through his mother's beautiful soprano voice and her piano playing that Benjamin first developed his love of music. He was a child protege, playing the piano and composing, and at age fourteen became a student of the English composer Frank Bridge. In 1930, with a scholarship in composition, he entered the Royal College of Music to study with John Ireland. Britten developed his piano skills under the tutelage of Harold Samuel and Arthur Benjamin.

Many of Britten's well known staged, orchestral, choral, chamber, and instrumental works include harp in the orchestration. Bryan R. Simms states that Britten's eleven operas are the "greatest contributions to English-language
operas since Handel."¹ Britten was an "outstanding figure of British generation that came to prominence just before World War II at the end of which his Peter Grimes laid the foundation for a revival of native opera which his works have continued to dominate."² This successful harmonically modern work features the harp in the Sea Interludes. Several of his operas, such as Peter Grimes, The Rape of Lucretia, Albert Herring, Billy Budd, Gloriana, and A Midsummer Night's Dream, extensively utilize the harp throughout the score. His well-known work for children, The Young People's Guide the the Orchestra (Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell) has a substantial harp part. The score was composed for a documentary film produced for the Ministry of Education. These compositions, as well as Britten's choral and instrumental works featuring the harp, contribute to the emergence of a new role for the harp in contemporary music.

Because of England's support of opera in the 1940's (there were two established opera houses) England "was scarcely ready for a full-scale native repertory. So Britten turned to the medium of chamber opera, using an orchestra of solo instruments and few enough singers to be developed on modest provincial stages."³

In 1948, after the successful performances of The Rape of Lucretia, 1946 and Albert Herring, 1947, the English Opera Group, Britten's company specially


³ Evans 294.
formed to present his works, started the first Aldeburg Festival. This small Suffolk town was the home of Britten's finest works; compositions written and performed there became the composer's principal activity for the rest of his life, and consequently, it was here that Britten performed his finest work as conductor and pianist. Britten's music before 1950 was classically oriented. It was largely diatonic, triadic, and expressed keys in novel ways. In 1951, the Festival of Britain commissioned Britten to write a large scale work, *Billy Budd*. Beginning with this work he spoke with a more dissonant, non-triad vocabulary and in more concentrated forms. This score extensively utilized the harp. Another commission in 1954 was *Turn of the Screw*, given at the Venice Biennale. Because the harp is used in this chamber ensemble, it functioned as an integral part of the score and not just primarily for color. The further utilization of harp in this work created a greater public awareness to this instrument. *Turn of the Screw* and most of his later works reflect a singular adaptation of aspects of the 12 tone method. The theme of the *Turn of the Screw* is loosely based on a 12 tone row which simply consists of a cycle of fourths. The opening of a new concert hall in 1967, the Maltings at Snape, enabled Britten to perform larger works. *Owen Wingrave*, 1970, and *Death in Venice*, 1973, operas written for the larger Aldeburg Festival resources, include harp in the score.

During the three years after *Death in Venice*, Britten was too ill to write large scale works. Instead, he turned to chamber compositions, notably three compositions - *Canticle V*, *The Death of St. Narcissus*, 1974, a T. S. Eliot poem set for tenor and harp; *A Birthday Hansel*, 1975, for high voice and harp, a cycle of Robert Burns songs for Peter Pears and the English harpist, Ossian Ellis; and *Eight Folk Song Arrangements*, 1976, written for Peter Pears and Ossian Ellis.

Throughout his writing, Benjamin Britten treats the harp as a capable and
versatile solo and accompanying instrument. His writing creates new attainable challenges, thus dispelling the former limits imposed on this instrument. A detailed study of these three major harp works is essential in gaining an understanding of Britten's contribution to the harp literature.

Musicologist Robin Halloway exemplifies Britten's understanding of the harp; "...no one since its (the harp's) emancipation from mere arpeggios and glissandos has understood the genius of this instrument as Britten who makes its technical character so influence his compositional thought that the music grows directly out of what the instrument can and cannot do." In other words, Britten removes the stereotype of nineteenth century romanticism from the harp.

CHAPTER ONE

A CEREMONY OF CAROLS, OPUS 28

Benjamin Britten began his interest in writing for the harp at an early age. *Quatre Chansons Francais*, for high voice and orchestra, written when the composer was only seventeen years old, has a substantial harp part. The importance of the harp in Britten’s mature writing began in 1936 with *Our Hunting Fathers*, opus 8, a symphonic cycle for soprano and orchestra. From this time until his death, there are approximately thirty seven compositions with harp in the scoring. The use of the harp appears in the early operas. Because of the nature of the 1946 chamber opera, *Rape of Lucretia*, each instrument stands out. "The richness of the orchestral sound belies the mere twelve players involved, and the variety and ingenuity of the scoring is apparent on every page. Listen to the opening of the first scene: an obstinate harp figure - the crickets of the text- hovers over rocking strings while underneath plucked glissandi on double bass (the bull frogs) complete a tense atmosphere of rising foreboding."5

Britten’s early harp music is pianistic. Generally, the early works lack maturity of idiomatic harp writing found in his later pieces. For instance, in *Rape of Lucretia*, exemplitive of Britten’s early writing, the harp score is effective yet relatively simple. Triads and blocked repeated chords are prevalent. Frequently, the harp merely doubles other instruments but the addition of the harp’s timbre is vital. This

pianistic writing does not portray the harp as simply part of the accompaniment. At the beginning of Scene II the harp is alone, setting the atmosphere with flowing arpeggios. Lucretia is sewing, while Bianca and Lucia work at their spinning wheels. When the voice enters a flute line accompanies the harp figure. The scene consists primarily of the ostinato harp figure, along with the flute and voice. An earlier work, *A Ceremony of Carols*, for treble voices and harp, also contains pianistic harp writing. It was composed in 1942 on Britten's sea journey home to England after a three year stay in America, and was first performed by Fleet Street Choir and Gwendolen Mason, conducted by T.B. Lawrence, in Norwich Castle on December 5th, 1942. The revised version was first performed on December 4th, 1943 by the Morriston Boy's Choir and Maria Korchinska. Again, the harp is not just accompanimental to the voices, but is conceived as an equal partner.

*A Ceremony of Carols* consists of the following movements: "Procession", "Wolcom Yole!", "There is no Rose", "That Younge Child", "Balulalow", "As dew in Aprille", "This little Babe", "Interlude", "In freezing Winter Night", "Spring Carol", "Deo Gracias", "Recession".

Britten writes that *A Ceremony of Carols*, can be played on the piano (except for the "Interlude", and gives an alternative piano score for the movement "Spring Carol") yet usually one hears this work performed on the harp.

Britten wrote the work for women's choir but gave Julius Harrison permission to arrange it for the more common S.A.T.B. choir.

The choice of text reflects Britten's firm beliefs in Christianity and his influence by the Church of England's liturgy and music. The sources are fifteenth and sixteenth century medieval carols as well as settings of poems by James, John, and Robert Wedderburn, Robert Southwell, and William Cornish, and also liturgical chant. These sundry poems are unified by the common reference to the
Nativity. (The "Spring Carol" is the exception.) "Although these words reflect a choice of religious texts, interestingly enough they are mainly non-Biblical. The derivation of his use of the mixture of Latin and the vernacular can be traced to the liturgical drama of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; his predilection for using multiple texts is apparently derived from the thirteenth and fourteenth century French motets.\(^6\)

Harmonically, Britten adhered to simple structures; modality and tonality are mixed and chromatic changes of the third of the chord alternates the major and the minor. Texture variety is achieved through the alteration of chordal, imitative, and unison singing. The absence of elaborative counterpoint is replaced by repetition of melodic and rhythmic figures in the harp, and by the frequent use of ostinatos and canons. "All the sections are monothematic and many are in ternary form. Rhythmic vitality characterizes the cycle. Rhythmic flexibility is achieved by the use of melodic patterns and metrical arrangements that are dictated by the text."\(^7\) A brief analysis of several of the movements in *A Ceremony of Carols* will demonstrate Britten's general style at this time.

An element of Britten's musical vocabulary found in his early harp writing is a simultaneous duple and triple subdivision within a phrase. For instance, in "Balulalow", movement 4b from *A Ceremony of Carols*, the meter is 6/4.


\(^7\) Anderson 24.
Example 1. Subdivision in "Balulalow", A Ceremony of Carols, op. 28

Andante piacevole

The harp subdivides the phrase into three, and the voice subdivides the phrase into two, thus creating a hemiola (example 1).

Example 2. Shifting accents in Canadian Carnival, op.19

Andante amoroso
Another example of shifting accents is found in the orchestral work, *Canadian Carnival*, written in 1939. Britten uses a duple phrase in the harp against the 3/4 clarinet line, creating a hemiola (see example 2).

"Balulalow" is in a modified strophic form. Britten contrasts the texture in this movement by scoring each strophe differently. The first strophe uses a solo voice, the second uses a homophonic chorus, and the third uses a polyphonic chorus.

An impressionistic device found in most of Britten's music is parallelism, or planing, which is a succession of parallel chords having the same intervallic structure and number of parts, and moving parallel to one another. An example of parallelism can be found in *A Ceremony of Carols*, in "There is no Rose".

Example 3. Parallelism in "There Is No Rose", *A Ceremony of Carols*, op. 28

Sharps and flats are obtained on the harp by moving the pedals. The harp is an ideal instrument for diatonic planing because once the pedals are set the hand moves up or downward in the same position. This is analogous to a hand moving up or downward in blocked chords on the white notes of a piano.

Britten uses parallelism extensively. In his *Rape of Lucretia*, the harp has a recurring refrain of parallel chords (example 4).
Example 4. Parallelism in *Rape of Lucretia*, op. 37

Andante grazioso

In addition to the parallelism in "There is No Rose", Britten also makes use of a dominant-tonic (C-F) ostinato in the left hand of the harp (see example 3). This ostinato, which occurs for over three-fourths of the movement, is used in conjunction with the choir and the right hand of the harp. The increasing number of flats in the key signature creates a marvelous dissonant relationship between the two forces. By the end of the third verse the chorus and the treble of the harp are in the key of D-flat major. Suddenly, in the fourth verse there is a tonality shift to A major in response to the text, "Gloria in Excelsis Deo".

Britten shifts tonality often in *A Ceremony of Carols*. In "Balulalow" the tonality shifts from F-sharp minor to F-sharp major every bar (see example 1), and in the following movement, "As Dew in Aprille", the tonality shifts from C major to C minor (example 5).
Example 5. Tonality shift in "As Dew in Aprille", *A Ceremony of Carols*, op. 28

(Allegro)  

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The essence of *A Ceremony of Carols* is that Britten does so much musically with so little material. An exemplary movement of this is "As Dew in Aprille". The harp part consists entirely of two rhymic motives: blocked and arpeggiated chords and a bisbigliando, which is a rapid back and forth motion of the fingers heard as a soft tremelo (example 5).

The form of this movement consists of three sections: The outer two sections are homophonic while the middle one is in a canonic style. The two-part canon at the unison is divided between three voice parts. The result of the two rhythmic motives with the voices changing from homophony to polyphony and back to homophony is a delightful balancing of harp and choir.
Another example of Britten’s minimal amount of material is in "This Little Babe". The harp plays blocked triads in a driving 3/4 rhythm throughout the piece. The theme is first sung in unison. In measure 20, the voices sing in canon at the unison at the close time interval of a quarter note in two parts, and then in measure 36 the canon at the unison is in three parts. Because there is only a quarter note value separating the voices, a stretto effect is heard. In measure 51, the choir sings in homophony. When the voices sing a long note value (quarter or half note) the harp sounds driving eighth notes. This propells the movement towards the climax where the opening theme in the choir is in augmentation (now in quarter notes instead of eighth notes). A hemiola over a two bar phrase is created between the voices and the harp. Both the choral and harp part obtain a duple feeling within the 3/4 time signature.

Example 6. Duple phrasing in "This Little Babe", A Ceremony of Carols, op. 28

(Presto con fuoco)

"Interlude", movement seven, is quintessential Benjamin Britten. This movement contains many of the characteristics that make up Britten’s early harp writing. The plainchant of the Procession and Recession, except for the "Allelulia’s", is paraphrased in the right hand of the harp over an ostinato figure consisting of a descending and ascending interval of a second, and then a
descending fifth. This motive is illustrated in example 7. The meter is 12/8 yet the plainchant freely floats over the ostinato figure. Here, for the first and only time in A Ceremony of Carols, there is idiomatic harp writing - the harmonics of the left hand.

Britten shifts the modes throughout this movement yet tonality is maintained through his use of the perfect fifth interval. The plainchant is used throughout the movement without becoming monotonous because of Britten’s subtle use of variation: the second time we hear the chant, the bass line is transposed down a step. Without changing the accidentals, Britten changes the modality by shifting the tonal center; now the descending fifth outlines a G tonal center. The third time, it is transposed up a minor sixth (the fifth is the interval from G to C). The fourth and fifth time the chant is stated, the bass octave doubles the ostinato while the middle register doubles the high treble. The tonal center now has shifted to E. The sixth time we hear the chant, the time signature is changed to 9/8 and $\frac{\text{\textbullet}}{\text{\textbullet}} = \frac{\text{\textbullet}}{\text{\textbullet}}$ so that the beat is slower. The seventh and final time, the chant is not notated in the same time values; there are half notes in place of quarter notes to create a sense of expansion. Here, the tonal center is on F.

Britten uses the illusion of accelerando in the right hand while the left hand ostinato remains in dotted quarter notes. This written out accelerando is created by keeping the pulse constant while increasing the number of subdivisions within the beat (example 7). This harp solo has such a popular appeal that it is frequently heard on the concert stage.
Example 7. Written accelerando in "Interlude", A Ceremony of Carols, op. 28

(Andante pastorale)

In the movement, "In Freezing Winter Night", the vocal part is constructed in a modified strophic form over a harp bisbigliando. The modality is G phrygian. Trebles I and II are in an exact canon for the first and second strophes. The mode changes to major at the third strophe while Trebles I and II are still in strict canon. In the fourth strophe, under solos from Trebles I and II, an ostinato pattern is created by the three choral parts. The phrygian cadence in a homophonic style in the last two bars breaks the ostinato pattern.

The form of movement nine, "Spring Carol", can clearly be marked as A A' B A, yet the tonality is obscure. The harp starts this movement with a one bar figure which is heard fourteen times and then variations of it continue throughout the piece (example 8).
Example 8. Ostinato figure in "Spring Carol", A Ceremony of Carols, op. 28

This figure is indicated to be in D major. Like the ostinato of movement three, "There is No Rose", the ostinato begins on the fifth scale degree of the key. Both vocal lines are centered in E dorian, which creates bimodality with the D major harp part.

The penultimate movement, "Deo Gracias", is in a bar-like form: A A' B Coda (strict bar form is A A B). The A sections are in A dorian mode. "The example of Stravinsky is not lost on Britten in the work: the chorus declaims its text as a staccato percussive chant, while the harp accompanies with a scale figure sotto voce under the chant. Syncopations almost suggestive of jazz punctuate the choral material just before the cadence."\(^8\)

The B section is in A major. The chorus is in a homophonic style while the harp has continuous chords consisting of fourths and fifths, sounding like an ostinato. In the coda, the chorus is in stretto. The vocal parts sound as if they are in either aeolian or dorian mode while the harp has an ostinato figure that functions like a V\(^7\) of D major. It consists of a glissando starting on the note D, covering all of

\(^8\) Anderson 31.
the notes of a AMm7 of D major, and ending on an A major chord. The third to last bar adds a G-sharp, thus returning to the key of A major. It is interesting to note that the choir has a C-natural against the C-sharp in the harp glissando. In this movement Britten changes the key center but the note A remains the common factor.

Characteristics from some of his first harp compositions - Quatre Chan-
sons Francais, 1928, Canadian Carnival, 1939, A Ceremony of Carols, 1942, and his opera Rape of Lucretia, 1946- consist of a pianistic style of harp writing, modality mixed with tonality, simultaneous duple and triple phrases, impressionistic devices, an abundant use of ostinatos and canons, and a minimal use of material.
CHAPTER TWO
SUITE FOR HARP, OPUS 83

Eric Roseberry, a Senior lecturer in Music at Bath College of Higher Education, states that Britten was well qualified to address his players as individual artists. He states that: "The category of 'solo chamber music' may at first seem a contradiction in terms, but the paradoxical truth is that Britten wrote music which challenged the virtuosity of his friends without sacrificing that intimacy and sense of dialogue which is the essence of true chamber music. The dialogue is there of course, in the music itself..." 9

A wonderful example of this is evident in Suite for Harp, opus 83 written in 1969 for an English harpist and friend, Ossian Ellis. Ellis made the premier performance in 1969 at the twenty-second Aldeburgh Festival.

This work exemplifies the experimental period of writing from 1961 to 1970 in Britten's life in which he challenged the virtuosity of specific musicians, thus expanding technique of various instruments. After a ten year period of no instrumental music from Benjamin Britten "it was the artistry of the Soviet cellist Rostropovich that reawakened Britten's interest and, beginning with the Cello Sonata opus 65 (1961), he wrote five works for that artist." 10 These violin-cello works

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9 Palmer 375.

written for Mstislav Rostropovich, the guitar works written for Julian Bream, and this harp work written for Ossian Ellis, show this virtuosic writing.

Britten's writing in this period is idiomatic for each instrument, thus the harp score challenges the performer with difficult passages that can only be executed on the harp. As opposed to *A Ceremony of Carols* where the left hand was accompanimental to the right hand melody, now both hands are equal partners, sharing the more involved contrapuntal lines. This work is one of the most difficult solos in the harp literature.

Britten experiments with new ideas in harp writing while using traditional baroque forms and technique such as fugue, theme and variations, and suite, a form he preferred over the sonata.

*Suite for Harp* consists of five movements: "Overture", "Toccata", "Nocturne", "Fugue", and "Hymn (St. Denio)". In this work, Britten uses the general meaning of suite. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music defines suite as follows: "A series of disparate instrumental movements with some element of unity, most often to be performed as a single work."\(^{11}\)

The formal structure of "Overture" is A B A'. It is connected to the following movement by ending with the main motive of the "Toccata". This motive is used throughout "Toccata" in each section of the Rondo form: A B A' B' A" B". Movement three, "Nocturne", is an A B A form. It is constructed in small sections, each consisting of ostinato patterns in one register of the harp. The movement "Fugue" is loosely constructed in a fugue, thus imitative counterpoint is pervasive. The last movement, "Hymn", uses theme and variation technique based on the Welsh

tune, "St. Denio".

Britten uses vocabulary established in his earlier harp writing such as the illusion of accelerando. An example of this, similar to *A Ceremony of Carols*, is found in "Hymn". The chords in the left hand keep the pulse constant while the number of subdivisions in the right hand increases in number, sounding like an accelerando.

Example 9. Illusion of accelerando in "Hymn", *Suite for Harp*, op. 83

Again, as in his earlier style period, Britten uses parallelism. In the opening movement, "Overture", the right hand blocked chords (the hand position remains the same) moving parallel show an impressionistic influence.

Another example of parallelism can be found in "Hymn". The right hand of the harp consists of parallel thirds for three bars, changing to parallel triads in the following three bars.

Britten continues to make use of a minimal amount of material. Three left hand rhythmic patterns, functioning as ostinatos, make up the entire bass of the middle section of this first movement (example 10).
These rhythmic patterns function as ostinatos under a moving line in the right hand of the harp. Muffling the right hand eighth and sixteenth notes accurately is one of the challenges of this piece. Other ostinatos appear throughout the work. At the end of "Overture" there is a right hand ostinato figure. This occurs for five bars and, as stated earlier, ends with the figure exploited in the second movement. "Nocturne" extensively utilizes ostinatos: There are four different left hand ostinatos, each occurring for several measures, and then four one measure right hand ostinatos, followed by a left hand ostinato for the last few bars.

Another example of a singular idea being used for the whole movement can be found in "Toccata". One rhythmic pattern, $\begin{array}{c} \text{3} \\ \text{3} \end{array}$, or its variation, $\begin{array}{c} \text{3} \\ \text{3} \end{array}$, appears in virtually every bar.

Britten's use of subdivisions within a beat cause the music to sound as if there are different meters. In his 1954 opera, Turn of the Screw, Britten writes the orchestra in 2/2 meter, while the harp is phrased in 5/4 (example 11).
Example 11. Subdivision in *Turn of the Screw*, op. 54

He uses the five against four motive in "Hymn" from *Suite*.

Example 12. Five against four in "Hymn", *Suite for Harp*, op. 83

Britten uses the interval of a second as dissonance within chords and uses these dissonant chords as chromatic neighbor chords.

Example 13. Chromatic neighbor chords in "Overture", *Suite for Harp*, op. 83
One of the challenges of "Overture" is to create a sense of horizontal motion with the vertical chords.

Britten uses major and minor seconds as dissonance extensively in "Toccata". The D pedal suggests tonality (example 14).

Example 14. Pedal use in "Toccata", Suite for Harp, op. 83

Britten's gift for melodic line, usually involving chromatic passages, is evident in his harp writing. The harp does not easily lend itself to chromaticism, yet this hindrance does not deter Britten from writing playable, although technically challenging, chromatic scales. A passage in the movement "Fugue" demonstrates his ability (example 15).
Example 15. Chromaticism in "Fugue", Suite for Harp, op. 83

Though the individual parts are written in the upper and lower thirds of the page, the composer has given each part a phrygian, lydian, and phrygian dominant quality.

Lively
express.
cresc.
resonant

Britten's creative use of tonality is clearly demonstrated in this harp composition. In "Overture", tonal centers do not follow a traditional progression; they change from C major to G-sharp mixolydian back to C major and then to an unusual scale with C as its tonic - C Db E F# G Ab B. Tonality is maintained through the repetitions of the various tonics.

Another example of shifting tonal centers is found in movement three, "Nocturne". Britten uses an exotic palette of notes throughout this section. By changing the tonal center, he creates a new set of exotic scales. When these scales are split into two parts, either the beginning or the ending part follows traditional major and natural minor scale construction. The movements, written with traditional key signatures, require added accidentals in every bar. The various
tonal centers produce the following scales:

- **F**: F Gb Ab/Bb C D E (first part phrygian, second part major)
- **C**: C D E F/ Gb Ab Bb (first part major, second part whole tone)
- **D**: D E F / Gb Ab Bb C (first part minor, second part whole tone)
- **Ab**: Ab Bb C D E/ F G (first part whole tone, second part major)

The construction is based on the whole tone scale with the exception of the "F" pitch:

Gb Ab Bb C D E F Gb

The F is the most important pitch because it is the upper and lower leading tones to the E and G flat respectively.

One of the challenges inherent in "Nocturne" is the simultaneous playing of different meters. The left hand phrases quarter notes in 4/4 while the right hand phrases follow the written time signature of 6/8.

The middle period of Benjamin Britten's harp writing, representative in *Suite for Harp*, clearly marks him as one of the twentieth century's greatest harp composers. His musical ideas during this time were experimental: the music which Britten wrote for Ossian Ellis not only challenged his friend but also expanded the harp's capabilities.
CHAPTER THREE

A BIRTHDAY HANSEL, OPUS 92

The late opus works of Benjamin Britten, works from 1971-1976, are more complex technically and harmonically than his earlier compositions. The best example of one of Britten's last works is A Birthday Hansel, for High Voice and Harp, opus 92, written "at the special wish of her Majesty the Queen for her Mother's 75th Birthday, August 4th 1975". The first public performance of it was given on March nineteenth, 1976 by Peter Pears and Ossian Ellis at the Cardiff Festival. Two other late works that Britten wrote specifically for Pears and Ellis are Canticle V, the Death of St. Narcissus opus 89, written in 1974, and Eight Folksong Arrangements, written in 1976.

Britten sets seven Robert Burns poems - "Birthday Song", "My Early Walk", "Wee Willie", "My Hoggie", "Afton Water", "The Winter", and "Leezie Lindsay" in A Birthday Hansel. Numerous musical ideas rapidly change within a concise musical form. The movements are connected by expressive harp interludes which begin in the atmosphere of the previous movement and transition into the mood and texture of the following movement.

Frequent meter changes occur in order for the music to conform to the

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12 Benjamin Britten, A Birthday Hansel, op. 92.
text. Meter is selected to fit the text. For instance, in "My Early Walk", the text is:

Example 16. Meters in "My Early Walk", A Birthday Hansel op. 92

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4/4 &quot;so thou dear bird&quot;</th>
<th>3/4 &quot;young Jeanny fair&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4/4 &quot;on trem-bling string&quot;</td>
<td>3/4 &quot;or vocal air&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example where Britten keeps the meter the same but changes the subdivision of the phrase can be found in the Scottish reel, "Leezie Lindsay". The harp part is grouped in five-note phrases with a duration of a beat and a half. This subdivision creates four symmetrical phrases of five notes against three measures of quarter notes in the voice part, creating a polymetric feel of 2/4 against 3/8.

Example 17. Phrase subdivision in "Leezie Lindsay", A Birthday Hansel op. 92
Britten uses two against three (2x3) to create a meandering atmosphere in "My Early Walk". There is 2x3 rhythm in the harp part and between the harp and the vocal lines. At the first vocal entrance, the harp plays eighth note triplets against constant eighth notes in the voice. The vague tonality and uneven rhythmic pulse created by the 2x3 produce a wandering ambience. Britten retains an affinity for the two against three texture in many of his compositions.

Example 18. Two against three in "My Early Walk", A Birthday Hansel op. 92

(Slow and casual)

Britten uses upper and lower leading tones as grace notes in A Birthday Hansel. In, "Leezie Lindsay", the upper leading tone G-flat to F and the lower leading tone F-sharp to G are heard throughout the movement, almost sounding like a parody of itself at the end (example 19).
Example 19. Leading tones in "Leezie Lindsay", \textit{A Birthday Hansel} op. 92

(Quick and rhythmic)

Britten opens \textit{A Birthday Hansel} with an idiomatic enharmonic unison bisbigliando (example 20). Enharmonics (two different note head names that are actually the same pitch - for example D-flat = C-sharp) can be played on the harp without retuning the instrument. The harp is the only instrument that can produce enharmonics without retuning. The tonality of the bisbigliando is B major (F-sharp, G-flat, C-flat, and B) but the interruption of C major upper leading chords create a bitonality, a harmonic scheme that Britten frequently uses in his late works.

Example 20. Bisbigliando in "Overture", \textit{A Birthday Hansel} op. 92

March-like

Britten uses the interval of a fourth, not the conventional third, in \textit{A Birthday Hansel} to establish harmony. The opening bibbigliando consists of perfect fourths (P4). This creates an amibuous tonal center for the first seven bars until the
voice enters on a D-sharp, establishing B major. The alternations of D-sharp and D-natural produce a major/minor tonal shift. The movement alternates between C major (usually defined by the P4 interval created by the third and seventh scale degree), B major, and B minor. The B chords function as lower leading tone chords, similar to the leading tone chords in "Overture" in Suite for Harp (see examples 13 and 20).

Quartal harmony is found in "Wee Willie". The quartal chords in the right hand are combined with the left hand ostinato of a P4 (D-G). The reiteration of the note D in the left hand produces a D tonal center. The occurrence of D-sharps (the leading tone of E minor) and the cadence of this movement in E minor suggest that the D chords function as lower leading tone chords.

E minor modulates to C minor, the key of the next movement, "My Hoggie". This modulation is achieved by descending bass line. "My Hoggie" contains shifts from parallel major to minor by chromatic changes of the third, similar to the opening movement, "Birthday Song".

Harp interludes preceding each movement create different moods for the sections. For instance, the harp prelude of "My Early Walk" is filled with cross rhythms and a wandering tonal center, setting the mood for the meandering text of the song (see example 18).

The crisp ostinato chords before "Wee Willie" establish the spritely atmosphere for this poem. Britten writes the movement in an additive texture. Initially, the harp has the ostinato chords. After several measures, a counter melody with an accompaniment to that melody is added. Half way through "Wee Willie" the two part texture becomes a three part texture by the addition of the voice. The addition of harp notes causes the texture to change from four to five parts, and finally to a six part texture. The heavy, dark chords before "My Hoggie"
set a gloomy mood while the flowing arpeggios before "Afton Water" sets the lilting water sound for this folk tune.

There is a harp interlude in between the graceful "Afton Water" and the uncertain mood of "The Winter". This interlude begins with the flowing arpeggios from "Afton Water" and dissolves into tremelo-like figures. These enharmonic notes produce an effect that sounds as if a single note is cleanly rearticulated.


The meter changes for the determined chords of "The Winter". The slow accelerando and driving rhythm of the harp music before "Leezie Lindsay" builds intensity and forecasts an exciting movement.

A Birthday Hansel, characteristic of Britten's late harp compositions, involves difficult idiomatic harp writing set in a twentieth century harmonic style. Overcoming the technical challenges found in this work is rewarding. The contribution of this well written chamber music to the harp literature is immeasurable.
"The most important and original English neo-tonal music has been that of Benjamin Britten... His fundamental idiom is based on a synthetic tonal technique elucidated with great simplicity, naturalness, and skillful clarity growing out of a kind of melodic thinking which is often vocal in origin... The music is typically put together in freely diatonic melodic-vocal phrases, often set into a simple contrapuntal web and punctuated by clipped, highly colored, triadic harmonies."\textsuperscript{13}

Benjamin Britten's harp music exemplifies these characteristics. He raised the level of acceptability of the harp as a viable instrument in twentieth century music through his frequent scoring of the harp and by the challenging technique he demanded from instrumentalists.

\textit{A Ceremony of Carols}, an established work in the repertory of singers and harpists, exposes the musical public to the charm of this instrument. The relatively simplistic, triadic harp writing is combined with "Britten's consummate ease of expressing musical invention of immediate attractiveness, and a way with words, that seemed, indeed, to be a true extension of their power, rather

than a mere musical addition to them."\textsuperscript{14}

Suite for Harp is a vital contribution to the harp's relatively limited repertoire because it is a well written, idiomatic work, and because it challenges the most accomplished artist. Britten said, "Almost every piece I have ever written has been composed with a certain occasion in mind, and usually for definite performers."\textsuperscript{15} His desire to write a composition for a specific friend created the opportunity for many people to share his gift.

The working relationship among Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, and Os-sian Ellis generated several works for voice and harp. In A Birthday Hansel, both the voice and harp are challenged individually and in ensemble. This work is typical of Britten's final works: many of them are written for Pears, most of them are for small ensembles, and all of them are written in an "original musical language within an essentially traditional framework."\textsuperscript{16}

Performances of A Ceremony of Carols, Suite for Harp, and A Birthday Hansel, elevate the stature of the harp as a versatile and capable instrument in twentieth century music.

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{14} Anderson 24.

\textsuperscript{15} Imogen Holst, The Great Composers: Britten, (Cambridge: Faber & Faber, 1980) 75.

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