Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was a prodigious and gifted composer for the voice whose collective oeuvre demonstrates an especially distinctive style and approach. Most of our musical and scholarly interest lies in the adult Britten, from *Hymn to St. Cecilia* (1942) and *Peter Grimes* (1943) through the *War Requiem* (1963) and beyond. But I suggest there is much to be gleaned from examining Benjamin Britten’s early works. Specifically, what were his influences and how did they affect the formation of his mature compositional style? We should therefore give close study to Britten’s first published choral work, *A Boy was Born*, Opus 3. Written in 1932-33 and published in 1934 by Oxford University Press, *A Boy was Born* was Britten’s final school project (one that occupied him for an uncharacteristically long period of six months). It is an *a cappella* choral tour-de-force theme and six variations of about 30 minutes’ duration for SSAATTBB choir and treble choir.

Given that Britten composed *A Boy was Born* at a relatively early age and while still a student at the Royal College of Music, an investigation into Britten’s musical influences is appropriate inasmuch as it helps us to understand from where and why he chose the compositional design elements that become hallmarks of his mature style. My goal here is not to assign a direct causal relationship between the techniques of established composers and the student composer—that would imply that Britten had essentially no original ideas. Rather, when we examine how Britten drew from these various sources and techniques and applied them in his unique way, a more coherent understanding of *A Boy was Born* and of Britten’s broader style may emerge.

Britten’s journal entries from *Letters from a Life* reveal a college student who was constantly listening to music and attending concerts. He frequented the Proms at the Queen’s Hall, London, concerts given by the London Symphony, the BBC Symphony, and anything Frank Bridge conducted. He would often borrow someone’s radio to listen to BBC broadcasts. In short, he was immersed in the British concert culture of the early 1930s. He listened to and formed opinions about the canon of the German tradition, including such composers as Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms, and Mozart; other Romantics such as Schumann, Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov, Sibelius, and Dvořák; British composers such as Vaughan Williams, Elgar, and Walton; plus modern such composers as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Berg. He was exposed to at least five centuries of art music, and we therefore cannot expect...
that his influences would be clearly delineated or simple. Instead, as I will show below, Britten parsed compositional ideas from a variety of composers and assembled them in his own way. Specifically, I suggest that the young Britten’s harmonic vocabulary is heavily influenced by William Walton, using Belshazzar’s Feast as an example; his voice-leading is influenced by Ralph Vaughan Williams, using A Fantasia on Christmas Carols as an example; and the use of ostinato and layering are influenced by Igor Stravinsky, using Petrushka as an example. In each case, I will demonstrate that the influencing composition was active in Britten’s mind and how Britten translates the technique into A Boy was Born.

Notably absent from this list of influences are Britten’s official composition teacher at the Royal College of Music, John Ireland, and his de facto composition teacher, Frank Bridge. While Bridge wrote some choral music early on, his interest and focus, particularly after World War I, was in chamber and orchestral literature. Bridge’s WWI period marked a rather significant stylistic change toward a more Continental style, especially regarding Berg, and while there was no doubt some transmission of this language in lessons, it was clearly not the kind of teacher-student relationship where Britten was pushed into the Second Viennese School. Rather, Britten describes Bridge’s teaching as based on the idea that “you should find yourself and be true to what you found,”1 not “write as I do.” As for Britten’s studies with Ireland, Britten’s sometimes scathing journal entries about him make clear that the lessons were not always productive or inspiring, though he acknowledged later in life that Ireland “nursed me very gently through a very, very difficult musical adolescence.”2 Britten’s work with Ireland tended to be in exercises: a mass in the style of Palestrina, a fugue, and so on. Indeed, it may be said that Britten was afforded the opportunity to develop a distinct musical language so early in his career because neither of his teachers exerted a didactic stylistic influence.

William Walton’s Harmonic Vocabulary as Seen in Belshazzar’s Feast

Britten first became interested in Walton’s music in 1931 when he bought a piano score of Walton’s Viola Concerto before attending a performance of the work on September 10. His diary entry for the day includes this glowing review: “Walton’s wonderful Vla Concerto (beautifully played Tertis) stood out as a work of genius.”3 Much later in life, after decades of friendship, Britten wrote to Walton in 1963 and said:

I don’t know if I ever told you, but hearing your Viola Concerto & Portsmouth Point (works which I still love dearly) was a great turning point in my musical life. I’d got in a muddle; poor old John Ireland wasn’t much help, & I couldn’t get on with the 12-tone idea (still can’t) – & you showed me the way of being relaxed & fresh, & intensely personal & yet still with the terms of reference which I had to have.4

Britten’s first contact with Walton’s Belshazzar’s Feast was a little later that autumn, on Wednesday, November 25, 1931. In preparation for the concert, Britten went to Oxford University Press to purchase a score of the work, and then attended the B.B.C. concert that evening. His review in the journal entry is: “Walton’s Belshazzar’s Feast (National Chorus – mod. good) — very moving & brilliant (especially 1st half) — but over long — & to [sic]

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2 Ibid., 147.
are biblical, while Walton’s libretto is strictly from the Bible; Britten’s work has no soloist or narrator while Walton’s features a baritone soloist who functions as narrator. We can summarize these contrasts by stating that Belshazzar’s Feast was not a significant influence on Britten’s setting of A Boy was Born, with respect to libretto, scoring, and overall structure. Rather, it is the pervasive use of non-tertian harmonies in both works that links the two compositions.

Let us look at salient examples of non-tertian harmony in Belshazzar’s Feast. First, I will examine the pervasive use of quartal/quintal harmonies. In the haunting opening section for men’s chorus, measures 9–11, “howl ye, therefore,” collections of fourths are emphasized:

\[ \text{[D/G, B} \flat/\text{D}^\#] \]

\[ \text{[B/E, C} \#/\text{G} \flat] \]

\[ \text{[D/G, B/E]} \]

Figure 1: TTBB, mm. 9–11

At two measures after Rehearsal 22, at “They drank wine again”:

\[ \text{[G/C, B/E]} \]

\[ \text{[E/A, F} \#/\text{B}] \]

Figure 2: SAATB, mm. 311–14

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5 Ibid., 217.
6 Ibid., 283.
7 Ibid., 261.

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Ibid., 217.

Ibid., 283.

Ibid., 261.

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All examples from Belshazzar’s Feast appear courtesy of Oxford University Press: Words selected from biblical sources by Osbert Sitwell. Music by William Walton © Oxford University Press 1931. All rights reserved.
At “pledged the King before the people”:

\[ \text{[E/A, F#/B]} \text{ [G/C, C/F, Ab/Db]} \]
\[ \text{[G/C, B/E]} \text{ [E/A, G, B/E]} \text{ [A/D, E/A, G, B/E]} \]

Figure 3: SAATTB, mm. 587–90

At “Make a joyful noise”:

\[ \text{[G/C, E/A]} \text{ [G/C, B/E]} \text{ [F#/B, D/G]} \]

Figure 4: SATB, mm. 686–7

Britten’s use of quartal/quintal harmony is equally pervasive throughout A Boy was Born.

Figure 5: SATB, theme, mm. 1–49

In Variation I, an excellent example is mm. 65-69:

Figure 6: tutti, mm. 65–69

Variation III is dominated by quartal harmonies, as this excerpt of the first eight measures shows (see fig. 7). This is just a brief look at the pervasive use of quartal/quintal harmonies throughout the work. The similarities in timbres and voicing are striking.

But, just as in A Boy was Born, Belshazzar’s Feast uses secundal harmonies frequently; at Rehearsal 4, “For they that wasted us…” (see fig. 8); at Rehearsal 8, “If I forget thee…” (see fig. 9); at page 69, “praise ye…” (see fig. 10); at four measures before Rehearsal 46 (see fig. 11), “who can neither see nor hear,” which resembles the opening measures of the theme of A Boy was Born (see fig. 5); at “crying”, page 91 (see fig. 12).

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9 All examples from A Boy was Born appear courtesy of Oxford University Press: A Boy was Born by Benjamin Britten © Oxford University Press 1934. All rights reserved.
Figure 7: SATB, Variation III, mm. 1–6

Figure 8: SATTB, mm. 48–50

Figure 9: SATB, mm. 107–9

Figure 10: SATB, mm. 450–2

Figure 11: SATB, mm. 452–5

Figure 12: SSAATTBB, mm. 492–4
influence in Britten’s mind when he composed A Boy was Born. The diary journals confirm this with his study of the score and his interest and overall positive reviews of the work.

Ralph Vaughan Williams and the Fantasia on Christmas Carols

Britten’s relationship with Ralph Vaughan Williams was an ambivalent one. On the one hand, Britten came to the Royal College of Music to study with Bridge, and both teacher and student rejected the English pastoral school of composition of which Vaughan Williams was a major force. While Vaughan Williams was researching folk songs, Bridge was researching the second Viennese school. Britten had this to say about Vaughan Williams’s Five Mystical Songs in his journal entry for January 16, 1935:

The fifteen biblical songs of R.V.W. finished me entirely; that ‘pi’ and artificial mysticism combined with, what seems to me, technical incompetence, sends me crazy. I have never felt more depressed for English music than after that programme… especially when I felt that that is what the public—no, not the public, the critics love and praise.10

Still, Britten did not dismiss the man outright and even admitted some praise. When writing about a December 1930 performance of the Vaughan Williams Fantasia on Christmas

10 Ibid., 364.
layers of textures (ostinatos, narrative voices, etcetera).

It is clear from both Britten’s written words and his music that he was in no way interested in emulating Vaughan Williams. But I argue that the choral culture in which Britten participated as a student at the Royal College of Music necessarily affected his approach to setting choral music; setting the work in a manner similar to such contemporary European works as Ravel’s *Trois Chansons* or Distler’s motets would not have been a real option since he had no exposure to that kind of choral music. Instead, his choral experience at the Royal College of Music was centered on the English Madrigal Choir with Arnold Foster, who was a student and proponent of Vaughan Williams’s music, the Palestrina-style Mass composition exercises with Ireland, and the steady diet of concerts featuring Vaughan Williams’s music. These factors would suggest that when the young Britten set choral music (of which Bridge wrote quite little), he had an abundance of Vaughan Williams’s influence and little of alternative styles. As we will see below, this influence is primarily in how the voices exchange lines and how repetitive canons create intensity.

Both *A Boy was Born* and *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* feature a choral part-writing technique in which a line is passed from voice part to voice part through the intersection of a common tone. Vaughan Williams uses this technique throughout the *Fantasia*, but particularly in the whole first section (mm. 1–81), as shown here in measures 26–27:

![Figure 16: SATB, mm. 26–7](image)

11 Ibid., 191.
12 Ibid., 191.
13 Ibid., 197.
14 Ibid., 145.
There is also frequent use of scalar canon in Fantasia that both looks and sounds in its technique like A Boy was Born. We find these canons in Fantasia at measures 72–78 in the chorus (see fig. 19).

At measures 107-122 in the winds and strings:

![Figure 20: vln., fl., cl., ob., mm. 107–9](image)

At measures 202-204 in the choir, at “All for to see”:

![Figure 21: SATB, mm. 202–4](image)

These are just several of the many instances in which Vaughan Williams intensifies the texture with simple polyphony. In most cases, these canons lead to the prominent entry of a carol tune, such as the orchestra’s entrance of “God Rest You, Merry Gentlemen” at measure 213 after the build-up that begins at measure 202.

Britten uses these canons in A Boy was Born. In Variation V, Britten layers the treble choir over a scalar canon in the women’s voices (see fig. 22).
So while Britten did not admire Vaughan Williams, per se, he was clearly influenced by the voice-writing techniques from this other great Christmas choral work.

Later in Variation VI, Britten shows both a “Welcome, Yule” scalar canon throughout the voice parts:

So while Britten did not admire Vaughan Williams, per se, he was clearly influenced by the voice-writing techniques from this other great Christmas choral work.

Figure 22: trebles, SSAA, mm. 24–9

Figure 23: sopranos, mm. 230–5
Layering and Ostinato as Seen in Stravinsky’s Petrushka

When Britten first met Walter Greatorex, the Director of Music at Gresham’s (his public school), he was greeted with “So you are the boy who likes Stravinsky!” — and the relationship never improved from there. Britten was captivated and intrigued by Stravinsky’s music, and we have ample evidence of Britten’s active interest in the composer. Britten’s diary entry for January 27, 1931, reads: “Listen all the evening to Stravinsky concert. Remarkable, puzzling. I quite enjoyed the pf. concerto. Sacre—bewildering & terrifying. I didn’t really enjoy it, but I think it’s incredibly marvelous & arresting.”

We know that he checked out a score of Le Sacre du printemps just a few weeks later on March 4, 1931, that he bought a recording of it on August 31, 1932, and that he described a B.B.C. Symphony concert on November 16, 1932, this way: “A competent performance of the all astounding Sacre to finish with.”

This was the week in which Britten read carols and began sketches of A Boy was Born.

By November of 1931 Britten owned a recording of The Firebird, and he heard a performance of it by the B.B.C. Orchestra on March 13, 1932. Regarding the Symphony of Psalms, Britten’s review of a B.B.C. Symphony concert conducted by Ernest Ansermet on January 27, 1932, included the comment: “Stravinsky, Capriccio for Pft. (Strav. himself) & Orch. Amusing but not much more. Marvellous Symphony of Psalms (Strav.) tho’. Bits of it laboured I thought but the end was truly inspired.” He bought a recording of it on July 20, 1932, and a vocal score ten days later.

Britten attended the Ballets Russes on June 17, 1931, at which he saw a performance of Petrushka. He describes the piece as “most glorious of all… this is an inspiration from beginning to end.” For Christmas that year his parents gave him a miniature score of the work, and Britten bought the LSO recording on January 7, 1932, adding in his journal: “marvellous music — playing quite good.”

On January 10, February 13 and 16, Britten made special note in his diary of listening to Petrushka, on November 24 he noted that he listened to “a faked perf. of Petroushka by Beecham — within an inch of collapse all the time,” and the next day he wrote the theme for A Boy was Born.

Given this abundance of diary information about Britten’s interest in Stravinsky, it seems clear that some aspects of the latter’s style would be found in the former’s music. I will look at Petrushka as an influencing composition, based on Britten’s glowing review of Petrushka in concert, his subsequent possession of the miniature score and record purchases, and the coincidence of the poor Beecham performance the day before Britten began working on A Boy was Born in earnest. I suggest that Petrushka informed Britten’s use of pentatonic collections, ostinato, and textural layering.

Petrushka uses pentatonic collections throughout the First Tableau. The work opens with a flute solo (see fig. 24).

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15 Ibid., 121.
16 Ibid., 158.
17 Ibid., 286.
18 Ibid., 242.
19 Ibid., 231.
20 Ibid., 184.
21 Ibid., 227.
22 Ibid., 287.
This collection can be interpreted as a G pentatonic scale missing the third, B natural, or as 'stacked fourths', E-A-D-G. Incidentally, the third and fourth measures feature the (0,2,5) pc-set {D,E,G}, which is the theme of *A Boy was Born*. The {G,A,D,E} collection also serves as an ostinato, for example in the violins and harp at Rehearsal 2, 16, 34, 45, and so forth:

**Figure 25:** vln. I, m. 14

More specifically, that alternation of the open fifth and the minor third is a prevalent ostinato (in various ways) in the First Tableau.

Britten employs the major pentatonic scale consistently throughout *A Boy was Born*. Figure 17, above, shows the running pentatonic scale that goes continuously for the majority of Variation IV. Figure 26, below, shows how the first eight measures of Variation III can be best understood in pentatonic collections (see fig. 26).

Britten’s use of the major pentatonic collection both in melodic and harmonic construction clearly resembles Stravinsky’s use in *Petrushka*.

Stravinsky’s use of ostinato is in itself the subject of multiple articles and dissertations, and a detailed discussion of the subject is beyond the scope of this work. I recommend in particular Gretchen Horlacher’s article “The Rhythms of Reiteration: Formal Development in Stravinsky’s Ostinati,” in which she introduces her idea “that the progress of each stratum is controlled not only by its own pattern of repetition, but also by the patterns of repetition in other simultaneously occurring strata. The superimposed repetitions, then, are part of a strictly controlled contrapuntal texture.”

In short, as she demonstrates with ostinatos from *Symphony of Psalms, Perséphone, and Les Noces*,

**Figure 26:** trebles, SATB, mm. 1–8

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The same can be said of Britten’s ostinatos in *A Boy was Born*, though Britten gives them other identifying markers as well, such as a distinct text:

- In Variation I

![Figure 28: SI/II, mm. 1–3](image)

- In Variation IV (see fig. 17)
- In Variation VI, with two simultaneous ostinatos

![Figure 29: TII, BII, mm.1–5](image)

In all three examples, the ostinato not only sets a harmonic/rhythmic context, but it also drives the movement with its constant repetition and manipulation.

Ostinato is one of the many aspects of stratification in Stravinsky’s music, another topic that is teeming with excellent studies. Lynne Rogers’ “Stravinsky’s Break with Contrapuntal Tradition: A Sketch Study” is particularly good at discussing Stravinsky’s approach to layered
the distinct layers do in fact relate vertically, that is, obey the same harmonic framework.

Edward Cone’s “Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method” (Perspectives in New Music, 1962) addresses Stravinsky’s stratification slightly differently. He seeks to find unity in Stravinsky’s various stylistic periods by suggesting three phases of his technique, namely stratification, interlock, and synthesis. I suggest that this concept of stratification, which Cone defines here as “the separation in musical space of ideas – or better, of musical areas”\(^{25}\) is the influencing force in Britten’s use of layered composition. A classic example of this stratification is at Rehearsal 92 in the Fourth Tableau of Le Sacre. The “Dance of the Nursemaids” begins with three different ostinatos at Rehearsal 90, as shown in figs. 30a, b, and c.

By Rehearsal 92, he has added a fast scalar ascent in the violins, a pulsing \{A,C,D\} in the cellos and viola, an oscillating \{D/F + C/G\} the distinct layers do in fact relate vertically, that is, obey the same harmonic framework.

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Then, at four measures after Rehearsal 90, Stravinsky adds the Russian folk-song “Akh vy sieni, moi sieni”\(^{26}\) as an oboe solo:

By Rehearsal 92, he has added a fast scalar ascent in the violins, a pulsing \{A,C,D\} in the cellos and viola, an oscillating \{D/F + C/G\}


in the clarinets (which is the same (0,2,5,7) as the ostinato examined above), and the original pentatonic theme in the flutes. While the aggregate texture is incredibly busy, each stratum is clearly defined with respect to rhythmic gesture, melodic content, orchestration, and range.

This is the essence of Britten’s layered textures in Variations I and VI. As figures 32 (Variation I) and 33 (Variation VI) show, Britten was both exceptionally interested and gifted in writing complicated multiple strata.

Using layered strata to such an extent is not something that Britten would have picked up from Ireland, Bridge, Vaughan Williams, or others at the RCM — it is clearly an influence of Stravinsky.

This essay is by no means an attempt to consolidate the complete list of musical influences from which Britten felt a subconscious or conscious exertion. As I established at the beginning, Britten was exceptionally musically literate for his age and an acutely critical thinker. Other influences are also clear in his writings: Schoenberg, namely Pierrot Lunaire which he knew and loved by the start of A Boy was Born, and the Op. 31 Variations, which Britten heard in February of 1933; Bach, whose St. Matthew Passion he heard in March of 1931 and 1932, and, I believe, was the impetus for the stratified treble part (see the opening Chorus, measure 30, e.g.); Bartók, whose music he heard in March and July of 1932 (“I cannot say I love this music but it is amazingly clever & descriptive”27); and Mahler’s Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen, a score of which Britten had purchased in January 27 Letters from a Life, vol. 1, 240.
1931. But given the detailed diary accounts of Britten’s contact with and opinions about Walton, Vaughan Williams, and Stravinsky, combined with the clear evidence of the compositional design elements in *Belshazzar’s Feast*, *A Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, and *Petrushka*, I suggest that Britten incorporated these ideas and synthesized the techniques, as is first seen in *A Boy was Born*.

**References**

Cone, Edward T. “Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method.” *Perspectives of New Music*, v.1, Fall 1962.


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28 Ibid., p. 156.