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**Motive and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's  
Billy Budd**

**by**

**Wendy Griffiths**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Musical Arts, the City University of New York.**

**1998**

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## Abstract

## MOTIVE AND MEANING IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S

BILLY BUDD

by

WENDY GRIFFITHS

ADVISOR: Philip Rupprecht

Benjamin Britten's Billy Budd represents a successful adaptation of not only a literary work but of several literary *techniques* to an operatic medium. Musical motive plays a crucial role in these musical-narrative techniques. In the analogue for point of view, for example, several characters present their versions of a motive, thereby revealing important information about themselves, information which in a literary work a narrator might supply. Motives are also used in the orchestral narrative which underscores the drama acting as the thread from which this non-verbal narrative is woven. Billy Budd is a work in which techniques of motivic association which would characterize his later works begin to emerge.

### Acknowledgements

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I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to Professor Philip Rupprecht for his supervision of my dissertation, "Motive and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's Billy Budd". He was a constant source of stimulus and enthusiasm throughout the research project. Most especially, I thank Professors David Olan and John Graziano for their invaluable comments and suggestions in the preparation of the manuscript.

Wendy Griffiths

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## MOTIVE AND MEANING IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S BILLY BUDD

### Introduction

The present study will concentrate questions of motive and meaning in Benjamin Britten's Billy Budd. In Billy Budd, as in many of Britten's other operas, motive plays an important role in the musical narrative. In this study of the opera's recurrent thematic shapes, I will take a particular interest in different characters' interpretations of the same musical material. Before turning to my own analysis, I will review the existing studies on the opera.

One of the most important aspects of Billy Budd is the motivic dimension. Previous studies on the use of motive in Billy Budd include those of Erwin Stein and Peter Evans.<sup>1</sup> Stein has identified family resemblances and motivic economy in the derivation of most of the opera's main motivic material from an *ur motive*, the opening gesture of the Prologue. Stein's interest in motivic unity reflects his close contact with Schoenberg. Evans, beginning with Stein's observations, goes on to catalogue the major motives of the work and to show their relationship to Stein's *ur motive*. Philip Brett has also described motives in Billy Budd, in particular as they are used to portray character attributes, for example, the use of a falling fourths motive to express Claggart's depravity.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Brett has shown how the opening of Act II is musically dominated by motives associated with Billy.

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1. Erwin Stein, "Billy Budd", in Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (eds.), Benjamin Britten: a Commentary on his Works by a Group of Specialists, (London: Rockcliff, 1952); Peter Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

2. Philip Brett, "Salvation at Sea: Billy Budd", in Christopher Palmer (ed.), The Britten Companion, (London, 1984), 141.

Donald Mitchell has also examined the use of motives in Billy Budd. He has described a process, “motivic convergence,” by which motives associated with one character migrate to another. In examining other Britten operas from the 1950’s, he finds other examples of motivic convergence and shows how Britten uses this technique to highlight ambiguities in the story or the minds of its central characters.

Tonality in Billy Budd has been the subject of several recent studies. Philip Rupprecht<sup>3</sup> shows how the chromatic opposition of “tonal strata” in the Prologue establishes an air of tonal uncertainty, an ambiguity that mirrors the conflict in Vere’s mind. Mervyn Cooke<sup>4</sup> has treated the subject of the opera’s tonal symbolism. He shows how Britten uses semitonal oppositions in Billy Budd to manifest dramatic conflict, a technique already well manifest in Peter Grimes. He shows graphically how these half-step juxtapositions are built into the large-scale architecture of the work. Like Cooke, Clifford Hindley<sup>5</sup> has examined the tonal symbolism of Billy Budd, with reference in particular to the orchestral “interview chord” sequence (Act II, R#100).<sup>6</sup>

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3 . Philip Rupprecht, “Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten’s Music.” Journal of Music Theory 40/2 (Fall 1996).

4 . Mervyn Cooke, “Britten’s ‘Prophetic song’: Tonal Symbolism in Billy Budd”, in Mervyn Cooke and P. Reed (eds.), Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

5 . Clifford Hindley, “Britten’s Billy Budd: The ‘Interview Chords’ Again.” Musical Quarterly 78 (Spring, 1994).

6 . Although I will often illustrate specific details in numbered examples, readers will best follow my arguments with reference to a vocal score of the revised 1961 version .

Arnold Whittall<sup>7</sup> also discusses the “interview chord” sequence, not for its tonal symbolism but for its motivic significance. His study interprets two important recurrences of this sequence. (in Act II at R#117 and in the Epilogue at R#143) as, respectively, Billy and Vere’s “interpretations” of the interview. Whittall shows how the degree to which each of the two men’s vocal lines is consonant with the underlying chord sequence represents the extent to which they accept the verdict.

In this dissertation I will examine the principal musical motives in Billy Budd, particularly as they interrelate, and proceed to show how these motives form the basis of a musical narrative that parallels the drama. Brett has commented on how music derived from Billy’s motives pervades the musical narrative in the opening of Act II.<sup>8</sup> Following on Brett’s work, I will show how Claggart’s music gradually, throughout the course of Act II, undermines Billy’s in the opera’s musical narrative, a topic covered in chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation. My discussions of musical narrative will draw upon literary critical concepts as well as the work of Edward T. Cone because I have found that many of the musical techniques used in Billy Budd, in particular the ones involving motive, have literary analogues.

Although this dissertation is primarily concerned with the motives of Billy Budd, it was impossible to exclude any discussion of tonality in the opera. Unfortunately, a problem inevitably

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7. Arnold Whittall, “‘Twisted Relations’: Method and Meaning in Britten’s Billy Budd,” Cambridge Opera Journal 2/2 (1990).

8. Philip Brett, 140.

arises when applying music theoretical terminology to the music of Britten, particularly terms which relate to “key”. Previous authors have found inventive solutions to this problem. Colin Matthews refers to “C majorishness” in Britten’s later music, finding this indicative of a “motion toward harmonic clarity.”<sup>9</sup> In discussing bitonality in Billy Budd, Philip Rupprecht has used the term “tonal focus” to describe the stratified tonal centers which occur at the opening of the opera’s Prologue.<sup>10</sup> Rather than adopt alternative terminologies, I have chosen to use the terms tonal, tonality, and modulation with the understanding that with their use I am not invoking all of the associations of traditional functional tonality which come with them. I will, for example, use the terms “tonic” and “modulation” to refer to fairly localized tonal centers which represent stable but transitory key areas rather than describing them as functional key areas within the context of a larger “tonality”.

In spite of Britten’s use of key signatures throughout the opera, it is fairly uncommon for him to operate within a straightforward major or minor key. In most cases these “keys” are actually modally “colored,” the Lydian #4th scale degree and Mixolydian b7th being two favorites of Britten, especially in his early vocal works. In describing tonalities, I will therefore make a distinction between “keys,” by which I would imply major and minor tonalities and “tonal areas” which would be a much broader term which would include modes and polyharmonic key areas, for example, major/minor keys.

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9. Colin Matthews, “Britten’s Indian Summer,” Soundings 6 (1977), 45.

10. Rupprecht, 311.

## Chapter 1

### THE ADAPTATION OF LITERARY TECHNIQUES TO AN OPERATIC MEDIUM

Benjamin Britten's Billy Budd represents a successful adaptation not only of a literary work but of several literary *techniques* to the medium of opera. Musical motive plays a crucial role in the narrative techniques which have literary analogues: Britten weaves a musical narrative from motivic "red threads" that carry associations with text or with other musical ideas with which they bear familial resemblances. Billy Budd is also a *tour de force* of text setting and character development through musical motive, and is a work in which the techniques of motivic association that characterize Britten's later works begin to emerge.

In this opening chapter, I will introduce the main concepts of operatic narrative as they apply to Benjamin Britten's Billy Budd: point of view, narration in opera, "voice," and musical motive and character development. In later chapters of this dissertation, I will give illustrations of these techniques through closer analytic exploration of the specific scenes of the opera.

#### Point of View

As defined in the literary critical literature, point of view is a technique whereby a narrator "moves into or out of a character's mind"<sup>1</sup> allowing the reader to see into that character's thoughts or motivations. This narrator can be either a third-person narrator, someone outside the story, or a

---

1. Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 17.

third-person narrator who refers to himself as “I” and is himself a participant in the story.<sup>2</sup> By presenting the reactions of several characters to the same event, point of view can be used to underscore their differences. Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury is an example of a work in which point of view is used on a grand scale, one in which the narrator is abandoned altogether and the story is simply told three times from the perspectives of three of its main characters.

In a literary work a narrator is an invaluable source of information about the inner workings of its characters. Because of the absence of a narrator in dramatic works, point of view must be handled in a very different manner. Here opera has an enormous advantage over non-musical theater in that each line of text comes with a musical gesture uttered by an actual person. As Edward Cone has written, in “specifying the tempi, the dynamics, the exact rhythms, and the pitch inflections that are to be applied to the words, the music bestows upon each character a peculiar vivid individuality”.<sup>3</sup> That Britten chose the musical, rather than verbal, dimension to convey the emotional content is suggested by a comment to Myfanwy Piper while she was working on the libretto for The Turn of the Screw, the opera that followed Billy Budd. He told her “Don’t colour [the words], the music will do that”.<sup>4</sup>

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2. Meyer Howard Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 5th Edition (Fort Worth: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1988), 145.

3. Edward Cone, The Composer’s Voice, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 21.

4. Myfanwy Piper, “Writing for Britten”, in D. Herbert (ed.), The Operas of Benjamin Britten: The Complete Librettos Illustrated with designs from the First Productions, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 9.

In Billy Budd Britten begins developing a musical equivalent of point of view by having several characters present the same musical material thereby highlighting the differences in their characters. For example, as I will demonstrate in chapter 2, Billy's reinterpretation of Claggart's line "handsomely done" in which its tonal complexity is removed, dramatizes Billy's inability to see Claggart's malevolence, what Melville describes as Billy's "immature nature, essentially honest and humane [to which] forwarning intimations of subtler danger from one's own kind come tardily if at all".<sup>5</sup> In this way Britten has demonstrated that in opera it is possible to see into the thoughts of characters without the help of a narrator.

### **Narration in Opera**

Providing shifting points of view, giving readers access to a character's mental state, feelings, etc., is only one function filled by a narrator in a work of fiction. A narrator can also comment on the unfolding events of the story and fill in gaps in the plot. The reliability of the commentary as well as its degree of personal bias varies with the narrator. To return to The Sound and the Fury, by selecting an idiot as one of the three narrators Faulkner is playing with the notion of "reliability": the story is much less accurate as told by the idiot (or is it?).<sup>6</sup> Although the

5. Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Other Tales, (London: Signet, 1961). 57.

6. Booth makes a distinction between reliable and unreliable narrators, the latter, unreliable due to personality flaws like excessive vanity, or flawed mental processes as was the case with the Governess in The Turn of the Screw.

structure of “realistic” opera does not allow for a narrator it is possible for the orchestra to provide a musical commentary. Because the language of the orchestra consists of motives and gestures the meaning of this commentary cannot be given an exact verbal translation. The gestures can however have strong text associations:

Words, then, do not limit the potential of music; rather, by specification and exemplification, they may render it more comprehensible... The connotations of a known text and of its associated melody can be just as vivid to the informed listener as if they were actually being sung.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative power of such purely musical gestures is evident in Act II of Billy Budd when Billy’s plea to Captain Vere to save him is answered not by words but by a close position F minor chord in the trombones (R#88)--a motive that has come to be associated with Claggart, the agent of Billy’s destruction--and various orchestral interludes in Act II: R50; R80-88; R96, and R102. These are often scene shifts, or descriptions of physical acts or settings (e.g. officers entering, Vere’s cabin). But these purely orchestral passages also allow the orchestra to present significant motives, giving an audience pause to reflect-reconsider-preview over the unfolding plot events.

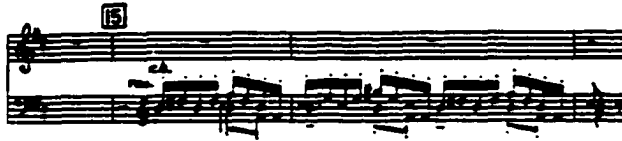
In addition to meanings derived from text, musical gestures can also refer to other related musical gestures, creating networks of meaning by association. Example 1 shows four families

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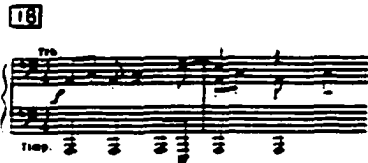
7. Edward Cone, 167.

Example 1 (a-d) - Families of motives

A. Triadic Motives



Billy's Motive



Claggart's Triads

B. Quartal Motives



Claggart Motive 1



Claggart Motive 2



The Accusation



descending pentatonic motive, the “evil twin” of the “Starry Vere”. Also the “mutiny” motive<sup>8</sup> is a flawed fifth and thus is a relative of Billy’s triadic motive, one in which an imperfection has been introduced. In the mutiny motive, the upper note of the fifth is being pushed up to a minor sixth (see example 1c) a musical representation of the threat that the crew might “rise” up against their superiors. The “stammer” motive, like the “mutiny” motive, manifests musically a flaw. In the “stammer motive” the F# triad is flawed by the addition of the notes B and D.

### “Voice”

If the orchestra provides a commentary analogous to what a narrator in a work of fiction would provide, a question arises: whose voice does the orchestra represent? Cone has described three elements in vocal music: a vocal, instrumental and total musical persona. According to Cone

The accompaniment, it will be remembered, is the direct component of the implicit persona. At the same time, its subject matter must be closely related to that of the vocal line. That is to say, in dramatic terms, the instrumental persona conveys certain aspects of the subconscious of the vocal protagonist. It can present either the character’s point of view *or its own*, or a combination of the two. That is how accompanied ensembles are possible, *for the instrumental persona, like the omniscient author, understands the motivations of all the participants*<sup>9</sup> (my italics).

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8. Erwin Stein, “Billy Budd”, in Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (eds.), Benjamin Britten: a Commentary on his Works by a Group of Specialists, (London: Rockcliff, 1952), 103.

9. Cone, 35.

Like an omniscient narrator, the instrumental persona can know more than the characters do, providing a musical narrative that contradicts or undermines the statements being made by the characters: offering an orchestral *counternarrative*. For example, in Act I, scene 3, as Billy tells Dansker that Claggart is not in fact a malevolent character, the orchestral accompaniment is contradicting his statement by playing an ostinato based on the melody of Dansker's warning to Billy "Jemmy legs is down on you" (R#124). In a musical counternarrative the instrumental persona can undermine the vocal line, both its meaning and its musical interpretation as presented by the vocal persona.

### **Musical Motive and Character Development**

In literature, narration is an extremely powerful tool in the development of character. By describing someone's character rather than showing it (mimesis), a narrator can quickly give the reader valuable information about the person, as in Wayne Booth's example and comment:

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, one that feared God, and eschewed evil." With one stroke the unknown author has given us a kind of information never obtained about real people, even about our most intimate friends.<sup>10</sup>

Alternatively, the author/narrator could have convinced the reader that Job was a good man by showing his behavior in a number of situations. By describing Job's character he has saved a lot of space. In opera, brevity is even more essential than in literature, a fact to which anyone who has done a dramatic setting of a literary work can attest. Musical gestures, which carry emotional

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10. Booth, 3.

content, can convey aspects of the operatic characters. Billy's simple triadic vocal lines (see for example the opening of Act II, Scene 3) as well as the quick, arpeggiated major triads in the high winds that announce his first entrance convey, in a few seconds, his positive energy. Likewise, the tonally complex motives (see Act II, R#66) and low minor brass triad associated with John Claggart instantaneously evoke a character of low moral stature,<sup>11</sup> possessing a deceptive nature.

### **The Leitmotivic Tradition**

In a recent article, Thomas Grey has elaborated on the critical reception surrounding Wagner and the Leitmotivic tradition.<sup>12</sup> As Grey notes, the use of leitmotives arose from a need of the musical equivalent of "red threads" to guide the listener through the labyrinth of continuous musical sequences lacking differentiated operatic numbers. The fact that the use of leitmotive persisted in the works of Verdi and Britten, who in returning to the "numbers opera" had rejected the Wagnerian ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, attests to a broader function. From the outset leitmotives and their function have been a source of controversy. Wagner in fact complained about studies which focused on leitmotives more for their dramatic significance than the effect of their role within the musical structure. Actually, Wagner's ideal was to use the motives as a way of

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11. Donald Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook", in Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed (eds.), Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 119.

12. Thomas Grey, "Wie ein Rother Faden: on the origins of 'Leitmotif' as Critical Construct and Musical Practice," In Ian Bent (ed.) Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 189.

giving his operas a symphonic unity. As Grey points out, the technique of having the orchestra recollect or anticipate motives presented in the vocal line was also employed by later composers as a way of composing out the fabric of the opera in a coherent fashion (the “symphonic” impression of La Bohème has often been commented on.)<sup>13</sup> From the start of his career as an opera composer, Britten used musical repetition to characterize and bind each scene together, Peter Grimes being an excellent example of this technique. In Billy Budd he continues in this vein using the repetition of characteristic motives to musically unify scenes.

### **Motive in Billy Budd**

Since the central tragedy of Billy Budd revolves around the failure of language, literally manifested in the form of Billy’s stammer, it is an ideal opera in which to investigate the subject of narrativity as it relates to musical motive. In several places in the drama, music is used to convey what words could not. The harmonic ambiguity of the “interview chord” sequence in Act II conveys musically this mysterious section of Melville’s narrative: “Beyond the communication of the sentence, what took place at the interview was never known”.<sup>14</sup>

An important technique of musical narrative that Britten began to use in Billy Budd is that of motivic “convergence”, whereby the music of a given character begins to accommodate themes

13. Edward Greenfield, “The Music of La Bohème”, in Nicholas John, ed., Opera Guide to La Bohème, (New York: Riverrun Press, 1990), 28.

14. Melville, Billy Budd, chapter 23. 72.

and motives that are specifically identified with others.<sup>15</sup> This technique would loom large in the works that followed. In The Turn of the Screw and Death in Venice, Britten used motivic convergence to highlight a recurrent theme in his work: the ambiguous relationship between innocence and corruption. The corrupting influence of innocence is an important thread in all of Britten's works since 1950, presented most pessimistically in Death in Venice, in which Aschenbach's obsessive pursuit of Tadzio strips him of his dignity and, eventually, his life. This potentially fatal aspect of innocence is manifest musically by the uncomfortable family resemblance of the plague and love motives.

Ambiguity in general interested Britten, as it did E.M. Forster, who independently and almost simultaneously came up with the idea of doing an operatic setting of Billy Budd,<sup>16</sup> a work whose moral ambiguity attracted frequent critical comment.<sup>17</sup> The ambiguous message of the story is musically realized in the motivic dimension where motives interrelate and converge. Billy Budd, which is probably Britten's most tonally and motivically coherent work, represents a turning point for the composer. This motivic coherence stands in stark opposition to the ambiguity of the message of the story itself. In the Prologue we are made aware that we are about to witness a drama about good and evil. These attributes are initially clearly manifest in the characters of Billy

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15. Donald Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook," 125.

16. Philip Brett, "Salvation at Sea: Billy Budd", in Christopher Palmer (ed.), The Britten Companion, (London: 1984), 134.

17. See for example Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd." in Studies in Romanticism 18 (1979).

and Claggart respectively. As the story develops, however, these attributes begin to blur as Billy and Claggart exchange roles of victim and aggressor. Musically, this ambiguity is mirrored by the motivic structure which allows the boundaries and the identities of the characters to blur.

## Chapter 2

### POINT OF VIEW IN BRITTEN'S BILLY BUDD

#### Literary Devices in Billy Budd

In Billy Budd Benjamin Britten uses a number of musical techniques for which there are literary analogues. Shifts of musical diction, for example, occur repeatedly as the music alternates between the diatonic simplicity of the sea shanties that are sung by the crew of the *Indomitable* to the more complex music associated with the main characters. To some extent, the tension between these two levels of musical diction drives the entire work. Another literary device, the narrator, also has an analogue in the opera. There are several critical places in the score where the orchestra performs a narrative function, commenting on the action and even substituting for dialogue. For example, Billy's plea "Save me" to Vere near the end is answered simply by the widely spaced F minor chord which has come to be synonymous with John Claggart, the agent of unyielding fate. In addition, the opera has a literal narrator, Captain Vere (the subject of Vere as narrator will be covered in a later section). Another literary device, point of view, which plays a critical role in Britten and Forster's interpretation of the *Billy Budd* story, was also adapted by Britten for the medium of opera.

#### Point of View and Musical Motive in Act 1

Point of view in literature is often shown by having two characters give their own accounts of the same event. In the standard texts on literary analytic techniques, point of view is treated as a

narrative device and is classified according to narrator or narration type.<sup>1</sup> An “intrusive” narrator, for example, brings his or her judgment to bear in his telling of the story whereas a self-effacing narrator will simply tell the facts without invoking personal biases. Because the concept of “narration” is so different in opera, if indeed it exists at all, these literary critical definitions are of limited utility. Cone’s ground-breaking work on the subject of “voice and persona”, particularly as it pertains to vocal music, is of much greater direct relevance. In his careful consideration of voice and persona in opera and art song, Cone grapples with the question of just whose voice we are hearing in each of the elements of a vocal composition: accompaniment, vocal line and in the composition as a totality. In this connection he makes the point that each character “is composing his part in response to the circumstances...symbolized, just as his words are a response to an implicit or explicit dramatic situation”.<sup>2</sup> According to Cone then, we can view the musical response (vocal line) of each character as reflective of his character. In Billy Budd, Britten has, I believe, attempted and succeeded in adapting the literary device “point of view” to a musical idiom. By having two or more characters present the same motive, for example, Billy’s “quoting” of Claggart’s statement “handsomely done” (Act I, R#124/+8), we learn things about each character by comparing their different interpretations of the same musical material. This is to be distinguished from what Donald Mitchell has called “motivic convergence” a process by which

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1. Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 149-165; Meyer Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 144-48.

2. Cone, 36.

the adoption of the motives associated with character A by character B signifies that character B has taken on attributes of character A, for example the adoption of Quint's "Miles" melisma by the Governess.<sup>3</sup> The subject of different interpretations of the same musical material in Billy Budd has been explored by Arnold Whittall whose discussion centered on Billy and Vere's "interpretations" of the "Interview chord" sequence.<sup>4</sup> It is Whittall's view that the relationship between melody and harmony in each of the two men's interpretations manifests the degree to which each has accepted the verdict: Billy's consonant melody reflecting his acceptance of the verdict while Vere's melody, with its frequent clashes with the underlying harmony, belie his unease with it. What is not covered by Whittall are interpretations of *motive*. A critical aspect of the way two characters interpret the same motive in this opera is the extent to which it functions within a tonal context as opposed to going against its tonal environment. Since this is Britten, it is possible that the tonality of the motive and its environment do not match. The basic question to ask about any given occurrence of a motive is "Is the motive to be heard as being in a key or simply as a succession of intervals"?

In Act I of Billy Budd two motives (examples 2 and 4) become explicitly linked with the character of John Claggart. Once identified with the character of Claggart they occur both in the orchestra and in the vocal lines of other characters as a constant reminder of Claggart's destructive

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3. Donald Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook," in M. Cooke and P. Reed (eds), Benjamin Britten, Billy Budd, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 125.

4. Arnold Whittall, "'Twisted Relations': Method and Meaning in Britten's Billy Budd," Cambridge Opera Journal 2/2 (1990): 145-171.

and threatening presence. Although Donald Mitchell has commented on the use of one of the motives by Vere <sup>5</sup> (see example 4b), he has not discussed how Claggart's motives, the symbols of Claggart's lack of humanity, are a pervasive presence on the *Indomitable*. As early as the fifth measure of the opera this motive begins to intrude into the texture, a foreign element in the smooth even eighth notes of the strings. Although the explicit association of this motive, first stated in its entirety in measure 14, with Claggart has not yet been made, it first appears as a disruptive element and conveys a sense of impending danger.

### **Saturation of Act 1 by Claggart Motive 1**

The first instance of point of view as reflected through different interpretations of the same motive is the adoption of one of Claggart's motives by Dansker. Throughout the first half of Act 1 the motive of two descending fourths and an ascending major second has been linked with the character of John Claggart (see examples 2a and b). In the first two instances the motive occurs in Claggart's vocal line making the association of him with the motive explicit. This motive is associated with Claggart from the moment he begins to sing (see example 3). Having made this connection Britten is then free to use the motive in the orchestra as a reminder of Claggart's

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5. Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook", 127.

Example 2. Instances of Claggart Motive 1.

(a) Act I, 35/+2

Musical notation for example (a) showing a vocal line for Claggart. The lyrics are "I heard, your ho - nout". The notation includes dynamic markings like *p dolce* and *mf*, and a tempo marking *And. fto.*

(b) Act I, 40/+10

Musical notation for example (b) showing a vocal line for Claggart. The lyrics are "And be damned!". The notation includes a dynamic marking *sfz*.

(c) Act I, 38/-4

Musical notation for example (c) showing piano accompaniment. A bracket labeled (a) spans the first two measures, and a bracket labeled (b) spans the last two measures. The notation includes dynamic markings *mf* and *fz*.

(d) Act I, 42/-4

Musical notation for example (d) showing piano accompaniment. A bracket labeled (a) spans the first two measures, and a bracket labeled (b) spans the last two measures. The notation includes dynamic markings *mf*, *mf*, and *mf legato*.

(e) Act I, 39/-11

Musical notation for example (e) showing a vocal line for Claggart. The lyrics are "I'll make... no trea - me...". The notation includes a dynamic marking *mf*.

(f) Act I, 113/+9

Musical notation for example (f) showing a vocal line for Claggart. The lyrics are "Good - What is good-ness to you?....".

(g) Act I, 56/-7

Musical notation for example (g) showing a vocal line for Danzer. The lyrics are "Bil-ly, be warned, keep clear of him.". The notation includes a dynamic marking *mf*.

(h) Act I, 124/-2

Musical notation for example (h) showing a vocal line for Danzer. The lyrics are "Jam-my - Legs is down on you, Jammy".

Example 3. Claggart Motive 1 as Stated Claggart's First Vocal Declamation

CLAGGART *p*

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Your ho - nour, I am at your dis - po - sal. ....

potential wanton cruelty that hangs over the heads of the crew of the Indomitable. One such instance is in Act I when Claggart is forcing Squeak to help him destroy Billy (four measures before R#38). In this passage, shown in example 2c, the motive, marked "(a)", appears in the brass at a *pp* dynamic, a subliminal suggestion of what might be in store for Squeak if he doesn't comply with Claggart's wishes. Another more dramatic occurrence of the motive in the orchestral texture is in Act I at three measures before R#42 (example 2d) when the Novice's friend pleads with Claggart not to flog the novice. In the two measures between the Novice's entreaty "He's only a boy" and in Claggart's response the motive appears in the brass with a rapid crescendo from a *pp* to *ff* dynamic producing a chilling sonic effect. This orchestral response to the Novice's friend's entreaty lets us know that human feeling is absent in Claggart even before he responds verbally. In both examples, the penultimate note of motive (a) is accompanied by the vertical harmony (b). In the form in which it appears in example 2d, this widely spaced triad with a missing fifth in the winds and brass is the first occurrence of a leitmotive, in this case simply a chord, which will be used repeatedly in the opera to invoke the notion of cruel and unforgiving

fate. In example 2c the accompanying triad does not provide a tonal harmonization for the G# melody note. In example 2d however Claggart's "Let him crawl" and the underlying, widely spaced triad clearly express an F minor tonality (the key associated with fate), clarified by the V7 - I cadence which precedes it. The shortened relative rhythmic value of the penultimate melody note in "let him crawl" as compared to that of example 2c clearly establishes its function as that of an incomplete neighbor to the final Ab, the third of the incomplete F minor triad. In order to end on this Ab the intervals of the motive have been slightly altered from previous statements: instead of a major second the final interval is a minor second. Examples 2e and f, both sung by Claggart, show instances of the motive presented in its inverted form. Example 2e is particularly interesting from the standpoint of text setting in that the musical inversion mirrors the perversity of the text "I'll make no trouble" in that it is a deliberate attempt by Claggart to disguise his true nature<sup>6</sup> by turning the motive, which manifests his depravity, upside down.

Later in the act the Claggart motive 1 is taken up by Dansker. In both of his two warnings to Billy concerning Claggart his text is set to the now familiar theme (examples 2g and h). The motive, as used by Dansker, reveals his ability to see Claggart for the dangerous character he really is, an ability fatally absent in Billy.

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6. Philip Brett has commented on the use of the motive of falling fourths to express Claggart's depravity. See Philip Brett, "Salvation at Sea," 141.

## Claggart Motive 2

The other important motive associated with Claggart is shown in example 4. In example 4a, Claggart's vocal line is based on the notes of an F# Minor triad to which a B natural has been added, complicating the overall effect. This statement of F# minor is further complicated by its harmonization, not with F# minor but two statements of its dominant (C#) prolonged by a neighbor chord (D). Although Claggart, in his attempt to gain Billy's trust with false praise, is attempting to use a simple musical language which Billy "understands", he is unable to completely rid his music of its complexity. The listener's attention is drawn to this passage (example 3a) due to several aspects of its setting: its orchestration, three trombones and one tuba, an unusually warm timbre, the tempo shift indicated by the ♩ = ♪ equivalence, the non-progressing "suspended" nature of its harmonization, and the sudden cessation of figuration in the accompaniment. All of these factors contribute to the sense that suddenly dramatic time stands still.<sup>7</sup> The texture, chorale-like accompanying chords, itself functions motivically as a topic occurring in several places in the score, most notably in the Act II "Interview chord" sequence (R#102). What makes this motive distinctive is that although it is a sequence of triads that does not "progress" in a familiar way and therefore does not form a familiar harmonic "sentence". Britten favors such statements of chains of non-progressing triads several other works: the opening of Midsummer Night's Dream (1960)

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7. In the recent Metropolitan Opera production which I saw, James Morris conveyed this sense of suspended time with his gestures, in particular during the "handsomely done" passage.

Example 4. Instances of Claggart Motive 2.

(a) Act I

Handsome done, my lad. And handsome is...

(b) Act II

Beauty, handsome, goodness can - ing to trial...

(c) Act II, 124/+8

Squeak that drabbling,.... "hand - some - ly done", was all he said... and he

and in a work that predates Billy Budd, The Hymn to St. Cecilia (1942).<sup>3</sup> I will save discussion of the leitmotivic significance of these sequences for a later section.

3. Philip Rupprecht, personal communication.

Example 4b shows Vere's agitated "quoting" of the Claggart's statement "handsomely done", during his distraught monologue in which he faces the fact that he must destroy Billy. Mitchell<sup>9</sup> has commented on the adoption of this motive by Vere after Claggart's death as an example of what he terms "motivic convergence". Mitchell has not, however, identified the other important instance of the adoption of this motive by another character. In response to Dansker's second warning to Billy (example 2h), Billy quotes Claggart's statement "handsomely done" (example 4c). The changes to the melody and to the accompaniment, particularly harmonization of the melody, figuration and orchestration, reveal Billy's simple interpretation of Claggart's statement and his inability to see its inherent duality. When Billy quotes Claggart's comment he relieves it of all of its complexity. There is a critical alteration of the interval structure in the vocal line of Billy's version which causes us to hear in a straightforward Eb major context: the first segment of the motive becomes the diminished fifth Ab to D (see example 5). We now hear the D as an incomplete lower neighbor to Eb and interpret this as a simple dominant-tonic motion in Eb (see example 5b). A comparison of examples 4a and 4c is instructive. In example 4a, Claggart's version the motive was "realized" with a series of non-progressing triads (prefiguring the "Interview Chord" sequence.) In Billy's version (example 4c), the upper-voice accompaniment pattern in Eb causes us to hear the motive as a bass arpeggiation in Eb with the F

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9. Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook". 127.

Example 5. V<sup>7</sup>- I Harmony Implied by the Vocal Line in Billy's Version of "Handsome Done"

(a)

"Handsome by done; she's all in kind"

(b)

V<sup>7</sup> I

acting as an appoggiatura to the G. The effect of this passage is to temporarily dispel our fears about Claggart by converting his motive into something that is familiar (a triadic context), which is therefore understandable. Billy's quotation forces us to rehear Claggart's motive as a familiar entity as Billy's words are an attempt to present Claggart to Dansker as a being with human attributes rather than the monster we suspect him to be.

The passage that follows is an extended duet in which Billy and Dansker "argue" about Claggart. Dansker's side of the argument is represented by the Claggart motive in the bass (low, like Claggart's consciousness).<sup>10</sup> At first the motive appears as the setting of "Jemmy Legs is down on you," but it and its sentiment persist as it is taken up and used as a bass ostinato by the

10. Mitchell, 119.

clarinets and low strings. This bass motive is then “realized” by a series of upper-register patterns summarized in Figure 1. The first pattern (R#123/+10) is simply a unison doubling. Next comes the semi-arpeggiated pattern in Eb mentioned in the previous paragraph (R#124-125). This

Figure 1. Summary of the Stages of Billy and Dansker’s “Passacaglia”.

	[texture]	[focal pitch]	[motives]
123/+9	unison doubling	C#	Claggart motive 1
124	semi-arpeggiated pattern	Eb	Claggart motive 1
125	woodwind trichords	C	Claggart motive 1
126/-6	arpeggio figuration	C, C#	Claggart motive 1, inv.
126	dotted rhythm	F	Claggart motive 1
127	dotted rhythm	D	Claggart motive 1, inv.
128/-6	chordal	G	Claggart motive 1

is followed by an arpeggiated pattern in C (R#125) over the motive, which is also in C. At the end of this “textural section,” starting at R#126/-6, is a modulating sequence in which the Claggart motive appears twice in inversion at starting pitches C and C#. The next entrance of Claggart motive 1 is in its non-inverted form and leads to the key area F minor at R#126 where a new motive appears. This motive, in the clarinets and violas, has a distinctive, dotted rhythm and, unlike the other patterns, is basically scalar.

Tonally this passage is also unlike the previous realizations. Here the bass stays at the same pitch-level, one that implies an F minor tonality, while the upper voice ascends in motion by

Example 6. Summary of Salient Tonal Motions from R#124 to the End of Act I

The image shows a musical score for Example 6, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef) with measures 124 through 128. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'mf' and 'f'. A dashed line indicates a melodic contour across the staves.

thirds to E (see example 6). The effect is that Billy, whose part follows the same progression as the “harmonization”, is forcing the tonality upwards to E, the key of Billy’s “king of the birds” aria (Act I R#31). This arrival on an E major chord at #127/-1 coincides with Billy’s bold statement “Billy Budd, mate of the *Rights o’ Man* and soon to be captain of the mizen.” What follows is another series of statements of the Claggart motive with a strong arrival in G major at #127/+6 emphasized texturally by widely spaced chords in the winds. Finally, there is a series of entries of the motive that outline a descent through the notes of the G major triad finally coming to rest on G at the sixth measure before the end of the act (see example 6). Note that here it is the

last note of the motive that is considered the structural tone. This was not true in Claggart's original statement of the motive but is in Billy and Dansker's versions, where the motive is given a tonal context by which the last tone has a sense of arrival. The final G major chord, at the very end of the act, is arrived at by an attempted retrograde version of Claggart motive 1 (two descending perfect fourths, F-C-G). In musical-narrative terms this gives Claggart the last word in Act I, which stands in diametric opposition to the opening of Act II which, as we will see in a later chapter, is motivically dominated by the positive energy of Billy. Like the different interpretations of the "Interview Chord" sequence, presentations of the two "Claggart" motives by Billy and Dansker reflect each of their perceptions of the Master-at-Arms. In particular, the level of complexity in each of their "tonal" interpretations of the motive indicates the degree of humanity they assign to the character of John Claggart. Billy's version is particularly revealing because of his reinterpretation of the actual vocal line as a tonally functioning entity. This use of motive to convey aspects of a character has been one of Britten's important contributions to modern opera.

## Chapter 3

### **Vere's Enigmatic Musical Identity**

In Billy Budd, Edward Fairfax Vere functions both as narrator in the Prologue and principal character (in the main drama), a common situation in literature but an uncommon one in opera. In Forster's libretto, the opera is presented as his flashback. This is implied by text at the end of the Prologue in which Vere refers to "the summer of seventeen hundred and ninety seven...when I commanded the *Indomitable*."<sup>1</sup> This is an alteration from the original in which Melville uses a narrator who is not a character in the main story. Unlike many "omniscient" narrators in 19th century works of fiction, Melville's narrator's ability to describe characters is somewhat inadequate. As he himself says of his description of John Claggart: his "portrait I essay, but shall never hit it."<sup>2</sup> In spite of his critical role in the events of the story itself, Vere must nonetheless give us a dispassionate account. It is therefore necessary that his character be not too strong so as to not impose upon us his point of view.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, within the context of the story, a clear-cut moral dualism is absent: evil acts are committed by good characters and vice-versa.

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1. The lighting of the first production was designed so as to convey the sense that the opera proper is a recollection of the events by Vere. See Basil Coleman. "Billy Budd on Stage." Tempo (autumn 1951): 25.

2. Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Other Tales, 27.

3. As was the case with Nick, the narrator of The Great Gatsby who is a self-effacing narrator.

Moving out of the literary domain I will examine how Vere's character is "painted" in the domain of operatic narrative, in its language of motives and gestures. Vere's music manifests an ambiguity, parallel to the moral ambiguity of the story, in its lack of tonal specificity and its paucity of distinctive motives. Vere's sound-world, particularly as presented in the Act 1 Scene 2, seems to come from a world that floats magically above then ordinary one, musically not unlike the one depicted in Act 1 of Midsummer Night's Dream.

According to the classification schemes of Booth and Abrams<sup>4</sup> there are two large divisions of narration types: first person and third person, also known as "omniscient narrator". Each category admits further subdivisions. First-person narrators can be central or peripheral to the events of the story itself. They can exert their moral judgments on the other characters and their actions, hence setting up a "moral distance" between themselves and the other characters, as Fowler does in The Quiet American, particularly in relation to the character Alden Pyle.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, a first-person narrator can be "self-effacing," merely reporting the facts. The reliability of a narrator can also be an issue: both Booth and Abrams describe the "fallible" narrator whose judgment is questionable. Like first-person narrators, omniscient narrators can also exhibit varying degrees of objectivity: they can be "intrusive" or "unintrusive".

Britten and Forster have chosen in the Prologue to present Vere as a self-effacing first-person narrator. In order to establish Vere as such his musical identity has been weakly defined by

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4. Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Meyer Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 5th Ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

5. Booth, 156.

Britten, without strong motivic or tonal identity. His character is given a musically ambiguous treatment as compared with Claggart's, whose motives clearly suggest his malevolence. It is onto the musically pale palette of Vere's character that the musical motives of Claggart can, following his death, be so easily projected (Act II, R#74).

Britten's interest in framing devices is evident in operas which span his entire career. Billy Budd, Peter Grimes, The Rape of Lucretia, The Turn of the Screw and Death in Venice all utilize framing devices (Prologues and/or Epilogues) to establish important background information about the plot and/or narrator. Frames are used in The Turn of the Screw and Death in Venice, like Billy Budd, to suggest the presence of a narrator who, with the exception of The Turn of the Screw, is also a central character in the drama. Obviously, a literal narrator is not possible in a dramatic work as there is no equivalent of "I saw", "I talked" etc., for the stage. Britten has, however, chosen to use these framing devices to suggest that the stories of these three operas are being told by the Governess, Aschenbach, and Vere, respectively.

In all three works, the prologue is used to establish the reliability of the "narrator". At the opening of Turn of the Screw, a character called "the Prologue" stands at the front of the stage voicing the inner thoughts of the Governess as she travels to Bly to begin her new job. The meandering vocal line with its lack of firm metric pattern and "drifting from an A center" following the vicissitudes of her distracted thoughts which reflect her still unformed character.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>. Lloyd Whitesell, "Doubt and Failure in Britten's The Turn of the Screw," Indiana Theory Review 13 (Fall 1992), 48.

Unlike the governess, whose distortions only become apparent as the story unfolds, Aschenbach's mental problems are presented immediately, actually with his first utterance, "My mind beats on" which is repeated like a mantra throughout his preamble. As we shall see, Vere presents the opposite, he epitomizes the "self-effacing" narrator. It is, in fact, this very quality that leads Vere to have to face his final verdict on the fate of the innocent Billy.

## **Tonal Ambiguity and the Character of Vere in Act 1**

### **Vere as Narrator : The Prologue**

The tonal ambiguity of the Prologue has been investigated by Rupprecht<sup>7</sup> who describes tonal "foci" that exist in registrally distinct strata. Rupprecht uses the optical analogy of close and distant images and the ability of a viewer to choose which to focus in on. An interesting corollary to this, not discussed by Rupprecht, is how these tonal foci can be thought of as representing temporal planes, Bb the key of the "present", and B natural that of the comparatively carefree past. Interestingly the dual B/Bb complex reflects the shadowy presence of the past in the present. When, at the beginning of Scene 1 the lower Bb stratum is removed, even without staging we know we have left the world of the present and entered the world of the *Indomitable* and Vere's recollection of "the summer of seventeen hundred and ninety-seven". The technique of using tonal conflict to manifest dramatic conflict, first used in Peter Grimes, has been reinterpreted in the

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7. Philip Rupprecht, "Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music." Journal of Music Theory 40, no.2 (fall 1996), 312.

Prologue of Billy Budd where the simultaneous presentation of dual tonalities is used to convey dramatic conflict.

The air of ambiguity associated with the character of Vere is achieved musically via several means. His first utterance occurs over an unstable F 4/3 chord, arrived at by an ambiguous path.<sup>8</sup> Vere's first musical utterance is in fact a composing out of the F 4/3 sonority, the dominant of the "close" (present) Bb focus which then resolves to D, the common-tone of both the distant (past) B minor focus and Bb sonorities at R#1 (see example 7). This dominant itself is polluted and confused by the intrusion of B natural into the upper sonic stratum, tipping the passage briefly towards the B minor pole. Overall, the tonality of Vere's opening declamation moves further and

Example 7. Composing out of F<sub>7</sub>, the V<sub>7</sub> of the Lower Bb Tonal Stratum in the Prologue

The musical score for Example 7 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and contains the lyrics "I am an old man...who has ex - pe - rienced much." The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and includes a string section (Str.) at the bottom right. The score is marked with dynamics such as *ppp* and *pp*. A "Bb intrusion" is indicated by an arrow pointing to a B natural note in the vocal line. A box labeled "I" is placed above the vocal line.

8. In fact there is an underlying logic which holds this passage together: in a polytonal sonority the lower harmony "wins", we therefore understand the F as the dominant of a Bmin/Bb sonority.

further away from the lower “flat”stratum (R#1/-1). By R#1/+5, his music has moved into a B minor key area, confirmed on beat 4 where the vocal line and the accompaniment together complete a B minor triad. At R#1/+9 Vere’s vocal line actually doubles the upper string melody, which states the upper tonal stratum. At R#2 this move to B minor is confirmed by an arrival at F# major punctuated by the distinctive stammer motive. Towards the end of the Prologue, at R#3/+9, the opening Bmin/Bb sonority is restored giving that section a sense of tonal closure.

Motivically one of the few distinctive figures in Vere’s music here in the Prologue is the upward leap of a perfect fifth followed by a half-step upper-neighbor figure, described by Erwin Stein as the “mutiny” motive.<sup>9</sup> The first appearance of the motive is as the setting of “Oh what have I done?” at R#3/+3. What is interesting is that our exclusive association of this motive with Vere is immediately diffused by its being taken up in the “Oh heave away” chorus in the scene which follows and subsequently, in Scene 2, when it is taken up by Mistery Redburn and Flint where its association with “mutiny” is made explicit (to be discussed later). The Mutiny motive is related to the Stammer motive, also first presented in the Prologue. Both motives are representations of flawed perfection, manifest musically as flawed perfect intervals (see example 1c). At R#2, the D natural added to the F#-C# interval, the flaw to the dominant seventh chord F#, beautifully conveys the meaning of the text “the good has never been perfect.”

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9. Erwin Stein, “Billy Budd”. In Mitchell, Donald and Hans Keller (eds.), Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Works by a Group of Specialists (London: Rockcliff, 1952), 103.

## Vere as Character - Act 1

The music associated with Vere in Act 1, particularly its *presentation*, conveys an air of misty ambiguity, not unlike the music of the forest in Midsummer Night's Dream or of Venice in Britten's final opera. Such points of reference are important to an overall understanding of Britten's conception of ambiguity and his association of it with the magical and hypnotic. In his important article, "Britten the Progressive,"<sup>10</sup> William Flynn uses the example of Curlew River to show how Britten contrasts areas where prolonged but unstable chords predominate with regions of quick moves through stable tonics. Along these lines, an interesting comparison can be made between the ambiguity associated with Vere's material and that of Claggart's music.

Consider, for example, the opening of Act 1, Scene 2, in particular the opening instrumental interlude. In the first nine bars of the interlude which opens Act 1, Scene 2, two sonic layers are presented, a lower, pianissimo, string layer and an upper layer represented first by the harp. In bar 6 the flute joins the upper stratum entering with a rhapsodized version of the pentatonic "starry Vere" motive sung by members of the crew in the previous scene. In its rhapsodized form, the melody continues rising, wafting upwards like smoke in a gentle breeze (example 8). This flute melody can be heard as making reference to a C pentatonic collection. It therefore represents a stratum distinct both harmonically, registrally and timbrally from the Eb accompaniment below. This air of ambiguity continues when, at R#62/+3, Vere begins to sing.

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10. William T. Flynn, "Britten the Progressive." The Music Review 44, no.1 (February 1983): 44-52.

Example 8. The “Starry Vere” motive as used in the Interlude that Opens Act I Scene II



Here not only is the sense of tonality deflected but the sense of downbeat as well which is obscured by the lack of clarity or feeling of progression of the harmonies as well as the tying over some of the bar lines in the vocal melody. It is not until R#62/+4 that a downbeat is felt. All of these factors contribute to our sense of Vere’s inner world (represented visually by his “inner sanctum,” his cabin) as a somewhat ambiguous place.

As a totality, this introductory instrumental passage (R#61/-12 to #62) makes reference to C major, all of its notes being contained in that collection. (The association of white-note collections with purity exists throughout Britten’s oeuvre; its significance in Billy Budd as the key of Vere has been noted by Cooke<sup>11</sup>). Gradually, chromatic elements are introduced until, at #61, a rapid flurry of chromatics, temporarily obscuring a sense of a “key”. This is followed by a return

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11. Mervyn Cooke, “Britten’s ‘Prophetic song’: Tonal Symbolism in Billy Budd”. In Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed, Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd, 89

of the opening white-note sonority which gives the section its sense of prolongation of this sonority. This passage is a good example of the Britten technique, used extensively in Curlew River, of the prolongation of an ambiguous sonority, described by William Flynn.<sup>12</sup>

In the original, 4-act version, the character Vere made an appearance prior to Scene 2 in which he addressed his crew, a scene removed from the 1961 two-act version. Mitchell has commented on how this delaying of Vere's entry means that Vere's authority is slower to establish itself as the counterpart to Claggart's. He has suggested that with this revision, Britten was deliberately weakening Vere's authority.

In chapter 2 above, in describing motives associated with Claggart, I argued that much of his most character defining leitmotivic material follows a procedure (perfected later in the "Screw theme") whereby a melody moves in sequences of fourths that rapidly juxtapose conflicting tonal centers. This can be likened to Flynn's observation that Britten often works with rapid successions of stable tonics.<sup>12</sup> In Curlew River these moves are associated with travel. In the context of Britten's works from the early fifties like Billy Budd and Turn of the Screw, this procedure is associated with deception, and is the musical representation of man-made, deliberate ambiguity. The Vere music is also ambiguous but in a very different way, represented, as in the opening of Scene 2, by prolonged ambiguous sonorities, ambiguous in the way that the music of the journey down the Curlew River was ambiguous. The chart below shows this comparison.

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12. Flynn, 44-52.

Figure 2. Comparison of Sonority Types Associated With the Characters of Vere and Claggart

VERE	CLAGGART
sustained ambiguous sonorities	fast moves through stable centers
slow to judge; evenhanded	deception-deliberate

This “soft” quality associated with Vere’s inner world presents problems when he is confronted with the deception and guile of the malevolent members of the crew of the “Indomitable”. Later in Scene 2, at R#70, Mr. Redburn and Mr. Flint begin to recite some of the rumors that have already begun to spread about Billy and his alleged “mutinous” ambitions, rumors, presumably emanating from Claggart. Their recitation contains numerous references to the previously describes Mutiny motive (see example 9). At R#70/+7 the two officers begin a procedure of imitation<sup>13</sup> and their accusations begin to escalate in volume. It is here that Vere offers his weak defense of Billy. At R#71 Vere interrupts the two men not with a loud declamation but with a quiet utterance, accompanied by pianissimo strings, similar to those that

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13. See the Witches’ duet in Act I of Purcell’s Dido and Aeneas in which close canonic imitation produces an echo effect for a possible precursor of this procedure.

Example 9. Mr. Redburn and Mr. Flint's Accusations Against Billy are Set to the Mutiny Motive

Act 1, 71/5 pressing forward – *stringendo*

14 L.L. Yes, "Rights... o' Man"

14 S.M. young chap who shout-ed out "Rights o' Man?..... Dan-ger-ous one...

14 L.L. He needs watch - ing.... The "rights..... o'

14 S.M. .... We must be vi - gil - ant. The "rights o'

opened the scene. What makes his defense particularly weak is that the setting of his first statement "Oh, that's nothing" is the very mutiny motive itself. Having already seen Claggart in action in the previous scene we cannot help but feel that the gentle Vere will be unable to "save" Billy from him.

### Vere's Intervallic Identity

As Claggart's music is characterized by its use of perfect intervals, Vere's is notable for its use of thirds. In its use of thirds and sixths, Vere's music has an affinity with Billy whose music tends to the triadic (see "Billy in the Darbies" Act II. Scene 3). Vere's music, however, also contains a level of complexity, absent in the music of the simple, trusting and somewhat naive Billy. As noted in the previous section, Vere's motives can be characterized as referring to

pentatonic collections. The pentatonic “Starry Vere” motive first stated in Act I at R#56/-3 outlines an ascending major sixth and contains one leap, that of a minor third. This motive is again picked up by Vere as the setting for this vocal line “to guide us all” (Act I R#63/-5). Registrally, melodically and intervallically Vere can be compared with Claggart as follows:

<b>Vere (Tenor)</b>	<b>Claggart (Bass)</b>
High	Low
Ascent	Descent
Imperfect consonances (pentatonic)	Fourths (disguised triads)

## Chapter 4

### Act II to Claggart's Death - Motivic Aspects of the Fight for Musical Domination

Having established in Act I leitmotivic associations for each of the opera's three main characters, in Act II Britten builds their struggle for supremacy into the overall musical narrative. In the first part of the act, music that has strong affinities with the character of Billy prevails as the crew is united in pursuit of the French frigate.<sup>1</sup> From the moment at which the chase is abandoned, and the mist descends (R#34) Claggart begins to displace Billy's musical supremacy as his motives begin to seep into the musical narrative. Ironically, this is especially true after Claggart's death, when his motives become a pervasive presence in the musical landscape.

Mitchell has described one aspect of Claggart's posthumous musical presence: the adoption of "Claggart motives" by Captain Vere after the death of the Master-at Arms.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell describes how this technique, which he calls "motivic convergence," is used to highlight ambiguities inherent in the plots of Billy Budd and of the two other operas from this period, Gloriana and Turn of the Screw. He comments on the music of Vere and of the Governess which,

while it is undeniably *theirs*, at the same time generates or accommodates themes and motives which are [nonetheless] specifically identified with 'the others' (to use Miles' words), i.e. their opposite numbers, Quint in the *Screw* and Claggart in *Budd*.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Mitchell has commented on the fact that this sense of a united front is realized sonically in the presentation of all registers in the music that opens Act II. In Donald Mitchell, "A Billy Budd notebook," 119.

2. Mitchell, 127.

3. Mitchell, 125.

As the following discussion will show however, this is only one aspect of Claggart's posthumous musical presence.

### **Billy's Motive**

Looking back to Act I, at R#15, just before Billy's first entry, we begin to have in the high winds the figure of two major triads one whole step apart. Again at R#31 the same idea occurs in the accompaniment to Billy's declamatory "King of the Birds" aria, evidence of what Philip Brett describes as "the slightly aggressive side of Billy's goodness."<sup>4</sup> In Billy's opening phrase (R#31 to #31/+3), the sequence is itself sequenced tonally: the initial limb (a) comprises two triads, beginning with the tonic triad in E major; its repetition (a') begins on the mediant.<sup>5</sup> Now the tonality is major rather than Lydian (see example 10). Like the "I accuse you music" in Act II, the process by which the motivic cell is generated is used as a replication process for generating a *series* of cells. Such treatment magnifies the implications of the motive: in Billy's case, his positive energy, in Claggart's his deceptive nature. Note that Billy's was a tonal sequence whereas Claggart's sequences tend to be exact, making them more tonally complex. (The issue of the "degree of tonality" associated with the motivic music of Billy and Claggart was covered in chapter 2 above; there I showed how Billy underestimates Claggart musically by his more diatonic

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4. Philip Brett, "Salvation at Sea," 139.

5. An exact sequence would have gone E, F#, G#, A#.

Example 10 - Sequence of triads in the accompaniment to the opening of Billy's "King of the birds" aria, showing use of replication process.

The image displays a musical score for Billy's "King of the birds" aria. The top section features the vocal line with lyrics: "Sit-ty Bodd, king of the birds! Sit-ty Bodd, king of the world! Up a-mong the sea". Below the vocal line is the piano accompaniment. At the bottom, two boxes labeled 'a' and 'a'' show the sequence of triads used in the accompaniment.

rendition of the "handsomely done" motive.) What is important is that by using replication processes in both Claggart's and Billy's motive a syntactic relation is set up -- at the level of the opera's musical language--between the two men. It is also significant that no such process is used in Vere's music, that is, before Claggart's death after which his music does, as we shall see in a later section, begin to utilize replication processes. Britten's reasons for excluding Vere from this syntactic relation are most likely related to his wish to leave Vere as musically undefined as possible, a subject treated in chapter 3.

## **ACT II : The struggle for Domination**

Billy's motive, two major triads a step apart (see example 1c), is the harmonic basis for the recurring thematic material which unifies the first half of Act II: the music which opens the act and which later becomes the setting for "This is our moment." Philip Brett has commented on how in the first part of Act II the ship is under Billy's influence:

At the opening of Act II, however it [the motive of two major triads a step apart] is transformed into the melody the whole crew sings in pursuit of the French ship, thus suggesting psychologically that this moment of unity is a product as much of Billy's influence as of the excitement of the chase.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the first portion of the Act, Billy's influence remains strong: almost all of the musical narrative and the choral sections have some basis in Billy's music. At R#37, as Billy's influence wanes, his music grows faint, marked "*to be played as if from afar*" receding with the sight of the French frigate, the appearance of which had served the dramatic function interrupting Claggart's accusations against Billy to Vere.

Already at R#34, during the "Billy" period, there are hints of Claggart in the musical narrative: the entry of the trombone choir playing a low, closely spaced minor chord already suggests the looming presence of the Master-at-Arms. This Bb minor chord appears at the moment when the men sing "the mist", thus establishing a direct connection between Claggart and the mist. Below the trombone choir the tuba oscillates between the root and the third of the Bb

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<sup>6</sup>. Brett, "Salvation at Sea", 140.

minor chord, first as measured notes then as a tremolo. This use of an accelerating oscillating minor third in the tuba hearkens back to the music that heralded the first entrance of the Master-at-Arms at R#19 in Act I. At R#34/+7 the root-third motion is expanded to full arpeggiation of the Bb minor triad, again paralleling the pattern at Claggart's first entrance. At the same place there is an important change of orchestration; the tuba quits at R#34/+7 its function is filled by the timpani, an instrument which has a strong association with violence in Britten's oeuvre, (a classic example is the opening of Owen Wingrave).<sup>7</sup> In the bars that follow the music continues its descent into the dark and primal world of John Claggart. Accompanying Claggart's ascent to Vere's deck at R#38 are three measures in which the trombones slide down the octave. This is followed by Claggart's vocal line in which there is also a musical descent at R#38/+6 in the form of the sequenced melodic descent which is the setting of Claggart's preamble to his accusations against Billy (see example 11) signifying that the listeners, including Vere, must come down to his level.

Example 11. Melodic descent as Claggart forces the listeners to come down to his level.

CLAGGART *p cresc*

As brief, your honour... as my theme al-lows, I dare not cut it short, and I must ask your patience,

This downward sequenced melody is the “evil twin” of the ascending melodic sequence of Billy’s motive.

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7. Mervyn Cooke, “Owen, Britten and Pacificism”, in Mervyn Cooke, ed. Britten: War Requiem. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

Vere makes several attempts in the bars that follow to blow away the mists; as Stein

comments:

In Vere's mind the fog and Claggart mean the same evil thing: for let us not forget that we see everything through the eyes of Vere's memories<sup>8</sup>

Vere's music attempts to banish Claggart's encroaching influence from the musical narrative.

The first attempt occurs at R#43 where Vere has an emphatic B major passage which challenges the Bb tonality that has now become fixedly associated with the mist. Britten's technique of using a semitonal neighbor to undermine a key was used earlier in the opera at R#35 in Act I, where Claggart's F minor is used to undermine the E major that Billy established in his aria and of course, in the very opening bars of the opera. (see chapter 3 above).

Harmonically the first bar of Vere's aria (#43) makes an important reference to Billy's motive of two major triads a step apart: it is a harmonically conflated version of this idea, a B major/A harmony. However in the next bar the sustained A turns out to be the first note of a retrograde statement of the Mutiny motive,<sup>9</sup> undermining the strength of Vere's statement. The second attempt is at R#47, also firmly in B major. This passage, because of the melody conveys a strong sense of resolution to B major (see example 12), a sort of affirmation of our hopes that Vere can manage Claggart. This sense of triumph is quite short-lived however and at R#48/+5 the mists drag the tonal focus back down to Bb minor. As before (at R#34), the tonality is made

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8. Erwin Stein, "Billy Budd," 207.

9. Mitchell, 96.

Example 12. Strong Statement of B Major in Vere's Vocal Line



unclear by the addition of notes outside of the Bb minor triad to the upper tonal stratum to a clearly triadic bass arpeggiation pattern in the lower stratum.

Closer analysis of the passage from R#43 to #48/+5 is instructive. As a totality, the passage from R#43 to R#48/+5, where the “mist” sonority occurs, represents a progression of keys which though not especially is “tonal,” nevertheless presents within each tonicized section presents a locally stable tonic (see example 13). Each of these tetrachord verticals combines a triad with a fourth pitch in the bass and is relatively “clear” as compared with the “mist” sonority. (The passage from R#43–#47 prolongs a B major upper tonal stratum, after which the tonal focus begins to shift away from B toward the Bb focus of the mist.) When we arrive at the passage that begins with “the cursed mist”, the situation is very different. Although the Bb-Db-F ostinato in the timpani (the pitches used for the descent of the mist) projects a strong sense of Bb minor, the sustained harmony above in the strings is a cluster. This “misty” tonal ambiguity continues through the orchestral interlude which is interrupted only by the second of Vere’s two pleas for light. at R#49/+5, which occurs in a clear A major tonality. Mervyn Cooke has commented on

Example 13. Reduction of R#43-#47/+5 showing movement through locally stable tonics.

how in this passage A major (Billy's key) struggles to attain C major (Vere's key=goodness). Unlike in the first plea for light, which occurs near the beginning of the scene in Vere's cabin (Act 1 R#62/+10) where the modulation is successful, here it is not and instead there is a sudden plunge back into the ambiguous Bb minor associated with the mist.<sup>10</sup> A change in the orchestration in the accompaniments in the second of these passages, from the lushness and warmth of tremolo strings to the bareness of chords sustained in the winds further serves to weaken this second of Vere's two "prayers". In the section that follows, at R#50, which I will call the "mist interlude", pyramids are set up, based loosely on a the parallel minor version of the "this is our moment" and

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10. Mervyn Cooke, "Tonal Symbolism", 106-108.

“God grant me light” themes. Mervyn Cooke has commented on the usage of Bb minor in Act II:

Since both the mist and Vere’s clouded vision are represented in this scene by *Bb minor*, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that the notable implications of Bb major at the beginning of [Act II] are a reminder of the tonal and spiritual goal of the entire opera...since the minor tonic triad of Vere’s spiritual mist reminds us of his increasingly urgent need for that ultimate *Tierce de picardie*.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, at R#57, we arrive, at the end of the “mist interlude,” at a bright, Lydian-inflected D, the tonicization of the Picardy third, for the Vere/Billy duet which follows. This tonal clarity dispels the mists created by Claggart and manifested by the tonal ambiguity of the interlude. The tonal clarity here also contrasts with the tonal ambiguity which characterized Vere’s music in Act I Scene 2. This relative tonal clarity attests to Vere’s ability to exhibit strength and definition when confronted with the treachery and deceit of Claggart.

A final note on motive and orchestration in the mist interlude: starting at R#50/+9, the melody of Vere’s appeal for light appears in the brass about which Mervyn Cooke has commented: “The brass then adopt the motive from his prayer (as a cantus firmus in augmented rhythmic values) *now in F minor* to illustrate Claggart’s increasing influence”.<sup>12</sup> In actuality it is not clear that the motive from Vere’s prayer as stated by the brass at R#50/+8 is in F minor. It could also be read as being in Db<sup>13</sup> which would associate it closely with the Bb minor key area of

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11. Cooke, “Tonal Symbolism”. 90.

12. Cooke, “Tonal Symbolism”. 108.

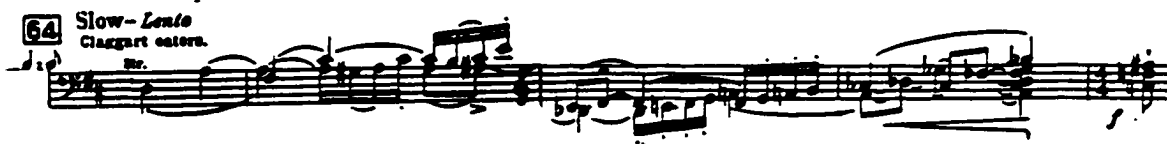
13. In Vere’s statement the first note, E, is the fifth of the key. By analogy the first brass note, Ab, would then be part of a statement of Db rather than F minor.

the mist, which also, like fate, is associated with Claggart . In addition Claggart's increasing influence in the tonal sphere, his presence can also be felt in the motivic domain, a subject to be covered in the next section.

### Claggart's music wins

The process of invasion of the general musical narrative by Claggart continues. Earlier in this chapter I have described how Claggart begins to undermine Billy in the motivic and tonal subtext to the events enacted on stage. This process continues when at R#64 a new motive enters with the re-entry of the Master-at-Arms. Its sinuous chromatic ascent is reminiscent of his earlier motives, like the "handsomely done" motive, in its lack of tonal clarity and quartal rather than triadic basis, (see example 14). The snake-like behavior of this motive is directly related to

Example 14. First appearance of the "Accusation" motive.



Melville's description of a change in Claggart's countenance after he has made his accusations, in particular, his eyes whose :

wanted rich violet color [blurred] to muddy purple, those lights of human intelligence losing human expression, gelidly protruding like the alien eyes of certain uncatalogued creatures of the deep. The first mesmeric glance was one of serpent fascination; the last was the hungry lurch of the torpedo-fish.<sup>14</sup>

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14 . Herman Melville, Billy Budd and Other Tales, (London: Signet, 1961), chapter 20, 58.

The next appearance of the motive is at R#65 where it is used as the orchestral counterpoint to Vere's reminder to the two men about the "penalties of falsehood". This is an ironic orchestral commentary because in the bars that follow it is used for each of Claggart's three *false* accusations against Billy. The Accusation motive also bears an important familial resemblance to the Mutiny motive in that it can be reduced to a "flawed" perfect fifth (see example 15).

Example 15. Reduction of the "Accusation" motive showing its basis in a flawed fifth figure.

Looking at the music of the accusations we can identify characteristic Claggart *procedures*. I have chosen this term because this section is more usefully analyzed as a *process* rather than a musically static "result" such as a fixed thematic object. Like much of Claggart's earlier music,<sup>15</sup> the accusations are based on juxtapositions of fourths and fifths, combined in such a way as to compromise a clear sense of tonal focus. Accusation 1 (R#66) can be reduced to the following set

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15. As discussed in the section on literary devices.

of juxtapositions:

66  
CLAGGART *pp*  
WIL - LIAM BODD, I ... ac - cuse you of in - sub - or - di - na - tion and dis - ob - e - d - i - ence

This self-perpetuating musical process is connected to the inexorable process of fate, of which, in Forster and Britten's reading, Claggart is the agent. Each accusation is at a higher pitch level than the one before signifying that with each accusation the "screw" which seals Billy's fate is being tightened. To further heighten the tension this sequential motion takes place over a pedal which defines a bass tonal stratum that opposes the tenor stratum containing Claggart's vocal line and its instrumental doubling.

At R#80 in Act II an entire "orchestral arioso" is created from the "I accuse you" motive, a funereal dirge to accompany the removal of Claggart's body. Not surprisingly Claggart's F minor is used as are the low brass chords, his orchestral thumbprint, which comprise the

accompaniment. The implication is that after his death, Claggart's voice <sup>16</sup> continues. In actuality, as we shall see in chapter 5, it grows in strength as it annexes more and more of the musical narrative.

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16 . This terminology is found in Cone, Edward, The Composer's Voice, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

## Chapter 5

### Claggart Exerts his Influence Musically, from Beyond the Grave

After Claggart's death, his music begins more and more to dominate the musical narrative, replacing Billy's. Claggart's post-mortem musical domination reflects the central irony of the story: that with his death he triumphs. Starting with the removal of Claggart's body from Vere's cabin (Act II, R#80), his leitmotives begin to infiltrate the music, appearing in the orchestra as they did earlier in Vere's vocal line of Vere (Act II, R#74).<sup>1</sup> There are also more subtle ways in which the Master-at Arms' influence is felt after his death. One of these is the distortion of musical motives, particularly those associated with Billy's positive influence over the ship.

#### Motivic Distortions - modal alterations

Just after Claggart's death Vere sings an aria in which he struggles with the decision he will have to face on the fate of Billy. The significance of the text "the mists have cleared" is that Vere now sees clearly that he has been left to decide the fate of Billy. At R#73/+3, Vere's vocal line takes up a modally altered version the "This is our moment" motive (see example 16). Here the key signature of is that of C minor. In fact, the quotation of the motive in Vere's vocal line, with the Db, added as an accidental, it is actually a Phrygian colored C minor, the modal equivalent of F minor, the key associated throughout the opera with the inevitability of fate<sup>2</sup>. Motivically the

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1. See Mitchell, "A Billy Budd Notebook". 127.

2. Claggart's "Credo" (Act I #107- #109/-5) contains oblique references to the fact that Claggart views himself as the agent of fate, its weapon of destruction. Therefore the references to

Act II, 73/+3

The musical score is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line for Vere and a piano accompaniment. The first system is marked *poco / ma infuso* and contains the lyrics "Soylla and Cha-ryb-die, the straits of". The second system contains the lyrics "Hell, of Hell, I sight them too". The third system contains the lyrics "late, too late;". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some chords in the bass line.

passage is largely drawn from the "this is our moment" music that opens Act II (heard first occurrence with text at #15/+2). There is however a subtle transformation of the motive by which

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F minor in Claggart's motives. for example the low F minor brass triads associate the key with fate. The connection between fate and F minor is also made explicit when Claggart enlists the Novice's help in gathering false evidence against Billy. The Novice's response "It's tate. It's fate" (R#115/+8) is in F minor, with a motivic reference in the bass to the motive of his flogging (R#42), also in F minor and, as far as the drama is concerned, the first indication of the severity of Claggart's brutality. The highlighting of key words like "fate" is a device used by Britten to ensure the intelligibility of the text to the listening audience.

it nonetheless maintains its recognizability. As this motive first appears in Vere's vocal line, the setting of "Scylla and Charybdis", its contour is flattened, spanning a perfect fourth rather than a perfect fifth. That the points of melodic inflection and harmonic rhythm, particularly the placement of the mode-defining note on the second half of the first beat, are maintained contribute to the recognizability of the motive. This undercutting of the motive conveys musically what the text is saying literally: that Vere is "lost" and will fail in his mission to save Billy. Modally the motive is also given a new context: Phrygian rather than its original Lydian one. This change alters the main progression from I (major) - II (major) to I (minor) - bII (major).<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the change to a Phrygian mode drains the motive of much of its original, positive energy. In the accompaniment of this passage the blurred unison texture, beginning at R#73, serves to impart a lack of clarity which further drags the music down.

As I've already noted, it is not only in the modality and tonality that Claggart's presence can be felt but also in distortions of the contours of the motives themselves. At R#73/+8 the "this is our moment" music can be found, in distorted form, as the setting of "I sight them too late" (see example 16). Again, the motive has been stripped of its positive, Lydian character. It now has the sense not of ascent (see example 17), but that a downward force is being exerted on its progression (see example 18). This sense of downward energy is also present in the repetition of

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3. Mervyn Cooke, in "Britten's 'prophetic song': Tonal Symbolism in Billy Budd," in M. Cooke and P. Reed (eds), Benjamin Britten: Billy Budd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 89, comments on the use of the Phrygian as being "important not only as a microcosmic representation of the semitonal conflict that governs the work as a whole, but also because [it] allow[s] a mechanism for the effortless transition between two keys with roots a semitone apart."

Example 17. Harmonic Reduction of the original "This is our Moment" Motive

*T. f sempre*  
This is our moment.....

Example 18. Harmonic Reduction of Vere's Modally Altered Version

*poco f ma intenso*  
Vere Scylla and Charybdis,

the interval of a downward major third (see example 19). The climax of the aria "It is not his trial its mine, mine..." (at R#76/-8) also contains a magnified sense of downward motion. In this

Example 19. Downward Sequence at the Climax of Vere's Aria

Vere  
late, ..... too late; ..... I see all the mists, ..... .

passage, the eight repetitions of the word "mine" form a downward moving sequence of descending perfect fourths, each one a whole step lower than the previous one (see example 20).

Example 20. Downward Sequence of Descending Perfect Fourth at the End of Vere's Aria

mine, ..... mine, ..... mine, mine, it is mine, mine, mine, mine.

In fact, repeated intervals in sequence are used in several places in this section, to show Vere's agitation. At R#75, there is a passage based on a rising sequence of the "this is our moment" motive. Here as evidence of Vere's growing agitation the sequence occurs at a faster harmonic rhythm (see Example 21). This upward sequence conveys musically Vere's struggle to

think of a way to save Billy. He is desperately exerting his “upward” force in an attempt to

Example 21. Ascending Sequence in Vere’s Vocal Line

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system includes a vocal line (soprano clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line has a box around the number 75. The lyrics are "How can I save him? How can I save him?". The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern. The second system also shows a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "How? How?". The vocal line continues the ascending sequence from the first system.

counteract Claggart’s “downward” force. Finally at R#76/-7 we get the longest of these interval sequences, covering most of Vere’s vocal range. This sequence is based on the descending interval of a perfect fourth, arranged itself in a descending sequence. Descending sequences of perfect fourths, as discussed in the section on Claggart’s leitmotives, have a particular association in this opera with fate and the inexorability of its progress. Musically the outcome of this aria is therefore Vere’s adoption of a musical procedure associated with Claggart signifying his acceptance of the “agent of fate” mantle, formerly owned by Claggart. Although the words do not indicate what action Vere will take with regard to Billy, their musical setting strongly implies that Vere will be forced to choose to destroy Billy. One possible interpretation of such a juxtaposition of texted meaning and musical meaning is that the musical meaning represents what Vere knows

consciously, while the texted meaning is what his unconscious knows.<sup>4</sup>

The arpeggiated motive of two triads a step apart also figures heavily in the musical narrative which accompanies Billy's responses to his accusers during the trial scene. In the section that begins at R#84 the strings play a variant of the familiar arpeggiated figure of Billy's motive. At R#87 the motive is stated in its original form (with the exception of a change (slowing) of the harmonic rhythm): as a D major followed by an E major arpeggio. However at R#88/-2 the tonality begins to turn away from D Lydian (see example 22). Tragically, the accompaniment to

Example 22. Reduction of R #87-#88 Showing Tonal Shift from D Lydian to F minor

D Lydian                      f min: V7 I

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4. See Cone p. 35 for a discussion of the idea of how the accompaniment manifests the unconscious of the vocal persona.

Billy's cry "Save me", the interval of C-Bb, prepares the F minor answer, disappointing our expectations of F# and wordlessly crushing all hope of Billy's salvation. In every way the music at #88 reeks of John Claggart: the motive, an inversion of "I accuse you", the low trombone choir tonic pedal point and most importantly the crushing blow dealt to our tonal expectations by the return of F minor.

### **Aspects of Orchestration**

As we saw in chapter 3, Britten has used the orchestral topic of harp and flute as a leitmotive for the captain. This association is set up at the opening of the scene in Vere's cabin (Act I, Scene 2) in an orchestral prelude. In making this association, it follows that the timbre of flute and harp represents Vere's "voice" in the same way that the orchestration of a trombone choir comes to represent the voice of Claggart. In Act II, in the same way that Vere's human voice begins to speak Claggart's words and sing his music,<sup>5</sup> his "orchestral" voice also sings Claggart's music. This occurs at R#96 where there is a brief fantasy on the "I accuse you" music which has been used throughout the scene as a unifying thread. In its previous occurrence (at R#80) this motive accompanies the removal of Claggart's body from the deck. The melody is carried by the strings, a "neutral" orchestral topic<sup>6</sup> in the context of this opera with a brass choir

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5. See Act II #99/+15.

6. One without a leitmotivic association.

providing a chordal accompaniment. At R#96, however, the main melody is carried by the harp, Vere's instrument, and the accompaniment by the strings. Other alterations are a quieter dynamic (*ppp*) and a less incisive single, rather than double dotted rhythm in the melody. All these factors contribute to the sense that the accusations, as spoken by Vere's "orchestral voice," are more gentle. In fact, though uttered more gently, this recitation of the accusations is lethal because it emanates from the highest source (both authoritatively and timbrally).

### **Aspects of Register**

In the "Billy in the darbies" scene (Act II, Scene 3) register contributes greatly to the overall musico-dramatic effect. In the music that precedes this section, the "interview chord" sequence (R#102), there is a gradual registral descent as the sequence of chords proceeds. This manifests sonically the physical descent as the action moves from the "high" world of Vere's cabin where the interview is conducted to the bottom of the ship, "the darbies" in which Billy is subsequently sequestered. Mitchell describes the scoring of the "Billy in the darbies" scene as being "anchored to the sea-bed....Billy's ultimate destination" with the exception of a "spectral piccolo [representing] the upper, exterior world, manifesting its presence as a shaft of moonlight".<sup>7</sup> Motivically this piccolo "beam of moonlight" is the familiar harmonic leitmotif of two major triads a whole-tone apart. Unlike its prior occurrences (e.g. Act I at R#16) it is marked *ppp* and "rubato". Also it has a fermata at the end of each phrase and at the end of the passage (at

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7. Mitchell, 119-120.

R#104/-12) there is the marking “rallentando”. In short, it is a whispered statement of the leitmotive, but a shadow of its former self, haltingly uttered. It is not so much “a beam of moonlight” but rather the final dying breath of the motive that at one time manifested Billy’s positive energy.

### **Narrative aspects**

Motives associated with Claggart are embedded in the musical narrative in the second half of Act 2. We have already seen how the passage from R#80-#96 is pervaded by the presence of the “I accuse you motive,” which is used, like the “storm music” in the second scene of Peter Grimes, to musically unify the passage. In the section that follows the trial scene, Vere’s aria which begins at R#97, there are also many “Claggart” aspects both in the vocal line and in the orchestra. To begin with, the aria is not in Vere’s key of C major but rather in F minor, the key associated with Claggart, the agent of fate. The widely spaced wind and brass chords too have a leitmotivic association with the Master-at-Arms. Furthermore there is much written about the adoption by Vere of Claggart’s “Beauty, handsomeness, goodness” text and motive as it was presented in Act 1 at R#102. Mitchell has commented on this motivic borrowing questioning its function: does it represent a true invasion by Claggart of Vere’s persona or does it simply draw our attention to the fact that Vere must complete Claggart’s task of destroying Billy?<sup>8</sup> Looking back at R#74 (Act II), the first time Vere sings this line, the agitation Vere conveys in his

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8. See Mitchell, 127.

rendition, suggests to me the latter scenario.

Another interesting reusage of a musical motive in Vere's aria starts at R#100 where the orchestra plays the Novice's flogging music that first appears in Act 1 at R#42, as the Novice emerges broken physically and spiritually, from his beating. At the end of Vere's aria, the music is used to counterpoint "I am the messenger of death, how can he pardon, how receive me?". As it first appeared at R#42, the melody was played by a doleful saxophone at a tempo marking "slow and deliberate" and had a solemn, almost funereal effect. As it appears here, more than twice as fast (♩ = 160), played by high winds, with octave doublings, it is triumphant. This is the fanfare version, clarifying musically what has already been clarified by the outcome of the trial: a victory for cruel fate, brutality, and deceit.

### **Triad Streams and the "Interview Chord" Sequence**

It would not be possible to discuss Act II of Billy Budd without including some discussion of the famous "interview chord sequence" which concludes Scene 2 of the Act. As mentioned in the previous section, part of the dramatic function is a registral descent to accompany the physical descent that occurs onstage. From a motivic standpoint, the section is however a blank, the melody being simply whole note leaps from one note of the F major triad to another with no discernable pattern. The accompaniment, whole note triadic harmonizations of the melody notes, is also not motivically distinctive. Its texture however does make reference to the accompanimental texture of Claggart's phrase, "handsomely done" from Act I. As I commented about this passage in chapter 2 above, this sudden lack of distinction in the texture contributes to

the sense that time has been temporarily suspended. The effect of the interview chords is the same only on a much grander (34 bar) scale. This greatly protracted suspension of time as Vere transmits the guilty verdict to Billy is therefore the dramatic function of the interview chord sequence, designed to keep the audience on tenter hooks.<sup>9</sup>

Clifford Hindley has examined the overall harmonic progression of the interview chord sequence. He views the sequence as moving from an unstable F major/F minor to a "more tranquil" C major, which in the context of the opera's tonal symbolism represents a vanquishing of malign fate (F minor) by goodness (C major). He views this as a purification process akin to the opera's biblical subtext (Billy dies to "save" Vere).<sup>10</sup> Although I would concur with Hindley's analysis of the dramatic effect of the passage I think that to analyze it in the key of C major does not account for its function on a larger scale in which the final C major chord clearly functions as dominant preparation for the F major which opens the next scene.

Although the interview chords constitute a motivic blank there are other important usages of "triadic streams" in the opera suggesting that they can appropriately be considered as constituting a topic. In chapter 4 I discussed another sequence of triads in the "Billy Budd, King of the birds" passage where the cell of two arpeggiated triads a step apart (Billy's motive) was sequenced to form a stream of triads, a device used by Britten to magnify the motive's effect. The

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9. The Pioneer company, who recently put out a two-videodisk recording of a National Opera production of Billy Budd (PC-96-144) were regrettably unaware of the dramatic function of the sequence when they chose to use this passage as the place for the viewer to change disks.

10. Clifford Hindley, "Britten's Billy Budd: The Interview Chords Again." Musical Quarterly 78 (Spring 1994), 99-126.

light and airy high wind arpeggios of Billy's motive manifest his positive energy in the same way that the other important group of triadic streams, the low brass triads of Claggart, manifest his heavy, negative qualities (see Act I R#29/+5 and R#101 for two examples). Though their orchestral color is quite different, both Billy and Claggart's triads have structural similarities. Each has an even harmonic rhythm, one bar per chord, but more importantly, both are closed position triads- Billy's being root position triads and Claggart's inversions (6/3 or 6/4 chords). "Light", like "fate", is a key word in the libretto.<sup>11</sup> In fact the two groups of triads are actually two sides of the same "topic", the dark side and the light side. The narrative behind the longest triad stream, the "interview" chord sequence can therefore be viewed as Vere's struggle between the forces of light<sup>11</sup> and darkness.

## Conclusions

In Billy Budd Britten uses motive to create a musical narrative which fills the function of a narrator in a literary work, a solution to one of the great problems a composer faces when he/she adapts a literary work for the stage. In Act I he establishes motivic associations for the operas main characters and central themes like "fate" and "mutiny". For Billy and Claggart Britten establishes strong musical identities whereas for Vere he creates a more ambiguous one, one onto which Claggart's stronger musical identity can, following Claggart's death, be projected. This

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11. Note that "light" like "fate" is a key word in the libretto (see footnote 2).

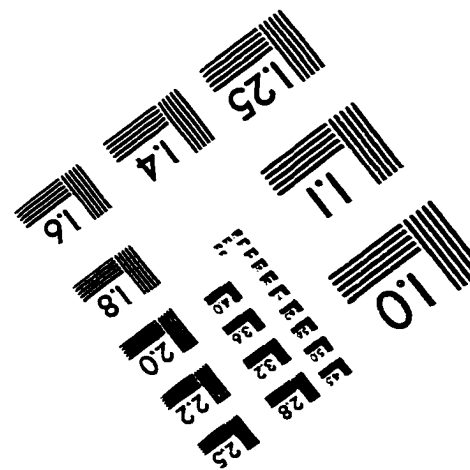
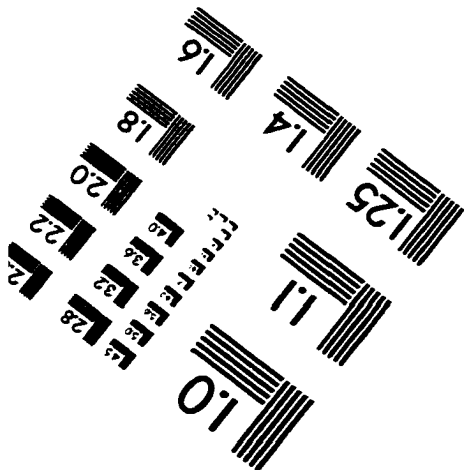
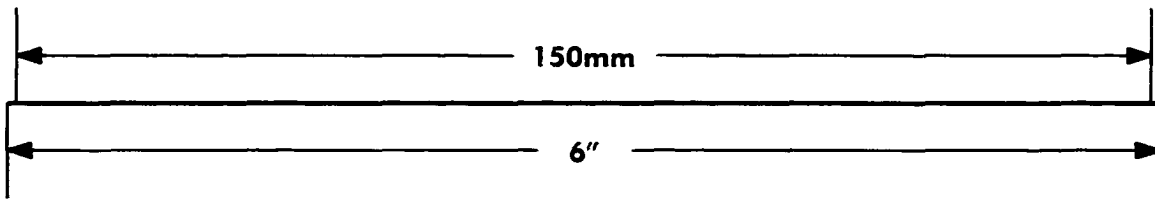
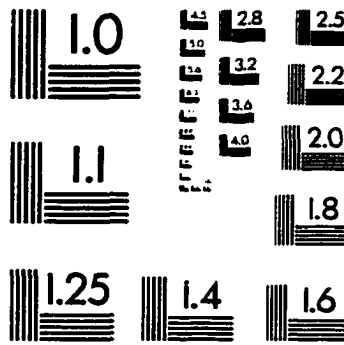
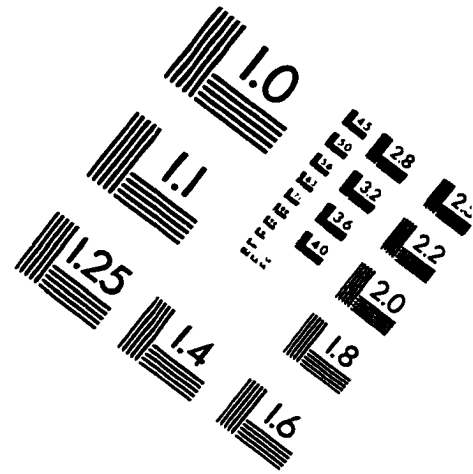
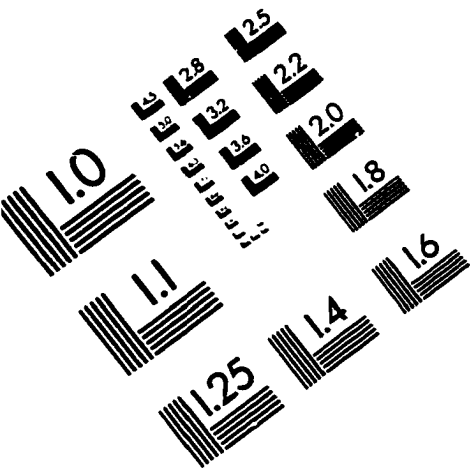
motivic invasion also occurs in the orchestra: Britten creates a musical narrative for the passage following Claggart's death which is dominated by the "accusation" motive. This musical narrative technique highlights one of the central ironies of Melville's story: that with his death, John Claggart triumphs.

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