

# Boys' Voices, Lads' Voices: Benjamin Britten and the "Ragazzo" (Continental) Sound.

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## Abstract

*Over 20% of the opus-numbered compositions by Benjamin Britten involved the sound of young voices. In thirteen of these pieces, he stipulated a chorus of trebles. Britten is known to have had a preference for what he perceived as a natural singing sound, rather than the refined and pure tone of a cathedral choir. This study analyses these works for five musical parameters: pitch range, pitch proximity, mean pitch, phrase length, and notated dynamics to demonstrate that Britten had two distinct styles when writing for treble chorus. One is for the traditional English cathedral sound and the other is for the 'continental' voice produced by certain choirs for whom he wrote. There are some transitional works composed in the late 1940s and early 1950s that show characteristics of both of these styles. These conclusions will help in interpreting Britten's works and as technical guidelines for composers seeking particular effects when writing for the treble choir.*

**Keywords** trebles, cathedral choir, Benjamin Britten, boys, continental tone, ragazzo.

## Introduction

### *The Nature of the Question*

The use of boys' voices is a noticeable characteristic of the music of English composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). He was strongly committed to writing music for children and young people of both sexes and used them as soloists, in small ensembles, and in larger choruses and choirs (Holst, 1966). Certain of the works involving a chorus of boys show a marked timbral difference from the others and were composed with that particularly robust tone colour, the continental or ragazzo sound, in mind (Ashley, 2009). This paper examines those works and compares them with Britten's pieces composed for a more conventional (or English) boys' sound by analysing five musical parameters (pitch range, mean pitch, pitch proximity, phrase length, and mean notated dynamics). The analysis will show marked differences in Britten's writing for these continental style choruses, which has implications for better-informed interpretation of these works and for composers whose timbral choices may become more nuanced as a result of Britten's practice.

The three continental style works in question, *Missa Brevis* (1959), *The Golden Vanity* (1965), and *Children's Crusade* (1968) are so designated because Britten wrote them with particular choirs in mind: Westminster Cathedral, Vienna Boys Choir, and Wandsworth High School Boys Choir respectively. These works were composed specifically with their continental timbre in Britten's imagination, as will be shown. This distinctive sound is robust and timbrally close to the speaking voice. George Malcolm, one of the leading proponents of this technique, famously said, 'good singing is a form of shouting' (Ashley, 2008: 113). Because the quality of timbre or tone colour is extremely difficult to quantify, this study seeks to demonstrate the significant difference between these three works and Britten's other boys' choir music by using more easily measurable musical parameters.

Britten is known to have preferred what he considered to be a natural sound in boys' voices, as if they had come straight from the playground (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 1, 1991). This is the quality that the continental sound conveyed to Britten and some of his early writing for boys chorus strived for that quality, for example *Spring Symphony* (1949) and *Gloriana* (1953) both of which will be discussed later in this paper.

The event that seemed to crystallise Britten's imagination of the continental sound and to change the technical parameters of his writing for these voices occurred on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1959. Britten was present at a performance of his own composition *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942) given by the choir of Westminster Cathedral conducted by George Malcolm.

In her insightful discussion about Britten's choice of vocal timbre in *A Ceremony of Carols* and the symbolism of these timbres, Wiebe points out that Britten was aware of the distinctive sound of Westminster Cathedral Choir since 1949 (Malcolm became their director in 1947 and was a colleague of Britten's, first performing at The Aldeburgh Festival in 1951) (Weibe, 2012; Henwood and Kenyon, 1998; Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 4, 1991). However, the January 1959 performance seems to have been a revelation for Britten. He wrote to Malcolm the very next day praising the 'wonderful' and 'deeply moving' singing. In the same letter, Britten offered to compose a work for this choir; the work in question was *Missa Brevis* (1959) (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 5, 1991: 103). The strength of Britten's reaction (Kildea says he was 'blown away' (2013: 439)) indicates how pivotal a moment this was in his thinking about the sound of treble choirs.

After this, Britten seemed to realise the techniques he needed to employ to exploit the continental sound to its maximum advantage: short phrases, relatively low pitch, low pitch proximity (i.e. small average interval), and loud dynamics. These matters will be discussed fully in the results section of this paper.

### **Terminology**

This study uses the term 'lads' in contradistinction to 'boys' to describe these two different chorus sounds. The choice of terminology is not easy because, as Ashley points out, in contemporary British English, the term 'lad' is something of a pejorative, having associations with young men behaving anti-socially, particularly under the influence of

alcohol (Ashley, 2008). In his published works, Ashley uses the terms 'boys' and 'young males' interchangeably and makes no distinction on the basis of timbre or method of singing.

In this study, the term 'lad' is used in its mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century British English sense, and therefore the sense in which Britten himself would have understood the term. It is roughly equivalent to the German *jung* and has many (including some archaic) near-synonyms in English (for example, youth, juvenile, youngster, and hobbledehoy). The term suggests someone slightly older than a boy, and has connotations of energy and self-reliance and of a greater maturity of outlook. The term is not intended to indicate a specific stage of pubescent development, nor of vocal maturity.

### ***Britten and Boys – The Volume and Significance of his Output***

No major composer has written as many works for children to perform in as Benjamin Britten (Sinclair, 1984). Despite his worldwide reputation, the honours bestowed on him and the calibre of the singers and instrumentalists for whom he often wrote, Britten's interest in composing for children, including musically untrained children, was a constant theme throughout his career. He spent the last of his creative energy (when he was frail and in his final illness) composing *Welcome Ode* (1976), a work for young people's chorus and youth orchestra (Palmer, 1984). Of his 95 opus numbered works, 19 of them (20%) had parts for children. By comparison, 5% of the output of his contemporary and countryman Michael Tippett (whose personal and artistic position was close to Britten's) are works that include children's voices (Coyle, 2019). Therefore, the degree of Britten's commitment to voices of the young is clear.

Not only did Britten write such a large body of works for children to perform, he also wrote some of his most significant pieces for them. He likened young performers to 'restricted bottles' into which, nevertheless, he wished to pour his 'best wine' (Kildea, 2013: 109). Critics and scholars have also ranked Britten's works for children as some of his most important, by, for example, describing *Noye's Fludde* (1958) as 'one of his major imaginative achievements' (Evans, 1996: 32), stating that 'It is as if this other world of ritual and magic injects the ordinary English one... with a new power' (Weibe, 2012: 182) and claiming *St Nicholas* (1948) is 'explicable only in terms of major art' (Mitchell, 1984: 169).

### ***The Boy's Voice as Symbol in Britten's Music***

There are musical aspects to Britten's work that are strongly characteristic. These include use of the lydian mode, structures such as theme and variations, and canon (Sinclair, 1999), and the use of poly-texture—even to the extent of requiring more than one conductor (White, 1982: 173). Certain of these tropes are symbolic of extra-musical elements. In the matter of key, for example, E minor represents repentance, Eb Major night, and G major reconciliation (Mellers, 1984). In other areas, the saxophone represents sexuality (Carpenter, 1992: 290), the passacaglia death (Handel, 1970).

Boys' voices in Britten frequently represent innocence. Very often the children in his works are victims sometimes of specific evil as in *Children's Crusade* (1968); sometimes these innocents are representative of the voiceless ones who suffer violence, for example in *War Requiem* (1961).

Not all of Britten's boys are victims. In *Spring Symphony* (1949) they are bucolic revellers. In *Voices For Today* (1965) they are prophets, but there is always a sense of the innocent, the incorrupt. Some scholars have argued that this is because of Britten's nostalgia for his own childhood which he viewed as a halcyon time before, as it were, the fall (Palmer, 1984). Britten himself stated 'it's because I'm still thirteen' (Kildea, 2013: 35) and his personality revealed certain boyish traits: his sense of humour, his preferred meals, his choice of company (Kildea, 2013). The last of these, that is Britten's clear and deep enjoyment of the companionship of boys, has received a considerable amount of critical speculation as to its nature in the past thirty years (Bridcut, 2011; Adams, 2017). This study does not propose to examine these issues. It is sufficient to establish that Britten liked boys and their voices and, whatever the nature of that liking, his writing for them was an important part of his output.

### ***The Continental Sound***

The continental sound as a characteristic vocal timbre is most unlike the sound of treble voices (boy sopranos) in the English cathedral tradition. The latter (colloquially known as the cathedral hoot) is pure, has little vibrato and is produced largely in head voice. It has been described by one of its detractors as an 'emasculated, flutey sound' (Ashley, 2008: 113). This type of choir has a repertoire (often with lower voices, sometimes with organ as well) that stretches back centuries and when Britten was composing it thrived in some parish churches as well as in cathedrals. It was for such a parish choir, for example, that Britten composed *Rejoice in The Lamb* (1942) (Kennedy, 1993).

To many listeners, the first adjective that comes to mind on hearing this sound is 'angelic'. However, Ashley rightly asserts that 'the association of boy voices with angel voices as a guarantee of asexual purity and innocence... is dubious' (2008: 80). Britten's association of this sound with the angelic is far more nuanced than this. Britten (who was very familiar with the works of William Blake) often portrays far more muscular angels whose function is to convey the Divine message in often violent situations (Kildea, 2013: 481). This interpretation of the nature of angels is abundantly evident in Britten's Church Parables.

Nevertheless, this 'asexual purity and innocence' is beguiling to many listeners and has led to the commercial success of trebles performing, often extremely well, music of the treaciest kind.<sup>1</sup> This emphatically excludes the works of Britten. Indeed, Wiebe reminds us that 'in the 1950s and 1960s, Britten regularly expressed his distaste for the pure, ethereal sound cultivated by many English cathedral choirs' (2012: 60).

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<sup>1</sup> A glance through Aled Jones' discography serves as an example of this <https://www.discogs.com/artist/289102-Aled-Jones> (accessed 13 December 2019)

In contrast, the continental sound, which has long been associated with ensembles such as The Vienna Boys Choir, is more akin in timbre to the adolescent speaking voice and is produced predominantly in chest voice for notes up to an octave above middle C. It was the desire to bring this sound from the playground into the church and concert hall that motivated its two British 20<sup>th</sup> Century proponents, George Malcolm (Henwood and Kenyon, 1998) and Russell Burgess (Ashley, 2009), who both viewed it as a more natural singing timbre (as did Britten).

The Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral in the post-war period was George Malcolm who was a pivotal figure in bringing the continental sound to England. Malcolm is more remembered now as one of the great harpsichordists of his generation, but it was his re-establishment of the choir of Westminster Cathedral in the years after the Second World War (it had been disbanded for the duration) that was his lasting legacy (Henwood and Kenyon, 1998), albeit a controversial one (Harland, 1966) to cathedral singing.

Westminster Cathedral in London (not to be confused with the Royal, and Anglican, Westminster Abbey) is the seat of the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. Therefore, its liturgical function differs somewhat from that of an Anglican cathedral choir. This may have allowed Malcolm the liberty to teach his trebles to produce such a distinctive, arguably un-English, sound.

It was Malcolm's wish to bring the 'ordinary, boyish sound' (Bridcut, 2011: 127-128), which he viewed as more natural and characteristic, into the cathedral. He rejected the idea that a boy's voice must be 'rendered harmless before it can be let loose in a church' (Wiebe, 2012: 62). His strong views were rooted in a belief that religious art should have a sense of realness about it, an unsentimental, human quality, liberated from what he perceived as Victorian tweeness (Wiebe, 2012).

The other Choir Director specialising in the continental sound to be closely associated with Britten was Russell Burgess. Burgess was Director of Wandsworth School Boys Choir from 1954. Wandsworth was a perfectly ordinary government school in a working-class area of South London who had, in Burgess, a Choir Director of exceptional vision and musicianship ('Omnibus: presenting The Wandsworth Sound' BBC, 1971).

Britten was patron of the choir until his death in 1976 and composed *Children's Crusade* for them in 1965 (Ashley, 2009). Wandsworth Boys, under Burgess, released recordings of a large proportion of Britten's works for treble choir including *The Golden Vanity*, *Voices for Today*, and *Missa Brevis* (Bridcut, 2011).

## Methodology

### ***Corpus Selection—Grounds for Inclusion and Exclusion.***

In selecting works for analysis as examples of Britten's writing for either boys or lads, three criteria have been applied. Firstly, the work to be analysed must have an opus number. Britten was a prolific composer and wrote a substantial body of work, a good deal of which has been published, that has no opus number (Evans, 1989). This includes

works written for trebles to sing. There appear to be two main reasons why Britten did not grant an opus number to some of his pieces. One is that he did not assign opus numbers to works which were arrangements, transcriptions or realisations of other composers' pieces or traditional pieces. This list includes substantial and significant things like the folk-song settings and the Purcell realisations. The other body of works with no opus numbers are those minor, often occasional pieces that, for one reason or another, Britten did not give the distinction of membership of the core of his output. There are, notably, some liturgical pieces in this category which have parts for trebles.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that such pieces without an opus number have been excluded creates a clearly defined limit to the scope of this study. Were, for example, non numbered liturgical works to be included, then what of things like the juvenilia? The question of limitation becomes too problematic in this scenario, so Britten's *de facto* definition of limitation is taken.

The second criterion is that only music for chorus or choir is analysed. It is clear and easy to delineate between boys and lads sound in the context of choral singing. Soloists, by their very nature, show such a variety of individual timbre, that attempting to categorise them in a polar manner is meaningless.

The third and final criterion is that Britten himself must have stipulated on the score that the part(s) in question are to be sung by 'boys' or 'trebles'. There is, with some pieces, a certain amount of ambiguity in this. With others, there is perfect clarity—the music is for both boys and girls and therefore must be excluded from this corpus. Arguments about the quality of girls' sound, indeed their interchangeability with boys in a cathedral choir, have been advanced for some decades and there is strong evidence to support the idea that there is no fundamental difference in sound, given the right training (Welch and Howard, 2002). However, the only truly relevant opinion was Britten's and he considered that boys' voices evoke 'strength and purity' in a way which girls' don't (Bridcut, 2011: 127).

Therefore, works which are excluded from this study include large-scale pieces which involve boys and girls such as *Noye's Fludde* (1957), *St Nicholas* (1947) and *The Little Sweep* (1948)—the last also because it has no chorus. A number of smaller works are also excluded such as *Psalms 150* (1962), *Welcome Ode* (1976) because they were written for 'young people's voices' (Britten, 1977: i). *Paul Bunyan* (1940) falls into the same category.

*Friday Afternoons* (1935) appears to be a borderline case. Britten wrote it for the boys under the care of his brother Robert, a headmaster. There were no girls at Robert Britten's school which, judging by musical context, is the only reason why Imogen Holst described it as a set of songs for 'small boys' (1954, 279). In the score, Britten himself describes the songs as being for 'voices' and piano (Britten, 1936: 4). In other words, there is no explicit intent on the composer's part that these songs be performed by boys.

It is Britten's stated intention that is the only significant factor involved in this criterion for corpus inclusion. Therefore, the fact that *A Ceremony of Carols* was first performed

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<sup>2</sup> Britten wrote four such works in 1961 alone (Evans, 1989: 93-94).

by a choir of women and Britten did not hear it sung by boys until a year later has no bearing on the fact that he wrote the work for trebles, not sopranos, and said so on the score.

There could be some confusion about the status of *Voices for Today* (1965). In the front material, the work is described as being for 'men, women and children' (Britten, 1965: v). It seems that this is rhetoric suitable to the occasion of the piece (the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations). In the score itself, Britten stipulates 'chorus of boys' (Britten, 1965: 1). Furthermore, at the three simultaneous premieres of the work (in London, New York and Paris) choirs of boys, rather than boys and girls, were used.<sup>3</sup>

There is a special criterion that was applied to identifying works that were written for lads to sing, as opposed to boys. It is simply that the three clearly definable lads' works were composed for choirs who famously used the continental or ragazzo sound; namely *Missa Brevis* for Westminster Cathedral, *The Golden Vanity* for Vienna Boys Choir, and *Children's Crusade* for Wandsworth Boys Choir. The remaining 10 works in the corpus were considered, *prima facie*, to be works for boys' voices.

The thirteen works that meet the conditions for inclusion in this study listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Corpus of works analysed**

A Boy Was Born	1934
A Ceremony of Carols	1942
Rejoice in the Lamb	1943
Festival Te Deum	1945
A Wedding Anthem	1949
Spring Symphony	1949
Gloriana	1953
Missa Brevis	1959
War Requiem	1961
Voices for Today	1965
The Golden Vanity	1966
Children's Crusade	1968
Owen Wingrave	1972

### ***Data Gathering Methodology***

There were two methods of gathering data employed in this study. One was to use diagnostic add-on subroutines in Sibelius notation software, which involved the entry of

<sup>3</sup> The programmes for these performances are held in the archives at the Britten-Pears Foundation and the relevant information was provided by the archives staff.

over 24,000 notes. The other was a phrase-by-phrase analysis of the published score of each of the 13 works analysed.

### *Pitch Range*

Sibelius notation software includes a plug-in routine that identifies the highest and lowest notes in a part. From these it is possible to calculate the total range for each part and the mean range for the treble voices in each piece analysed.

### *Pitch Proximity*

The plug-in for Sibelius software to calculate this was written by Roman Molino Dunn on the direction of James Humberstone who first used this analytical tool in his study of the Cassations of Malcolm Williamson (pitch proximity – calculate melodic intervals (for Sibelius 7 and later) (Humberstone, 2013). This value, derived from the analytical work of Schellenberg as developed by Narmour, gives a mean interval between adjacent notes in semitones. Humberstone concluded that one use of this value is to establish the degree of difficulty singers have in learning a melody (Humberstone, 2013: 34-35; Narmour, 1992; Schellenberg, 1997).

### *Mean Pitch*

Sibelius notation software includes a plug-in routine that identifies mean pitch for each voice. From these it is possible to calculate the mean pitch for the treble voices in each piece analysed. This is achieved by assigning a numerical value for each pitch (with a whole number to a semitone).

### *Phrase Length*

This value, expressed in seconds with the smallest gradation being half a second, was derived by examining the scores under consideration and working on the assumption that the metronome markings are, with a reasonable degree of accuracy, correct. This analytical method is predicated on the understanding that the tempi that Britten notated on scores was an accurate representation of his intentions. Analysis of recordings conducted or supervised by Britten conducted by Lee shows a high degree of fidelity to the metronome markings and therefore may be taken to be accurate within acceptable limits (Lee, 2013).

### *Notated Dynamics*

Loudness of singing in a recording is very hard to measure objectively. Not only are dynamics as written in music relative rather than absolute, they are also entirely contextual. A passage sung *forte* can be relatively louder or softer depending on the other elements of the musical texture, the structural context of the dynamics that precede and follow it and other elements of musical context.

Furthermore, dynamics in the same passage sung by the same singers can vary from performance to performance depending on the size and shape of the room, the number and character of the audience, the mood and disposition of the performers, and a number of other factors too difficult to predict or even to list.



Nevertheless, Britten's intentions of the relative loudness of a phrase are clear enough to establish reasonable data to answer the question, did Britten want his lads generally to sing louder than his boys?

Each notation of dynamics was assigned a numerical value: 1 for **ppp**, increasing by whole numbers to 8 for **fff**. An extra 0.5 was added for accents and notations such as **sforzando**. For phrases that become louder or softer, a mean value for that phrase was calculated rounded to the nearest whole value or half.

Despite the problematic nature of relating this value to the reality of musical performance, there is sufficient data indicating Britten's intentions regarding loud and soft singing. This is a significant issue considered in the context of Malcolm's remarks about continental style singing being 'shouting' (Ashley, 2018: 113).

These analytical instruments are sufficiently refined to answer questions about the comparative musical qualities of works written for lads in contradistinction to those written for boys.

## Results

Table 2 shows the overall results with the pieces listed in chronological order of composition. The works composed for continental style choirs are listed in bold type. In summary, if the highlighted works are taken as being written for lads and the others as written for boys, the results indicate the following (excluding the values for *Gloriana* and *Owen Wingrave* whose boys sing for such short periods of time that these results cannot make a statistically significant contribution to the overall averages given in Table 3).

Lads' works were composed later in Britten's career, which is consistent with his being so impressed with the sound of Westminster Cathedral Choir in January 1959. However, there is some evidence to suggest that Britten was seeking this sort of sound sometimes in earlier works, particularly *Spring Symphony* and *Gloriana*, which will be discussed later.

Lads' works have a larger overall range (22 semitones as opposed to 21.4 semitones).

Britten expects the boys to sing higher on average than the lads (a mean pitch of A' and G' respectively). The difference is nearly a whole tone, which is a striking result.

Boys sing much longer phrases than lads with mean values of 6.3 and 4.06 seconds respectively, another remarkable result.

Pitch proximity results also produce notable differences. The average interval between adjacent notes for boys is 2.08, for lads it is 1.69.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Results**

		Total Pitch Range	Mean Pitch Proximity	Mean Pitch		Mean Phrase Length	Mean Notated Dynamic <sup>4</sup>	
		Semitones	Semitones			seconds		
<i>A Boy Was Born</i>	1934	21.33	1.83	20.67	G# <sup>67</sup> cents	5.23	4.05	<b>mp</b>
<i>A Ceremony of Carols</i>	1942	22.33	2.88	20	G#'	6.15	4.25	<b>mp</b>
<i>Rejoice in the Lamb</i>	1943	22	1.71	20	G#'	7.32	3.9	<b>mp</b>
<i>Festival Te Deum</i>	1945	24	1.77	23	B'	8.46	4.3	<b>mp</b>
<i>A Wedding Anthem</i>	1949	21	2.93	23	B'	6.35	4.23	<b>mp</b>
<i>Spring Symphony</i>	1949	22	2.02	19.5	G <sup>50</sup> cents	5.48	5.48	<b>mf</b>
<i>Gloriana</i>	1953	12	1.72	21	A'	2	6.55	<b>ff</b>
<b><i>Missa Brevis</i></b>	<b>1959</b>	<b>21.33</b>	<b>1.83</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>G'</b>	<b>4.62</b>	<b>5.05</b>	<b>mf</b>
<i>War Requiem</i>	1961	17.5	1.54	21	A'	5.44	4.19	<b>mp</b>
<i>Voices For Today</i>	1965	21	1.99	23	B'	5.94	4.59	<b>mf</b>
<b><i>The Golden Vanity</i></b>	<b>1966</b>	<b>21.67</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>G#<sup>50</sup> cents</b>	<b>3.78</b>	<b>4.79</b>	<b>mf</b>
<b><i>Children's Crusade</i></b>	<b>1968</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>1.34</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>G'</b>	<b>3.77</b>	<b>4.41</b>	<b>mp</b>
<i>Owen Wingrave</i>	1972	22	2.3	19	G'	10.19	3.28	<b>p</b>
Mean Value		20.86	1.98	20.67	G# <sup>67</sup> cents	5.75	4.54	<b>mf</b>

Lads are directed to sing louder than boys. The mean value for boys is a little louder than **mp**, for lads a little quieter than **mf**. Numerically the difference is expressed as 0.38, which is noteworthy on a scale where the lowest value is 1 and the highest is 8.

To make an overall summary, Britten's lads sing lower, louder music with shorter phrases, smaller intervals and a greater range of pitch than his boys do.

<sup>4</sup> Dynamics are represented by integers: - p=3, mp=4, mf=5, f=6, therefore the number column is more accurate than the one with conventional dynamic indications.

These results need to be taken in musical context and each of the 13 works analysed will be discussed in chronological order of composition.

**Table 3**  
**Mean values for boys' chorus and lads' chorus**

	Mean Date of Composition	Total Pitch Range	Pitch Proximity	Mean Pitch		Phrase Length	Notated Dynamic	
Lads	1964	22	1.69	19.5	G' 50 cents	4.06	4.75	<i>mf</i>
Boys	1949	21.4	2.08	21.27	A'27 cents	6.3	4.37	<i>mp</i>

### ***A Boy Was Born***

This piece is the one that brought a young Britten to the attention of the public. It was broadcast on BBC radio in 1934, coincidentally on the day Elgar died (Kennedy, 1993). It is a set of variations for mixed choir and boys' choir with texts related to Christmas. It is notable in this piece, Britten's 'real opus 1' (Oliver, 1996: 39), he makes a distinction between sopranos (women) and trebles (boys). This shows that, from the outset of his career, he had in his mind clear timbral distinctions between chorus groups of similar pitch ranges. This work has the shortest mean phrase length of any of the boys' pieces (5.23'), but it is nevertheless longer than the longest mean phrase length of any of the lads' pieces (*Missa Brevis* at 4.62'). On the other criteria measured, the boys in *A Boy Was Born* are similarly close to the results for lads' pieces, but not close enough to question the categorisation of this work as one involving boys. There is no need for the continental sound to make a boys' choir have a contrasting timbre to a women's (or mixed adult's) choir which was one of the aims of Britten deploying these forces in this piece.

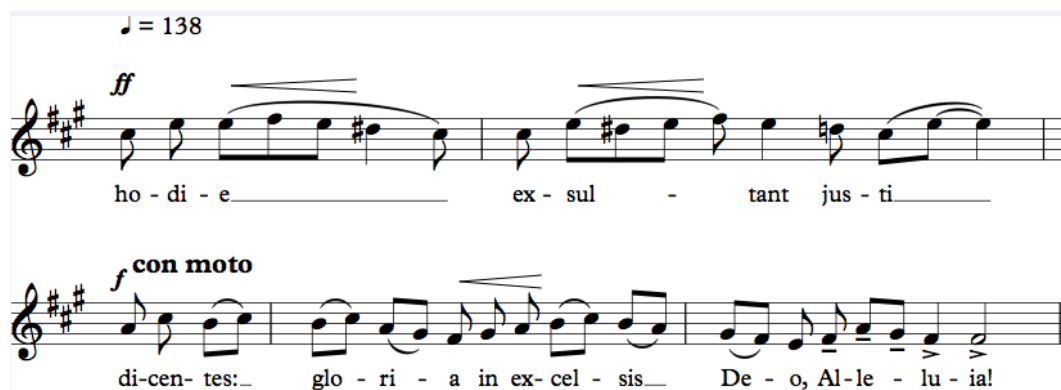
### ***A Ceremony of Carols***

This work was composed for treble voices only with harp. Ever, the pragmatist, Britten gives a piano *ossia*. The use of harp, rather than organ, is a bold stroke for a religious work and, for Bridcut, makes the work sound less ecclesiastical (Bridcut 2011: 129). Britten's delight at hearing this performed by the continental style voices of Westminster Cathedral Choir and the fact that the first performance of *A Ceremony of Carols* was given by a choir of women does not alter the fact that Britten had boy trebles very much in mind when he composed this, as the present analysis demonstrates.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that Wiebe's analysis of this work places it firmly in the

<sup>5</sup> After the first performance, Britten revised the score of *A Ceremony of Carols* and conducted the premiere of the revised version himself with a chorus of boys (see Britten, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 2, 1041).

continental sound group, particularly 'In Freezing Winter Night'. However, much of her discussion is of the treble solo, which is outside the remit of the present study (Wiebe, 2012). There are lively and strong numbers in this collection, 'Welcum Yole' and 'This Little Babe' for example, but the plainsong processional and recessional put us very much in the sound-world of the English cathedral tradition (for example, Fig. 1). Thus the interior evidence of this music, particularly the large pitch proximity and long phrases, identify this work as one for boys.

**Figure 1**  
**A Ceremony of Carols, p. 2, voices only.**



### ***Rejoice in the Lamb***

This work was commissioned by Rev Walter Hussey of Northampton who was a great patron of the arts in the Church. At the time Britten received the commission, he had not met Hussey, nor heard the choir in his church. Their correspondence indicates an assumption on Britten's part that the singers of the highest part were boys, but he does enquire whether the altos were men or women (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 2, 1991: 1139-1143). The score lists trebles and this piece has the hallmarks of Britten's writing for boys; long phrases, quiet dynamics, and a large range of pitch. The pitch proximity is low in this work, but this may be attributed to the many repeated notes in the opening section (Fig. 2).

### ***Festival Te Deum***

Britten's next work involving trebles also has them inside the Anglican church and its liturgy. Like *Rejoice In The Lamb*, *Festival Te Deum* was written on commission from a church choir which was unknown to Britten. In this case, he found the choir of St Mark's Swindon 'incompetent' and was very disappointed with the first performance (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 2, 1991: 1249). The work presents some technical difficulties to the boys singing it, particularly with the frequent changes of complex time signatures. Nevertheless, Britten incorporates a good deal of unison and canonic writing for the choir, which eases the trebles' burden (as shown in Fig. 3).

This piece incorporates some of Britten's highest writing and longest phrases for a group of boys. He also asks them to deploy a full two octave range when they sing, although their lowest notes are supported by the altos in unison. There is some sustained high writing (including repeated B5s) which Britten would never have written for continental style trebles.

**Figure 2**  
**Rejoice in the Lamb p. 1-3 (voices only: all voices in literal unison)**

♩ = 63 *ppp sost.*

Re-joice in God, O ye tongues; Give the glo-ry to the Lord, and the

*ppp cresc.* 3 3 3

Lamb. Na-tions, and lan-gua-ges, and e-ve-ry crea-ture in which is the

*f* *pp* *cresc.*

Breath of Life. Let man and beast ap-pear be-fore him and

*f* *ppp*

mag-ni-fy his name to-gether.

**Figure 3**  
**Festival Te Deum p. 7-8 (voices only)**

♩ = 144

Treble *f*

The Fa-ther of an in-fin-ite ma-jes-ty Thine hon-our-ab-le, true and on-ly Son;

Alto *f*

The Fa-ther of an in-fin-ite ma-jes-ty Thine hon-our-ab-le, true and on-ly Son;

Tenor *f*

The Fa-ther of an in-fin-ite ma-jes-ty Thine hon-our-ab-le, true and on-ly Son;

Bass *f*

The Fa-ther of an in-fin-ite ma-jes-ty Thine hon-our-ab-le, true and on-ly Son;

### ***A Wedding Anthem***

In this occasional piece, written for the wedding of friends, Britten contrasts a woman's voice with boys' voices. The soprano solo is expansive and expressive. The writing for the trebles of the chorus has a profile that places this firmly as a typical example of Britten's writing for boys, with its high pitch profile, long phrases, and large pitch proximity. For a church-intended piece, *A Wedding Anthem* has elements that seem more suitable to the operatic stage, particularly the duet for soprano and tenor 'These they are not two, Love has made them one' (Britten, 1950: 18-22), but analysis of the treble chorus writing supports the impression that is music for boys, very much in the Anglican cathedral tradition. This is scarcely surprising given its first performance as part of an Anglican liturgy and in the presence of the Head of the Church of England, King George VI.

### ***Spring Symphony***

In this work, Britten again makes a contrast in the timbre of a chorus of boys and one of women. However, in this work, from 1949, we start to see the emergence of Britten's interest in the continental sound, reflecting one of the songs about 'the happy, dirty, driving boy' (Britten, 1950: 35). In this passage (a typical part of which is given in Fig. 4), one of five occasions in this work when the trebles sing, the treble chorus is set against a soprano solo, as it was in *A Wedding Anthem*. Rupprecht reads the earthy vigour of this juxtaposition as something sexual (as much art about spring is) (Rupprecht, 2017). There is certainly a great deal of robust energy in this song, but it displays no more typically continental characteristics than the *Spring Symphony* as a whole, other than it is relentlessly loud until the final few bars. The trebles in this song sing high notes with a relatively large pitch proximity and long phrases. They are also called upon to whistle part of the piece, thereby adopting far more rough-and-tumble personas than the 'emasculated flutes' of the cathedral choir.

This earthiness is even more evident in the Finale of the *Spring Symphony* when the trebles burst forth with the ancient English song 'Sumer is Icumen In' in unison with four horns and set in metrical contrast with the mixed choir and the rest of the orchestra. Despite their very loud singing and low pitch range, this is not as fully continental style, under the criteria used in the present analysis, as some of Britten's later writing because of its comparatively long phrases and large pitch proximity. However, this is partly explained by the fact that the melody is a traditional one, not of Britten's own composition.

Taken as a whole, the treble writing in *Spring Symphony* presents itself as a borderline case; not gracious enough to belong to the same category of works as *Rejoice in the Lamb* and *Festival Te Deum*, nor dirty and driving enough to be categorised as a lads' piece. It has the shortest mean phrase length of any of the pieces classified as 'boys' in this study and its notated dynamics indicate louder music than for any work analysed other than *Gloriana* (which is a special case as the chorus is offstage, besides which the trebles in *Gloriana* sing so little that data related to them are statistically insignificant).

Furthermore, the values for mean pitch and pitch range in *Spring Symphony* are more akin to those of the identified lads' pieces, as Table 4 shows.

**Figure 4**  
**Spring Symphony p 35-38 voices only.**

The musical score for *Spring Symphony*, pages 35-38, voices only, is presented in four systems. Each system includes parts for Soprano Solo (S.S.) and Boys Choir (B.Ch.). The lyrics are: "A hap-py, hap-py, dir-ty, dri-ving boy. Till that time come a-gain she could not live a maid. boy, dir-ty boy hap-py When as the rye reach to the chin And chop-cher-ry, chop cher-ry rip with-in, boy dir-ty boy hap-py Straw-berries swim-ming in the cream And school-boys play-ing in the stream. dir-ty dri-ving boy Straw-berries swim-ming in the cream And school-boys play-ing in the stream." The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, ff, mf, pp, dim., ten., marc. catiss.), articulation (accents), and phrasing (slurs).

**Table 4**

**Spring Symphony Compared to Lads' and Boys' Mean Values**

	Total Pitch Range	Mean Pitch Proximity	Mean Pitch		Mean Phrase Length (seconds)	Mean Notated Dynamic	
<b>Spring Symphony</b>	22	2.02	19.5	G' 50 cents	5.48	5.48	<b>mf</b>
Mean Value Lads' Chorus	22	1.69	19.5	G' 50 cents	4.06	4.75	<b>mf</b>
Mean Value Boys' Chorus	21.4	2.08	21.27	A' 27 cents	6.3	4.37	<b>mp</b>

It could be that Britten dearly wanted to exploit a realistic, flesh-and-blood lads' sound at this time, but was not yet completely familiar with the capabilities of singers trained by Malcolm, Burgess, and the like. It is also possible that he had not fully realised the best way a composer can exploit that characteristic continental sound. This would indicate that *Spring Symphony* is more accurately described as a transitional work, rather than a borderline one.

This point of view is supported by criticism of *Spring Symphony* in which the critic claimed he could not hear the boys' voices well enough in the Finale (Howes quoted in Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 3, 1991: 527). It may be that Britten saw this as a technical shortcoming for which he was partly responsible and improved his technique in writing for this type of situation in subsequent pieces.

### ***Gloriana***

The part for chorus of trebles in *Gloriana* has the louder notated dynamics and shorter phrases than any other work examined in this study. Its total range of pitch (a mere 12 semitones) is far lower than any of the other pieces. These exceptional results must be taken in context, however. The trebles never appear on stage, they join the men of Lord Essex's retinue to sing a single brief passage off stage (representing less than 1% of the music in the opera). Despite the statistically insignificant number of notes in for the trebles in this piece, it is an interesting example of a transitional work. Here is Britten trying to obtain as robust a continental sound as possible, before George Malcolm opened his ears to the possibilities that a genuinely continental-sounding chorus of lads could offer.

It is also significant that the trebles for the opening performances of *Gloriana* were provided by Kingsland Central School,<sup>6</sup> an ordinary secondary school in a working-class area of London who could presumably be relied on to satisfy 'his [Britten's] preference for the raw, vibrant tone of boys' voices as distinct from the cultivated purity of the Anglican Cathedral tradition' (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 1, 1991: 325 (editorial comment)).

### ***Missa Brevis***

*Missa Brevis* is the first work Britten composed that can be unequivocally identified as for lads' voices because of the choir for whom he composed it, that of Westminster Cathedral. The context is liturgical and the words sacred and in Latin, but in certain important respects, the trebles here are required to sing more robustly than the 'dirty, happy, driving boys' of the *Spring Symphony*. Here, for the first time, Britten takes the ecclesiastical treble away from the conventional English sound, 'Et, O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!' (Verlaine quoted in Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 3, 1991: 527),

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<sup>6</sup> *Gloriana* programme, reproduced in Britten, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 4, 149. Kingsland Central School also provided trebles to sing the parts of midshipmen in the opening performances of *Billy Budd* in 1950 and had an association with The Royal Opera House during the 1950s during which time they provided boys and girls for small roles and chorus parts. Britten, *Letters from a Life*, vol. 4, 390.



and uses the 'raw, cheeky din' (Shaw-Taylor quoted in Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 3, 1991: 527), which he preferred. That is not to say that *Missa Brevis* lacks reverence. Britten was a deeply spiritual man whose religious feelings changed and developed throughout his life (Elliott, 2006), as did his writing for treble voices.

The sound world of *Missa Brevis* is partly the result of Britten's epiphany on hearing how Malcolm's lads could sing and the full realisation of the technical means he needed to employ to exploit that sound to its fullest extent.

### **War Requiem**

After *Missa Brevis*, Britten returned to the pure treble sound only once, in the *War Requiem*. This work, part liturgical, part operatic, has deep symbolism in Britten's choice of musical forces. Of the three soloists (designed to be sung by an Englishman, a German, and a Russian), the tenor and baritone deliver the poetry of Owens in an emotionally intense, highly personal, and intimate way, accompanied by what Britten calls a chamber orchestra (actually an ensemble of just 12 musicians). This is in contrast to a full orchestra, soprano soloist, and large choir who perform the rituals of mourning and regret that are the lot of nations in this situation. The 'distant' (Britten, 1964: ix) boys appear, with a small organ in support, on four occasions in this 90 minute work. Like the large chorus of adults, they sing only liturgical Latin, but seem to have a different role in the symbolic drama of the piece. At first glance, the boys represent angels, or at the very least some super-human voice or some agency outside or above the horror of war. Wiebe views the remoteness (both physically and musically—she describes them as being 'on a different temporal plane' (2012: 210) as the boys representing something superhuman. 'Suspended above the chorus, human uncertainty, they offer a more assured representation of paradise, if also distant, mysterious, and a little cold'. (Wiebe, 2012: 211).

At Britten's insistence, their description on the programme note was changed from 'ethereal' to 'innocent' (Ashley 2008: 80). Furthermore, they sing the text 'Chorus angelorum tu sucipiat' (may choirs of angels receive you) suggesting that they are not the angels themselves. The trebles here may be seen to be lost innocents in this drama, the voiceless victims for whom Britten so often wished to give a voice.

Britten's lads in the next two works he composed for trebles (*The Golden Vanity* and *Children's Crusade*) include innocent victims too, so why does the treble writing in *War Requiem* present 'the remote, eternally strengthening intonation of the boys' choir'? (Mann quoted in Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 5, 1991: 404). The answer could well lie in the nature of the drama and ritual that unfolds in the *War Requiem*. Although Britten used both lads' and boys' voices to represent innocence, the continental sound is far more connected with the things of earth. In *Children's Crusade*, for example, it is the bodies of the children that form the central part of the drama: their bodily suffering from cold, want, and hunger. Similarly, in *The Golden Vanity*, the text is concerned with real physical action: sailing, fighting, swimming, drowning.

In the *War Requiem*, the physical removal of the boys from the rest of the ensemble further emphasises their removal from the turmoil of conflict. They are not angels in any sense, including the representative; but their purity and innocence, characterised by the timbre of the English cathedral boy sound, sets them apart for the guns and blood of Owen's poetry and from the human grief of the adult choir and adding a super-human element to their persona.

### *Voices for Today*

**Table 5**  
**Voices for Today**

	Total Pitch Range	Mean Pitch Proximity	Mean Pitch		Mean Phrase Length (seconds)	Mean Notated Dynamic	
Voices For Today	21	1.99	23	B'	5.94	4.59	<i>mf</i>
Mean Value Boys' Chorus	21.4	2.08	21.27	A' 27 cents	6.3	4.37	<i>mp</i>
Mean Value (All 13 works analysed)	20.86	1.98	20.67	A' 67 cents	5.75	4.54	<i>mf</i>

The data from the analysis of the treble part in this work reveal a profile very similar to the mean profile of works classified as boys' (see Table 5). The exception to this is the mean pitch of B', which is as high as any in the repertoire analysed. Britten's apparent decision to reject the continental sound could have been partly for practical reasons. The work was premiered simultaneously in three separate cities, two of them overseas, and he would therefore have no influence on the choice of treble choir performing it (Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 5, 1991).

There may have been artistic reasons as well. The text for *Voices of Today* is a sort of tapestry of notable quotations from a wide variety of sources, all of which could be said to be wise aphorisms. In choosing a more conventional treble sound, Britten imbued his text with a super-human quality, just as he did in the *War Requiem* four years earlier. By the time Britten had made a full appraisal of the capacities of a chorus of lads, he had also apparently realised the sound of Anglican cathedral style boys had a place in his music too.

### *The Golden Vanity*

The Vienna Boys Choir commissioned this work from Britten to be a semi-staged piece they could take on tour. The choir has a tradition of performing longer, dramatic works on tour, often abridged versions of operettas. The boys of the choir pleaded with Britten

to write them something more masculine and something that did not involve any of them having to dress as girls (Kildea, 2013). The result is that *The Golden Vanity*, based on the eponymous English folk song, includes a plea for the innocent and a nautical setting which are very much Britten tropes. There is also much of this music which is martial, almost macho, as if Britten wished to take the Vienna Boys as far from their twee image as their faux sailor suits would allow. The present analysis shows he did this through loud dynamics, relatively low pitch and short phrases. It is clear by the 1960s Britten had developed the technical means to achieve his goal of exploiting the continental sound as a characteristic timbre.

### Children's Crusade

This work was written for the fiftieth anniversary of the Save the Children fund to a text by Bertolt Brecht translated by Hans Keller. It was written for Burgess' Wandsworth choir to perform and analysis reveals a profile similar to *The Golden Vanity* and *Missa Brevis*, except that *Children's Crusade* has a lower mean pitch proximity. This could be because the atonal nature of this work makes it difficult enough to sing, and using small melodic intervals may mitigate this difficulty, as Fig. 5 exemplifies. It could also be because smaller intervals may better reflect the bleak hopelessness of this work.

**Figure 5**  
**Children's Crusade p. 73-74 Voices only**

The musical score for *Children's Crusade*, pages 73-74, voices only, is presented in two systems. The first system covers the lyrics: "Once, to be sure, they found a sol-dier Wound-ed, in pine woods he lay." The second system covers: "They tend-ed him se - ven days, So that he could tell them the way." The score includes various tempo markings such as *rall.*, *slow*, *a tempo*, and *accel.*, as well as dynamic markings like *p* (piano), *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo), and *pp dolce*. The tempo is initially marked as  $\text{♩} = 92$  and later as  $\text{♩} = 60$ . The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and uses a variety of note values and rests to create a complex, atonal texture.

Despite Britten's score direction that the work was to be sung by boys, he clearly left open the possibility of performance by both boys and girls. The title of this work, which references an event in the thirteenth century, is gender neutral. Two of the soloists are lovers (in a performance in St Paul's Cathedral in 1969, this could only mean a

heterosexual couple). It is also a truism that war does not discriminate on gender grounds those children whom it wishes to kill.

Therefore, unlike *The Golden Vanity*, *Gloriana*, and parts of the *Spring Symphony*, the treble sound here is not being used to suggest a happy-go-lucky, adolescent swagger. Britten knew his first performance would involve only the Wandsworth lads and their sound, the continental sound, is representative of flesh and blood humanity, rather than the disembodied philosophising of *Voices for Today* or the distant innocence of the boys' voices in the *War Requiem*. In *Children's Crusade* it is the children's innocent flesh that suffers and perishes, and this harsh, visceral approach, represented by the continental style voice, makes Britten's pacifist pleading all the more eloquent.

### **Owen Wingrave**

This work, too, is concerned with delivering a pacifist message and was composed for television at the height of the Vietnam War. It is perhaps Britten's least known opera (Carpenter, 1992). Its chorus of boys appear once, briefly, in each of the two acts. Analysis of the music suggests that Britten was clearly writing for boys' rather than lads' sound. However, the statistical sample taken from analysis of this work is too small to be of great use in this study. Unlike *Gloriana*, which also has a very small amount of music sung by an off-stage treble chorus, *Owen Wingrave* does not come from a period when Britten's thinking about treble voices was evolving in a significant way.

### **Conclusion**

As Britten reached the last phase of his career, his preference for the continental sound became more pronounced. As Evans says 'Since the *Spring Symphony* at least, Britten had treated the boy's voice as an incisive wind instrument' (Evans, 1996: 436). This may be so in general terms, but it does not mean that Britten had abandoned the traditional English cathedral choir sound entirely. He uses it to great effect in some later works, notably the *War Requiem*, but his career showed a marked move towards the continental sound as it progressed.

After his revelatory experience with Malcolm and the Westminster Cathedral singers in January 1959, and his increasingly close relationship with Burgess and the Wandsworth lads, Britten had at his disposal extremely capable choirs and directors with the right kind of sound and a commitment to performing his music. Like his relationships with other performers, such as Pears and Rostropovich, these associations had an influence on how Britten composed.

This study demonstrates that Britten wrote differently for boys' choruses and lads' choruses, but that this is a nuanced rather than a polar difference. *Spring Symphony*, for example, has passages which work very well sung in continental style and the context would suggest that Britten preferred the sound of 'voices from the street or the playground' (Bridcut, 2011: 211). However, it wasn't until *Missa Brevis* that Britten found the technical parameters in his music that best exploited this type of singing.

With these results and conclusions in mind, directors of children's choirs may consider the sort of sound that is suitable for Britten's works on a piece-by-piece basis. This speaks to historically informed interpretation of Britten's works; of how best to reflect his intentions. It provides evidence from the text of the score that can supplement the understanding of interpretation which comes from listening to Britten's own recordings of these pieces.

There is also the question of what these results can mean for composers in the future who wish to write for boys' or lads' choruses and wish to make the differentiation. Perhaps just as usefully, this study identifies the techniques that Britten uses to enable his choruses to sound either like 'happy, dirty, driving boys' (Britten, 1951: 35) or 'the remote, eternally strengthening intonation of the boys' choir' (Mann quoted in Britten ed. Reed *et al*, vol. 5, 1991: 404). These techniques can be adopted by future composers writing for groups of children to produce either of these effects or to take a nuanced approach to the contrasting qualities of these sounds.

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