

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: INNOVATIVE USE OF TECHNIQUE IN BENJAMIN
 BRITTEN'S CELLO WORKS: THE INSPIRATION OF
 MSTISLAV ROSTROPOVICH

Elizabeth Shin-I Su, Doctor of Musical Art, 2003

Dissertation directed by: Professor Evelyn Elsing
 School of Music

Benjamin Britten was one of the most prolific and well-known English composers of the mid-twentieth century. During his life, he was widely recognized for his unique creative spirit, which, through his music, enriched people throughout the world. Britten was constantly looking for new possibilities for unique sounds and highly contrasted moods and rhythms. Thus, even today, his music remains riveting.

Britten introduced challenging cello techniques in his compositions inspired by Mstislav Rostropovich. Rostropovich's natural physical attributes – including his large hands, long fingers, and especially his great strength and stamina – all contributed to his astounding ability on the cello. Study of previous composers' works for Rostropovich,

combined with Britten's first-hand understanding of the cellist's amazing capabilities, assisted Britten in writing his stunning cello compositions. After careful study of all of Britten's cello works, I have categorized six important techniques: multiple stops, drone, unique use of *pizzicato*, harmonics, separation of voices, and *moto perpetuo*. Each of the six categories will be identified and examined in this dissertation within the context of the compositions in which they appear.

I have chosen the performance option for this dissertation. In support of my dissertation, two recitals were presented in two public recitals in Gildenhorn Recital Hall of University of Maryland on September 14, 2002, and March 8, 2003. For the purpose of contrast in style and sound, *Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, Op. 72* and the *Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, Op. 65* comprised the first recital. The second recital included *Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, Op. 87* along with the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 68*.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. A brief history of Britten's life is included in the first chapter. His compositions written prior to the cello works inspired by Rostropovich are the focus of the second chapter. The third chapter features a discussion of Rostropovich's influence on Britten. Chapter Four is an in-depth examination of the characteristic techniques found in Britten's intriguing compositions for cello.

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by

Elizabeth Shin-I Su

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2003

Advisory Committee:

Professor Evelyn Elsing, Chair
Dr. Suzanne Beicken
Professor Denny Gulick
Professor Rita Sloan
Professor James Stern

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INTRODUCTION

During the last years of his life, the renowned British composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) wrote five stunning and innovative cello works dedicated to the remarkable Soviet cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich (1927-). An outstanding composer of vocal music, Britten was deeply impressed by the artistry and personality of Rostropovich. As a result, Britten not only wrote these extraordinary compositions inspired by the cellist, but he also introduced challenging new techniques for the cello in these works.

None of Britten's prior writings for cello achieved the same level of virtuosity found in the five works composed for Rostropovich. Rostropovich's natural physical attributes—including his large hands, long fingers, and especially his great strength and stamina—all contributed to his outstanding ability on the cello. Study of previous composers' works for Rostropovich, combined with Britten's first-hand understanding of the cellist's amazing capabilities, assisted Britten in writing these unique compositions.

This dissertation project is intended to provide (for the benefit of both listeners and performers) a useful characterization, analysis, and demonstration of the novel techniques that Britten incorporated into these works. After a careful study of Britten's cello works, I have identified six categories of such techniques: multiple stops, drone, unique use of *pizzicato*, harmonics, separation of voices, and *moto perpetuo*. Each of the six techniques will be defined and examined within the framework of Britten's cello works inspired by Rostropovich.

These works include:

Sonata For Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65 (1961)

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68 (1963)

Suite No. 1 in G Major, op. 72 (1964)

Suite No. 2 in D Major, op. 80 (1967)

Suite No. 3 in C Major, op. 87 (1971)

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. A brief history of Britten's life is included in the first chapter. Britten's compositions written prior to the cello works inspired by Rostropovich are the focus of the second chapter. The third chapter features a discussion of Rostropovich's influence on Britten. Chapter Four is an in-depth examination of the characteristic techniques found in these works.

In support of this dissertation, I have performed two recitals at the University of Maryland's Gildenhorn Recital Hall. For the purpose of contrast in style and sound, *Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72* and the *Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65* comprised the first recital, presented on 14 September 2002. The second recital, presenting *Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87* along with the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68*, was performed on 8 March 2003. The complete works for these two recitals are listed here. The movements are presented as they appear in the editions cited in the bibliography of this paper.

First Recital Program

Suite No. 1 in G major, Op. 72

Benjamin Britten

Canto primo: Sostenuto e largamente (2:21)

I. *Fuga: Andante moderato* (3:59)

II. *Lamento: Lento rubato* (3:08)

Canto secondo: Sostenuto (1:11)

III. *Serenata: Allegretto (pizzicato)* (2:13)

IV. *Marcia: Alla marcia moderato* (3:31)

Canto terzo: Sostenuto (2:28)

V. *Bordone: Moderato quasi recitativo* (3:04)

VI. *Moto perpetuo e Canto quarto: Presto* (3:21)

Sonata For Cello and Piano in C Major, Op. 65

Benjamin Britten

I. *Dialogo: Allegro* (7:34)

II. *Scherzo pizzicato: Allegretto* (2:38)

III. *Elegia: Lento* (6:58)

IV. *Marcia: Energico* (2:11)

V. *Moto perpetuo: Presto* (2:40)

Second Recital Program

Suite No. 3 in C Major, Op. 87

Benjamin Britten

I. *Introduzione: Lento* (2:35)

II. *Marcia: Allegro* (1:46)

III. *Canto: Con moto* (1:21)

IV. *Barcarola: Lento* (1:23)

V. *Dialogo: Allegretto* (1:43)

VI. *Fuga: Andante espressivo* (2:36)

VII. *Recitativo: Fantastico* (1:17)

VIII. *Moto perpetuo: Presto* (0:58)

IX. *Passacaglia: Lento solenne* (9:45)

Symphony For Cello and Orchestra, Op. 68

Benjamin Britten

I. *Allegro maestoso* (12:24)

II. *Presto inquieto* (3:54)

III. *Adagio* (11:30)

IV. *Passacaglia: Andante allegro* (7:10)

CHAPTER ONE

The Life of Benjamin Britten

Britten, the Young Prodigy

Edward Benjamin Britten was born on St. Cecilia's Day in Lowestoft, Suffolk, England, on 22 November 1913. He was the youngest of four children. His father, Robert Victor Britten, was a successful dental surgeon and his mother, Edith Britten, was an amateur singer who also enjoyed playing piano. Early in Britten's life, music became an integral part of his childhood. At the age of five, Britten began learning piano and the basic elements to write a piece of music, all taught by his mother. Soon, he was able to compose tone poems inspired by the daily events of the young boy's life.¹

At the age of seven, as Britten's skill at the piano was rapidly progressing, he began private lessons with a local piano teacher, Ethel Astle. With Britten's talent at the piano, he soon became skillful enough to accompany his mother's beautiful voice. In addition to piano lessons, Britten began his formal harmony lessons three years later. Soon, he began to write numerous songs, inspired now by his mother's singing.²

When Britten was ten years old, he entered the South Lodge Preparatory School and began taking viola lessons with Audrey Alston. Alston recognized Britten's musical gifts and encouraged his progress in becoming a composer. In October 1924, Alston took Britten to the Norwich Triennial Festival for an orchestral performance of *The Sea*, composed and conducted by the outstanding composer

Frank Bridge. The festival had a great impact on Britten who was “knocked sideways” upon hearing Bridge’s work performed.³ Three years later, in 1927, both Britten and Bridge attended the Norwich Triennial Festival again, and this time, Audrey Alston introduced them. Britten subsequently studied for some time under Bridge’s tutelage. Britten wrote years later:

We got on splendidly...and I spent the next morning with him going over some of my music... Even though I was barely in my teens, this was immensely serious and professional study; and the lessons were mammoth. I remember one that started at half past ten, and at tea-time Mrs. Bridge came in and said, “Really, Frank, you must give the boy a break” Often I used to end these marathons in tears; not that he was beastly to me, but the concentrated strain was too much for me... This strictness was the product of nothing but professionalism. Bridge insisted on the absolutely clear relationship of what was in my mind to what was on the paper.”⁴

Himself highly professional, Bridge required Britten’s to develop a foundation that was technical, not just innovative and creative. When Britten wrote a tribute to Bridge about his teaching, Britten said:

“In everything he did for me, there were perhaps above all two cardinal principles. One was that you should find yourself and be true to what you found. The other-obviously connected with the first-was his scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one’s mind. He gave me a sense of technical ambition.”⁵

For the next two years (from September 1928 to July 1930), Britten studied at the Gresham’s School, Holt, in Norfolk. During this period, his interest in music became more serious and intense. While studying at the Gresham’s School, Britten studied piano in London with Harold Samuel and continued composition lessons with Frank Bridge, even during holidays. Britten, upon completing his studies at the Gresham’s School at the age of seventeen, had decided to pursue music as his career.

He always remembered and appreciated his parents and his teachers from his early years and the care they took in preparing and encouraging him as a musician. As a result he eventually composed several works in expression of his gratitude. Both the *Sinfonietta, op. 1* (1932) and *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge, op. 2* (1937), were dedicated to Frank Bridge.⁶

In 1930, Britten received a scholarship to study composition at the Royal College of Music in London. His experience at the Royal College was an unhappy one. He did not find the course of study to be challenging enough, and opportunities for performance at the College were very restricted. Britten expressed his frustration in the following words: “When you are immensely full of energy and ideas, you don’t want to waste your time being taken through elementary exercises in dictation.”⁷ Only one of Britten’s works was performed at the College during the time he was a student there. His *Sinfonietta, op. 1*, a chamber music piece composed for ten instruments, was performed on 16 March 1933.⁸

While a student at the Royal College, Britten sought opportunities to broaden his horizons. He explored a great deal of unfamiliar music, particularly contemporary music, to expand his knowledge. From the classical realm, he was greatly influenced by the works of Mozart and Schubert. Furthermore, Britten’s feeling of melody and lyricism led him to find Mahler’s music attractive. Britten was convinced that Mahler’s songs such as *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and the *Kindertotenlieder* “had expressed the idea behind the music with such success as to achieve real perfection of musical form.”⁹ From among contemporary composers, Britten most admired the works of Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, and

Alban Berg. Britten praised Stravinsky's *Petrushka* as "most glorious", and described his *Le Sacre du Printemps* as the "World's Wonder".¹⁰ Britten was fascinated by Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* asserting: "what a work—the imagination and technique!"¹¹ Britten was mesmerized by Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, which Britten heard in a concert performance at the Queen's Hall. When awarded a scholarship to travel abroad, the young composer wished to study with Berg in Vienna. Britten's parents objected due to the rumor that Berg was "not a good influence."¹² The implication was that there was something immoral about both Berg and his music. Nevertheless, Berg remained one of Britten's favorite composers.¹³

Britten's Reputation Grows

Although Britten found his experience at the Royal College unsatisfying, his gift for composing was not completely unrecognized during his years as a student there. He received numerous awards from the College, and this helped expand his reputation outside of the school. Also, he was able to present his works to audiences outside the College with the help of Anne Macnaghten, a violinist who had founded a contemporary music concert series with the conductor Iris Lemare and the composer Elisabeth Lutyens. Through the Macnaghten-Lemare series, Britten's *Phantasy for String Quintet in one movement* (1932) and *Three Two Part Songs for female voices to words by Walter de la Mare* (1931) were given on 12 December 1932. The success of the concert earned Britten great reviews in *The Times*, *Musical Times*, and *Music Lover*.

Britten was widely known by the British public by the time he completed his studies at the Royal College at the end of 1933. Music composition then became the

main source of his income, and his works were performed frequently, to great acclaim by the press. As composition became his livelihood, Britten was willing and able to compose for a great variety of musical genres.

In May of 1935, John Grierson, the head of the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, recognized Britten's talent and invited him to write music for the GPO cinema. His great drive and flexibility enabled him to craft works quickly, even with the challenge of Grierson's requests for distinctive music styles to match the style of different films. Britten once commented that, "[I] had to work quickly, to force [myself] to work when [I] didn't want to and to get used to working in all kinds of circumstances."¹⁴

Also working at the GPO was the gifted English poet W. H. Auden. The two worked collaboratively on many songs, Britten focusing on the music while Auden wrote the lyrics. As a result, Britten's and Auden's first two film scores, *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*, were considered upon their release to be the two finest documentary films in the history of cinema. The success of the two documentaries ironically expanded Britten's career opportunities beyond film, though later he would be asked to work for theater, radio, and other film works as well.

News of Britten's musical ability in writing occasional and incidental music spread quickly and lived long. Years later, when he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music from the Cambridge University in 1969, Britten was praised by the University Orator: "[Britten] likes composing works on commission—a rare quality..."¹⁵ Britten's readiness to write for unusual combinations of musical forces,

his development as a composer, and his ability to get behind an idea and translate it into a new musical language, were all evidence of his astounding talent.¹⁶

A Visit to America

Through his association with Auden, Britten gained “a fuller sense of an artist’s political responsibility, a deeper appreciation of the beauties of poetry, and a growing awareness of the aesthetic problems involved in the alliance of words and music”.¹⁷ Auden and Britten became good friends and were an influence on each other, not only in their artistry but also in their decision to emigrate from England.

In response to the darkening economic, social, and political horizons in Europe, Auden emigrated to America early in 1939 thinking that he would have more freedom there to work and develop his artistry. While Britten also felt a worsening of the political climate in Europe, he was also dissatisfied and frustrated with the reception of his works, feeling “muddled, fed-up and looking for work, longing to be used.”¹⁸ Accompanied by the great tenor Peter Pears, Britten followed Auden’s footsteps by going abroad to America, hoping a new environment would give him better opportunities for artistic development.¹⁹

Britten and Pears departed for Canada in April of 1939. Later that year they were invited to New York to hear the first American performance of Britten’s work *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* performed by the New York Philharmonic on August 21. Britten and Pears remained on New York’s Long Island as guests of friends for two and a half years. During his first year in the United States, Britten completed his *Violin Concerto in D minor, op. 15* (1939) and an orchestral work, *Canadian Carnival, op. 19* (1939). One of Britten’s most important compositions

written in this period was the song cycle *Les Illuminations*, op. 18 (1939), which proved Britten to be a song-writer with the ability to write with “exceptional range and subtlety.”²⁰ Other significant works from this time included the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, op. 22 (1940), *String Quartet No. 1 in D*, op. 25 (1941), *Sinfonia da Requiem*, op. 20 (1940), and several works for piano.²¹

Return to England

While his career seemed to be a success during his years in New York, Britten suffered a period of mental illness in 1940 and decided to return to England. Britten and Pears were kept waiting for nearly six months before they could finally obtain tickets home in March of 1942. During this time, they had the opportunity to hear Britten’s *Sinfonia da Requiem* conducted by Serge Koussevitzky in Boston. Koussevitzky proposed to Britten that he write a full-scale opera and allocated a \$1000 commission fee from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation in memory of the conductor’s late wife, Natalie.²²

Upon their return to England, Britten and Pears continued giving concerts of all kinds. At the same time, Pears was engaged in the productions of the Sadler’s Wells Opera Company. The director, Joan Cross, would later arrange the first public performance of Britten’s first opera *Peter Grimes*, op. 33 (1945), commissioned by the Koussevitsky Music Foundation. This premiere marked the reopening of the Sadler’s Wells Theatre on June 7, 1945. The success of *Peter Grimes* stamped Britten as “the most gifted music dramatist England had produced since Purcell.”²³

The years following *Peter Grimes* were amazingly productive. Britten produced an incredible number of compositions. His many large-scale operas from this time include such works as *Billy Budd*, op. 50 (1951), *Gloriana*, op. 53 (1953), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. 64 (1960). He also composed chamber operas including among others *The Beggar's Opera*, op. 43 (1948), *The Turn of the Screw*, op. 54 (1954) and *Curlew River*, op. 71 (1964). Britten composed not just operas, he also wrote a full-length ballet called *The Prince of the Pagoda*, op. 57 (1955). Furthermore, his famous *War Requiem*, op. 66 (1961), which was premiered in May 1962 and celebrated the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, had great impact on audiences and earned Britten considerable public regard.

The Founding of the Aldeburgh Festival

In 1947, Britten moved from Snape to Aldeburgh. While there, he founded the Aldeburgh Festival which opened on 5 June 1948 and was originally conducted on an annual basis. Britten's compositions played an important part in the festival's program, and many of his compositions received their first performance there. In the beginning, the festival was limited to people living in Aldeburgh, but as the program gradually expanded, many guest artists from abroad were invited to perform, including a remarkable group of Russian artists. The Aldeburgh Festival was fundamental to supporting Britten's friendship and collaboration with Mstislav Rostropovich who was to become a frequent guest artist there. Rostropovich premiered Britten's first cello work, the *Sonata For Cello and Piano in C Major*, at Aldeburgh in a highly successful performance.

Russian Reception

In March of 1963, Britten and Pears were invited to Russia for festivals featuring British music. These events, focused in Moscow and Leningrad, included orchestral performances of Britten's *Sea Interludes*, and the *Passacaglia* from *Peter Grimes*, *Sinfonia da Requiem*, and *Serenade op. 31* (1943). Chamber recitals included the *Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major*, the *Winter Words, op. 52* (1953) and the *Six Holderlin Fragments, op. 61* (1958). At both festivals, Britten's music received a very warm response from Russian audiences. During an interview with a *Pravda* reporter, Britten expressed his appreciation to the Soviet audiences:

[I] was assailed with doubts whether the Soviet audiences would understand and accept [my] musical art ... I am happy at having had my doubts dispelled at the very first concert. The Soviet public proved not only unusually musical—that I knew all along—but showed an enviable breadth of artistic perception. It is a wonderful public."²⁴

This interview was widely quoted in the international press and may have played a major role in improving Anglo-Soviet cultural relations.²⁵

Expansion of Aldeburgh

The scope of the Aldeburgh Festival was greatly expanded in 1967 with the opening of the new Malting Concert Hall in Snape. The new performance space was widely acclaimed as one of the finest in the country and was not only able to house large opera productions, but also brought to a greater public's attention of Britten's power as a conductor of orchestral repertory. Britten's last and only opera following the expansion of the Aldeburgh Festival was *Death in Venice, op. 88* (1972) which premiered in June 1973. Tragically, in the midst of this powerful and creative period,

Britten suffered from a reoccurrence of his ongoing heart ailment and could not participate in the premiere of *Death in Venice*.

Death and Recognition

Britten's health continued to deteriorate despite surgery intended to repair his heart, and within the three years of the production of *Death in Venice*, he was too ill to produce large-scale works. He was still able in his last years to write two of his most dominating works: *Phaedra*, *op. 93* (1975), a solo cantata with orchestra, and *String Quartet No. 3*, *op. 94* (1975). Britten, who was "unafraid" of death, passed away in Pears's arms on 4 December 1976 at the composer's home in Aldeburgh, Suffolk.²⁶ The *String Quartet No. 3* was premiered on 19 December 1976, fifteen days after the composer's death.

A prolific composer with a sensitive personality, seeking to express the depth of his emotions in his compositions, Britten produced an abundance of works noteworthy for their authentic expressivity and musical originality. In an obituary in the *Listener*, Michael Tippett, composer of *Fanfare for Brass*, paid this tribute to Britain's great composer: "[Britten] has been for me the most purely musical person I have ever met and I have ever known."²⁷ The *London Times* also published a powerful tribute to Britten stating: "he was the first British composer to capture and hold the attention of musicians and their audiences the world over, as well as at home; he was the first British composer to center his mature work prolifically on the musical theatre—grand opera, chamber opera, sacred music-drama."²⁸

Britten's funeral was held three days after his death, and Rostropovich, who had hurried over from Germany, was among the mourners. Britten was buried in the

churchyard of the Aldeburgh Parish Church. His funeral was both a reminder of all he had done for the musical world and a celebration of his inspirational talents.

During his life, Britten was widely recognized for his uniquely creative spirit, which, through his music, enriched people around the world. In his music, Britten was constantly looking for new possibilities for unique sounds and highly contrasted moods and rhythms. In his acceptance speech for the Aspen Award, Britten once stated: "I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to enhance their lives. I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it."²⁹ Composing music was almost the whole of Britten's life. His lifetime companion, Pears, once described Britten as someone who "lived and breathed music."³⁰ There is no doubt that Britten made an astounding contribution to English music which gained in stature and respect throughout the world as a result of the work of the brilliant and prolific composer. Original, personal, and innovative, Britten's music will always remain riveting.

CHAPTER TWO

Instrumental Compositions Preceding the Five Cello Works

In the vast course of his musical career, Britten's vocal music predominated. Before attempting to write music for cello, he had already mastered writing for the voice in the multitude of its possible combinations with instrumental ensembles. He wrote songs for solo voice with a single instrument (piano, guitar, or harp), solo voice with various sizes of orchestra, unaccompanied choral works, choral works accompanied by a single instrument, works for chorus and orchestra, operas, and music for children's voices in various combinations. An examination of the titles and subjects of these vocal works leaves no question that dramatic and serious themes coexisted in Britten's imagination along with his personal expression, humor, and religious faith. Happily, the success of Britten as a composer for voice carries over beautifully into his works for cello.

In the midst of a career in composition, Britten consistently participated in chamber music performances. His experience as a chamber musician gave him a keen appreciation for the importance of the individual part in compositions for all musical genres. Britten's perspective on writing for stringed instruments in particular was a successful personal composite of his experiences as a violist, piano accompanist, chamber musician, composer, and conductor.

While Britten's writing focused primarily on vocal compositions, the quality of his instrumental writing was also consistently high. Most of his instrumental

music was written after he and Pears returned from America in 1942. Among his twenty-five works for large and small orchestra, the early orchestral works such as *Simple Symphony*, op. 4 (1934), *Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes*, op. 33a (1945), and *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, op. 38 (1946) became well known and much recorded. Compared with these successes, Britten's instrumental compositions prior to those for cello were less familiar to audiences beyond his homeland. His attempts to write for individual solo instruments were never long-lived, except in the case of his own instrument the piano. His instrumental compositions prior to his works for cello included: one for solo viola, *Elegy* (1930); one for solo organ, *Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria* (1946); one for solo oboe, *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*, op. 49 (1951); five for solo piano, *Five Waltzes* (1923-1925, later rewritten in 1969), *Three Character Pieces* (1930), *Twelve Variations* (1931), *Holiday Diary*, op. 5 (1934), and *Sonatina Romantica* (1940); three for solo violin with piano accompaniment, *Two Pieces* (1931), *Suite*, op. 6 (1935), and *Reveille* (1937); one for solo viola with piano accompaniment, *Lachrymae*, op. 48 (1950); two for solo oboe with piano accompaniment, *Two Insect Pieces* (1935), and *Temporal Variations* (1936); one for solo timpani with piano accompaniment, *Timpani Piece for Jimmy* (1955); two recorder selections, *Alpine Suite*, for three recorders (1955), and *Scherzo*, for recorder quartet (1955); a trumpet trio, *Fanfare for St. Edmundsbury* (1959); an arrangement of *Soirees Musicales* for military band; and four works for two pianos: *Lullaby for a Retired Colonel* (1936), *Lullaby* (1936), *Introduction and Rondo alla Burlesca*, op. 23, No. 1 (1940), and *Mazurka Elegiaca*, op. 23, No. 2 (1941). With the exception of writing for solo piano,

Britten's interest was more consistently drawn to composition for chamber music than to any of these other instruments in small ensembles. He composed several string quartets: *String Quartet in D Major* (1931, later revised in 1974), *String Quartet No. 1 in D Major, op. 25* (1941), *String Quartet No. 2 in C Major, op. 36* (1945), *Phantasy for String Quintet* (1932), *Phantasy for oboe, violin, viola, and cello, op. 2* (1932), and *Alla quartetto serioso*, (1933; revised 1936). This small number of instrumental compositions illustrates and underscores Britten's relative devotion to vocal composition through his early and middle years.

The situation began to change around the time Britten began to work with cellist Mstislav Rostropovich. Beginning with the *Sonata in C for Cello and Piano* written in 1961, Britten's interest in writing instrumental music superseded his interest in other genres. His *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* written in 1963 was one of his most magnificent works. After completing a composition for solo guitar, *Nocturnal after John Dowland, op. 70* (1963) and the *Cello Suite in G Major* (1964), Britten wrote an interesting quartet, *Gemini Variations, op. 73* for flute, violin, and piano duet (1965), *Hankin Booby*, a folk dance for wind and drums (1966), and the *Suite for solo harp, op. 83* (1969). As Britten's expanding interest in writing music for solo instruments continued, he wrote his second and third cello suites, *Suite No. 2 in D Major* (1967), and *Suite No. 3 in C Major* (1971). Britten's interest in writing cello music, especially in the unaccompanied genre was of course much influenced by Rostropovich. In fact, contributions to the cello repertoire outweighed all others during Britten's later years.

CHAPTER THREE

The Inspiration of Mstislav Rostropovich

It is safe to say that Britten would never have composed his solo cello works had he not been inspired by Mstislav Rostropovich's artistry and personality. Rostropovich was the greatest influence on Britten as an instrumental composer. He wrote a total of five major cello works inspired by Rostropovich: *Sonata for Piano and Cello in C Major, op. 65* (1961); *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68* (1963); *Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72* (1964); *Suite No. 2 for Cello in D Major, op. 80* (1967); and *Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87* (1971).

Britten first met Rostropovich in 1960, in the green room of the London Royal Festival Hall, after hearing the cellist perform Shostakovich's cello concerto. Communicating through an interpreter, Rostropovich, who had already heard of Britten's works "attacked Britten there and pleaded most sincerely and passionately with him to write something for the cello."³¹ Britten, "who had been reluctant to write for the cello as a solo instrument,"³² was impressed by Rostropovich's performance and agreed that a cello sonata would be written and scheduled to be performed at Aldeburgh. Britten's first solo work for cello, *Sonata in C Major*, was thus premiered on July 7, 1961 by Rostropovich. Britten himself was at the piano. With two such extraordinarily talented musicians on the stage, the concert was "bound to take the musical world by storm."³³ *The London Times* printed a rave review of the concert the following morning: "They [Rostropovich and Britten]

played the last two movements as encores: we would gladly have heard the whole sonata again on the spot.”³⁴

Britten’s *Sonata* consists of five compact movements each bearing a unique title that portrays the movement’s distinctive character. Britten’s consistency in placing musical patterns and shapes to fit to the title of each movement led Peter Evans, author of *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, to describe the sonata as “in fact a suite.”³⁵

As a result of the success of the C-major sonata combined with the creative bond that had been established between the cellist and the composer, Britten continued devoting himself to composing cello works for Rostropovich. Britten’s second composition for cello, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, written in 1963, was an even greater creation. Rostropovich praised the work as “the very top of everything ever written for cello.”³⁶ With Britten conducting the orchestra and Rostropovich as the soloist, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* was premiered in Russia on 12 March 1964. The performance was received with great enthusiasm. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, reporting from Moscow, this cello symphony was “Britten’s finest instrumental work to date, a constant joy to the ear, [and] a stimulus to the mind that will be satisfying for many years to come.”³⁷

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra was Britten’s first substantial work to be completed after the *War Requiem*, written in 1960. In the cello symphony, cello and orchestra are equal partners between which two prominent melodic elements simultaneously alternate. Thus, again according to Evans, Britten’s *Cello Symphony* can be considered “as a sonata.”³⁸

After composing the C-major sonata and the cello symphony and hearing Rostropovich's performance of Bach's solo suites for cello at the Aldeburgh Festival, Britten was inspired to tackle the unaccompanied cello genre. He composed a total of three cello suites, all dedicated to Rostropovich. Britten's *Suite No. 1 for Cello* was written during November and December in 1964, slightly more than a year after the completion of the cello symphony. Rostropovich premiered the suite at the Aldeburgh Festival on 27 June 1965. As expected, this first suite, a large-scale virtuosic piece, proved to be the beginning of a masterful series of works. Britten wrote two more cello suites, revealing his growing and imaginative grasp of the genre, and perhaps most of all, a continuing desire to honor Rostropovich, who premiered *Suite No. 2 for Cello*, at Aldeburgh on 17 June 1968. *Suite No. 3 for Cello* was composed early in 1971. Interestingly, the premiere was not performed until December in 1974 because of political problems that Rostropovich encountered in his Soviet homeland during this period.

Each of Britten's cello suites has its own unique character. The first suite, in G Major, with its distinctive chordal *Canto* sections, pays clear homage to Bach's music. The suite may be described as "a song cycle without words."³⁹ The recurring *Canto* which is modified on each of its three returns during the suite is the 'motto theme', linking a succession of character pieces.⁴⁰ The second suite, in D Major, is more relaxed in intensity. Although the suite has no thematic relationship between the movements, each movement contains its own unique character and is filled with substantial elements. The mood of the third suite, in C major is again entirely its own. Britten based the work on a Russian theme "as a tribute to a great Russian

musician and patriot.”⁴¹ It is clear that the third suite cleverly combines musical elements closely associated with both Russia and England. The inspirational and creative collaboration between Britten and Rostropovich is obviously of great importance to any thorough understanding of Britten’s compositional history.

Britten introduced challenging cello techniques in his compositions inspired by Rostropovich whose approach to the cello was remarkable both physically and musically. Harold Rosenthal, in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, describes Rostropovich’s style:

His playing combines unusual accuracy of intonation and fullness of tone in all registers, and his range of colour extends from eerie *sul ponticello* to a threatening rasp, from a lute-like plangency in pizzicato to a sonorous bell-like thrum. He effortlessly employs a variety of techniques, such as *style brise*, left-hand pizzicato, gradations of pizzicato dynamics and cross rhythms, and sustains a powerful initial attack with continued intensity of character.⁴²

Study of previous composers’ work for Rostropovich combined with Britten’s first-hand understanding of the cellist’s amazing capabilities, all assisted Britten in writing his tremendously innovative cello compositions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Innovative Use of Technique in Britten's Cello Compositions

Throughout his cello works, Britten has incorporated new sounds and techniques that are worthy of examination. After a careful study of his five compositions for cello works, I have identified six technique categories. Each category will be described and studied within the framework of the cello works, although not every technique appears in each work. The following categories of techniques shall be presented and analyzed: multiple stops, drone, unique use of *pizzicato*, harmonics, separation of voices, and *moto perpetuo*.

Multiple Stops

The greatest challenge of playing multiple stops on the cello is that of producing a beautiful texture of sound and sustaining that texture through a long musical phrase. Although multiple-stops are commonly found in cello literature, they are difficult to play well, and the technical demands are considerable. The use of multiple stops can be categorized into three different types according to the end goal:

- 1) create harmony and volume
- 2) give the listener an impression of virtuosity, breadth, and drama
- 3) provide a change of texture.

Britten's first use of an extended passage of multiple stops for cello appears in his *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. In the *Sonata for Cello and Piano*, no such passage of multiple stops exists, but in the symphony's slow third movement, such an

example begins five measures after rehearsal number 57 and continues through nine measures after rehearsal number 59 (Example 1).

Example 1

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68, III Movement
Five measures after rehearsal 57 - nine measures after rehearsal 59

The musical score consists of six staves. The first staff is in treble clef and begins with a *pass.* marking. It contains measures 57 and 58, with a *p dolciss.* marking at the end of measure 58. The second staff continues in treble clef, featuring several measures with a '+' sign above the notes, indicating a specific fingering technique. The third staff is in bass clef and includes a *p* marking. The fourth staff is in bass clef and includes a *p espress.* marking. The fifth staff is in bass clef and includes a *mf* marking. The sixth staff is in bass clef and includes a *f* marking, a *cresc.* marking, and a *ff* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

This passage contains four varied statements of new material. Furthermore, it acts as introductory material for the cadenza that immediately follows and also contains multiple stops. Two novel technical demands can be found in this passage that require special care. The use of the printed fourth finger in thumb position (such as the one indicated by the + sign) can be uncomfortable. Pressing on the fourth

finger can cause pain not only on the finger itself, but the whole left arm. Therefore developing a strong fourth finger while learning how to relax is crucial in playing a passage such as this. The other challenge seen in this passage is the rhythmic independence of the two voices conversing with each other with their own individual sets of grace notes (upper voice triplets against lower eighths and the reverse). From this passage alone, the reader can see that technical difficulty did not stand in the way of Britten creating something about which he felt strongly.

In the *Canto Primo*, the *Canto Secondo*, the *Canto Terzo* of the *Suite No. 1*, and the *Andante espressivo* of the *Suite No. 3*, Britten has apparently taken great pleasure in extensively exploiting multiple stops in a novel way. These four movements will be collectively discussed below with reference to Examples 2 through 5.

Example 2

Suite No. 1 For Cello in G Major, op. 72, Canto Primo, mm. 1-6

Sostenuto e largamente ($\text{♩} = 60$)

Example 3

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, Canto Secondo, mm. 1-3

Sostenuto

Example 4

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, Canto Terzo, mm. 1-6

Musical score for Example 4, Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, Canto Terzo, mm. 1-6. The score is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and G major. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff starts with the tempo marking "Sostenuto" and dynamics "pp". It features a series of chords and intervals, with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The second staff continues the piece, marked with "pp" and "pp cresc."

Example 5

Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, VI: Andante espressivo, mm. 15-19

Musical score for Example 5, Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, VI: Andante espressivo, mm. 15-19. The score is in bass clef, 4/4 time, and C major. It consists of two staves of music. The first staff starts with the tempo marking "Andante espressivo" and dynamics "f". It features a series of chords and intervals, with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The second staff continues the piece, marked with "(restez)" and "f".

Consistency in the two-voice writing in Examples 2 to 5 shown above places great demands on the technique and musicianship of the performer. Greater strength is required from the left-hand fingers whenever the fingers are extended and stretched apart from each other to play multiple stops across the strings. The strength factor is even more prominent when playing on the lower and thicker strings. Playing continuous multiple stops often causes an intense grip in the left hand fingers and can very likely stiffen the whole forearm, from finger-tips to elbow. Therefore, concentrating on releasing and relaxing the fingers whenever possible is vital.

Achieving higher elevation and over-arching of the left hand fingers on the surrounding strings is also crucial. The achievement of higher elevation of the fingers enables an open string to sound freely when it is a part of the multiple stop. Furthermore, this over-arching prevents the fingers from unnecessarily reinforcing each other, while at the same time promoting greater flexibility which allows the fingers to spread out more easily. An example of extreme arching required by the inclusion of an open string can be seen in measures 3-4 of the *Canto Terzo* (Example 4).

Another technical challenge is that of playing a perfect 5th chord by pressing one finger on two adjacent strings at the same time. Such an example can be seen in measure 3 of the *Canto Primo* (Example 2). Notice that Britten did not hesitate to require use of the weak fourth finger in playing the perfect 5th chord. Flattening out the fourth finger (or any other finger) not only adds discomfort for the player, but also makes pitch and tone control difficult. The passages discussed above illustrate demands that are much greater than usual for strength in and control of the left-hand fingers.

Vibrato is another challenge for the performer when playing multiple stops. A different approach to vibrato has to be developed. Clearly, the hand does not have the same flexibility to vibrate on the multiple stops as when vibrating on a single note. In multiple stops, vibrato can be achieved by flattening the fingers, instead of playing with the fingertip. With increased surface area created by flattening the fingers, the fingers gain greater balance and weight on the string. As the result, the tone becomes fuller and richer.

When multiple stops include a large group of notes, preparation time becomes another important issue as in measures 15-19 of the *Andante espressivo* (Example 5). Here, the two voice lines running simultaneously together need to be as legato as possible. Therefore, preparing for the upcoming group of notes becomes essential. Without proper care, this kind of preparation can easily cut into the length of the preceding notes. Again, flattening the left hand fingers and reaching across two strings ahead of time may help to prevent this problem. Similarly, the performer may vibrate on flattened fingers instead of fingertips.

When playing multiple stops, the need to sustain the bow in a slow tempo creates a technical challenge. In the *Canto Primo*, the *Canto Secondo*, the *Canto Tarzo*, and the *Andante espressivo*, the performer must work hard in order to prolong the sound along with the vibrato on the multiple stops without letting the sound fade. The right arm must be able to sustain the tone and volume as if playing a single string. Rather than allowing the cellist to begin the note with an attack and have the multiple stops sound through the natural energy of the bow motion and the resonance of the instrument, this type of polyphonic writing demands a highly sustained bowing. Furthermore, it forces both arms and left hand fingers to constantly maintain pressure and thus, does not give the player opportunity for rest. Therefore, the exertion of the player's strength must be allotted wisely, for it is very easy to get tense and stiff.

In order to maintain the dynamic *pianissimo* while playing multiple stops such as in the *Canto Secondo* (Example 3), the left hand must be relaxed so that the vibrato can be constant. In addition, any bow change must be inaudible and smooth.

As noted before, the sustained nature seen in the *Canto Primo*, the *Canto Secondo*, the *Canto Terzo*, and the *Andante espressivo* in itself contains “hidden” difficulties.

Drone

The use of drone is another special feature in Britten’s cello music. In the *Bordone* of *Suite No. 1*, Britten uses a continuous drone on the note D, produced either by the open string (Example 6a) or by playing in unison on the G string (Example 6b). Britten has maintained the interest of this D pedal point throughout the entire movement (thirty-two bars) without a single break in the sounding drone. The technical aspect of playing this movement is that the performer must maintain a sense of balance in the bowing in the right hand by placing the bow on two strings simultaneously. While the drone note maintains a steady *pianissimo*, the performer faces the tremendous challenge of the bow articulating a variety of phrasings, dynamics, accents, and rests on the other bowed string in all the two-string bowed measures.

Example 6a

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, V. Bordone, mm. 1-4

Example 6b

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, V. Bordone, mm. 24-25

The slowly sustained drone in Britten's *Bordone* further presents an additional bowing problem. In this case, the bow must cross over the drone note without breaking musical continuity while the change to the other adjacent second string is being made. Example 7 demonstrates this type of crossover. The change from the A string to the G string must be as smooth as possible for twenty-one notes while the D-string drone is maintained. The long slur written for the open D string drone suggests the composer's intention not to allow the crossover to disrupt the musical line. This type of writing requires unusual care in matters of bow speed, contact point, and changes in pressure to equalize tone from strings of different

thickness and responsiveness. In a further complication of this technique, Britten alternates between the string above and below the drone note in measures 28-32 in Example 8. To play the A-string notes without a noticeable disruption in the sound requires extreme sensitivity to the weight of the bow. Britten's interest in repeated open-string notes can be found in all three of his cello solo works. Nevertheless, it is only in the *Bordone* of *Cello Suite No. 1* that the drone lasts for such a length of time and involves such intricate bowing.

Example 7

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, V. Bordone, m. 9



Example 8

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, V. Bordone, mm. 28-32

In the *Dialogo* movement of the *Sonata for Cello and Piano*, the drone passage can be found after rehearsal number 2 (Example 9), where the repeated drone note on open A alternates with the fingered notes on the adjacent string. A similar

passage occurs in measures 14-15 of *Bordone*, where the unison D is formed first using the open D string and the adjacent G string. Subsequently D is played also on the C string for added intensity (Example 10). The crossover of a drone can also be found in the first movement of the cello symphony (Example 11). Here, various kinds of short notes are combined with a consecutive triplet of the droned notes alternating in a minor third (open string plus fingered note.) Although this passage is difficult to perform, this type of passage in the symphony serves to relax the right hand in preparation for setting bow arm levels and facilitates bow direction changes at the entrances to emphasized notes.

Example 9

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65, I. Dialogo, Rehearsal 2

Example 10

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, V. Bordone, mm. 14

Example 11

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68, I. Allegro maestoso
Third through eighth measures after rehearsal 14

Unique Use of *Pizzicato*

Pizzicato has been a technique frequently used by composers to introduce a percussive quality to the sound of a stringed instrument by means of plucking rather than bowing the string. Yet, *pizzicato* may be used to create an infinite variety of effects and requires skill in its application. In keeping with his artistic creativity, Britten adopted several challenging types of *pizzicati* to embellish his cello works.

The entire *Scherzo-pizzicato* movement of the *Sonata for Cello and Piano* is played *pizzicato* by the cellist, using a variety of techniques.

Example 12

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65, II. Scherzo-pizzicato, mm. 4-7



Example 13

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65, II. Scherzo-pizzicato measures 41-50



Among various kinds of *pizzicati*, left-hand *pizzicato*, which is marked “+” in the musical score, adds greatly to the technical challenge of the music. This technique requires of the left hand to depress the string and thus define a pitch (stopping the string) with one finger while plucking the string with another finger at

the same time. As shown in Example 12, measure six, the sound of the note D-flat is produced by stopping the string with the second finger and plucking the string with fourth finger at the same time. The following note, “C”, is played by stopping the string with the first finger while plucking the string with the second finger. A player’s approach to left-hand *pizzicato* is significant to the success of the technique. The fingers must be raised very quickly after the notes are plucked, so that they are high above the string, ready for the next pair of notes.

As the movement progresses, the left-hand *pizzicati* become more complicated. In Example 13, the open-string *pizzicati* are plucked by left and right hand simultaneously. To play swift consecutive sixteenth notes, the left hand and the right hand must closely coordinate with one another. This type of passage may create muscular discomfort for the performer, since it is seldom seen in the cello literature and thus rarely practiced. Nevertheless, by choosing the best-sounding fingers and the most appropriate sounding point on the fingerboard for both hands, the performer should be able to produce vibrant-sounding *pizzicati*.

In the *Andante lento* movement of the *Suite No. 2*, the left-hand *pizzicato* this time provides harmonic accompaniment to a melody concurrently sustained by the bow (Example 14).

Example 14

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, IV. Andante lento, mm. 3-12

Still another very difficult version of *pizzicato* can be seen in *Scherzo-pizzicato* movement of Britten's cello sonata (Example 15). The main rhythmic motive is composed of two consecutive sixteen-note *pizzicati*. Plucking the sixteen notes twice, especially given the connecting slur, is physically impossible. To execute such a passage, one must pluck the string on the first of the three short notes and then—using the vibration that has been set in motion—continue the sound on the second and the third notes by means of percussive finger strokes from the left hand. Strong and vital finger work are essential for the notes to sound clearly. Left-hand *vibrato* can further assist in intensifying the tone.

Example 15

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65, II. Scherzo-pizzicato, mm. 1-2

Chord *pizzicato* is another unique feature found in this movement. Two types of chord *pizzicato* can be seen, the plucking type and the chordal type (Example 16). The plucking type of *pizzicato* involves sounding the strings together with more than one finger depending on the number of the notes in a single chord. The chordal type of *pizzicato* on the other hand (indicated with the wavy line next to the note) involves a full sweep of the whole arm, using the thumb to sound the strings. By adding *vibrato* to both types of *pizzicati*, the strings will achieve greater resonance which may serve to embellish and intensify the color of the tone.

In the *pizzicato* section of first movement in the cello symphony, Britten indicates very specifically that the chordal *pizzicato* stroke is intended (Example 17). The arrow signs found over of the chords indicate the direction on the start of the stroke, giving the performer the best possible understanding on how to execute the chords.

Example 16

Sonata for Cello and Piano in C Major, op. 65, II. Scherzo-pizzicato
10 measures before rehearsal 14 - 6 measures after rehearsal 14

The musical score for Example 16 consists of two staves of music in bass clef. The top staff contains measures 10-13, marked with a forte 'f' dynamic and a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking. The bottom staff contains measures 14-19, marked with a 'Piano' dynamic and a 'ff' (fortissimo) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as chords, slurs, and articulation marks.

Example 17

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, op. 68, I. Allegro maestoso
4th and 5th measures after rehearsal 24



Harmonics

Just as *pizzicato* is employed increasingly today to diversify the effects that can be created with stringed instruments, similarly, there is a growing appreciation of the color changes that can be introduced by taking advantage of the additional tonal range for stringed instruments provided by harmonics. The execution of harmonics is certainly not easy. It requires sensitivity in the player's right hand to adjust the bow speed and pressure that is required for a specific musical line. Examples of the use of harmonics can be found in the *Marcia* movement of Britten's *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (Example 18) and the *Marcia* movement of the *Suite No. 1* (Example 19).

Example 18

Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 65, IV. Marcia
Rehearsal 24 - ten measures after rehearsal number 25

The musical score for Example 18 consists of four staves. The first two staves are for the cello and piano, and the last two are for the piano and cello. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *sf*, and *sfp*, and performance instructions like *senza rallentando*. Rehearsal numbers 24 and 25 are indicated in boxes. The music features complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic contrasts.

Example 19

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, IV. Marcia, mm. 1-2

The musical score for Example 19 is a single staff of music. It includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *pp saltando*, and performance instructions like *arco*, *col legno*, and *Alta marcia moderato*. The tempo is marked as *Alta marcia moderato* (♩ = 120). The score features a mix of arco and col legno playing, with a *pp saltando* section.

For interest in color and sound, Britten brought out the characteristic of the *Marcia* in the *Sonata for Cello and Piano* by employing artificial harmonics. Artificial harmonics are created by stopping the string firmly with the thumb or first

finger according to position, and touching the sounding finger a fourth above very lightly with the third or fourth finger. Thus, the sound of the note will be two octaves higher than the basic stopped note. In Example 18, the precision of the *Marcia* is blurred by the sustaining pedal in high register of the piano sonorities, and the cello is converted into harmonic *glissandi*. The key to executing these harmonics well is to familiarize the hand by practicing placing and balancing the hand between the thumb and the sounding third finger. Also, arching of the left-hand third finger helps to create a clear sound. In addition, the performer must relax the left arm when “glissing” from one harmonic note into the next.

Once artificial harmonic tones are activated, the next challenge is to vibrate on those notes, to make the tones continuous and singing. Great discipline is needed to find the best balance for *vibrato* between the firmly pressed thumb and the sounding finger. As seen in Example 18, the dynamic ranges from *pp* to *sf* over two slurred *glissando* notes. In this unusual and appealing passage, Britten carefully indicated *sf* for all the eighth notes in the cello part. Eighth notes marked *sf* are to be played at the same time on the piano. These notes have the identical pitch, note value and dynamic markings in both parts. By putting the two instruments together, all the notes indicated *sf* imitate the timbre of a chime. The performer must consciously know the proper amount of bow, weight placement of the bow, and movement of the bow on the string to successfully achieve this effect.

The natural harmonic is another kind of harmonic seen in the *Marcia* movement of Suite No. 1. Natural harmonics are created by touching the string lightly with one finger at a certain given point. In Example 19, two sequential

ostinato elements contrast with one another, the natural harmonics vie in character with the drum-like rhythm played on open strings with the bouncing wood of the bow. By carefully constructing the rhythm and the sounding tone, Britten has brought out the best character of the *Marcia*.

Harmonics are an excellent approach for creating a special kind of atmosphere and color. Twentieth-century composers especially often adopt harmonics for unusual effects. With their wide range of unique sounds, harmonics can certainly grasp the attention of the audience.

Separation of Voices

Still, another novel characteristic of Britten's cello works is found in his use of the registers. Within the normal timbre of the four cello strings, composers, especially those in the early twentieth-century, have been interested in exploring the register possibilities for creating dramatic effects. This is particularly seen in the unaccompanied medium for solo composition. The main function of such separation of voices is to give the listener an impression of contrasting sound. Britten explored these possibilities primarily through three different means:

1. jumping back and forth between nonadjacent strings
2. specifying fingerings up the fingerboard on a single string rather than across strings to create a special kind of timbre
3. creating another dissimilar voice with the tone of artificial and natural harmonics.

The technique of jumping back and forth between nonadjacent strings can be found in the *Fuga* and *Ciaccona* of the *Suite No. 2* and the *Lento solenne* of the

Suite No. 3. The *Fuga* movement in Example 20 consists of two equally important voices conversing with each other. The upper voice is on the A string, and the lower voice is on the C string. Register separation is maintained by avoiding the two middle strings. In order for the bow not to touch the two middle strings, the height of the right arm must raise accordingly. The performer must keep the bow at the height of the A string, and drop the right-hand wrist when crossing to the C string (or crossing back to A string). In doing so, little arm movement is involved and the performer gains greater flexibility in controlling the motion of the bow especially necessary when playing at a fast tempo. The preparation of the left-hand fingers is also very important in this passage. The fingers need to be able to reach for either the outer string or the inner string in fast progression.

Example 20

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, II. Fuga, mm. 18-20



In the first seventeen bars of the *Ciaccona* of the *Suite No. 2*, two variations make use of this same effect in measures 9-12 and measures 14-17 of Example 21. The movement begins with two dissimilar voices, the lower voice with *tenuto staccato* articulation is contrasted with the upper voice indicated *tenuto* with

occasional accents but without *staccato*. Beginning in measure 9, the D string is no longer used, and the voices hop back and forth between the A and G strings. The next variation (measures 14-17) continues with the contrasting articulations and still excludes the D string. In the following two variations found in measures 19-26 of Example 22, the single string of the upper voice is replaced by double stops through the reintroduction of the D string for the effect of the timbre. Notice that the return of the D string does not signal the end of the upper and lower voice separation, but rather a substitution of a new kind of sound for the upper voice. The effect of jumping back and forth between nonadjacent strings is thus retained throughout the work, although the strength of the effect becomes somewhat lessened as the piece progresses.

Example 21

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, V. Ciaccona, mm. 7-17

The musical score for Example 21 is presented in two staves. The first staff, starting at measure 7, contains six measures of music. It features a variety of articulations, including accents (marked with a 'V' and a vertical line), slurs, and dynamic markings such as *sim.* (sforzando). Fingerings (1-4) and bowings (1, 2, 3) are indicated. The second staff, starting at measure 13, contains five measures of music. It continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns, also featuring accents, slurs, and dynamic markings like *sim.* Fingerings and bowings are clearly marked throughout both staves.

Example 22

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, V. Ciaccona, mm. 19-26

In the *Lento solenne* of the *Suite No. 3*, Britten applies the technique of jumping back and forth between nonadjacent strings to the fullest effect through the incorporation of many arpeggiated figurations. Until measure 95, the C-string melody is almost constantly interrupted by material in the higher registers. The first twenty-two bars of the movement consist of fragmented material presented in the lower and upper strings, often with contrasting dynamics and individual phrasing. An example of this interlocking phrasing in the two different registers is found in measures 7-11 of Example 23, where the upper voice must sustain the high point of its phrase over the more relaxed material heard in the lower voice. Notice that the G-string is never being used. This makes the return of the C string difficult because the bow must constantly approach the C-string without the security of first contacting the adjacent string. Finally, in measure 24, Britten introduces the G-string for the first time (Example 24). In measures 23-29, the G-string carries its own melody in contrast with that of the A string. One important factor to keep in mind when playing

such a passage is that when the C-string is combined with the G-string, be sure to bring out the *tenuti* of the C string. Otherwise the C string is heard as harmonization of the G-string melody rather than as the slow-moving passacaglia motive retrieved from the third through fifth notes of the movement's beginning C-string melody. In addition, the techniques behind executing measures 26-27 and measures 28-29 are very different. It is crucial to know how much right hand pressure on the bow is needed when just playing the single melodic line on the A string, and how much weight is required when playing the lower two strings. Since it is easier for the thinner A string to speak, less pressure is needed. Likewise, more bow pressure is required to effectively sound the lower two strings.

Example 23

Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, IX. Lento solenne, mm. 7-11



Example 24

Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, IX. Lento solenne, mm. 23-29

In the *Fuga* and *Ciaccona* of Suite No. 2, Britten achieves an audible impression of contrasting voices not only by jumping between nonadjacent strings, but also by specifying fingering up the fingerboard on one string rather than across the strings. This kind of method permits a particular voice to maintain consistent sound of a single string while simultaneously producing a timbre contrast through the use of a different register. In many situations, cello technique strives for homogeneity of

the tone so that the melodic phrasing may be developed across all the strings and registers. Britten on the other hand assigned melodies to specific strings. The purpose for the fingerings is to take the player into the higher, and less manageable areas to retain a distinct personality for that particular register. Both the *Ciaccona* and *Fuga* of the *Suite No. 2* incorporate this exploitation of unusual fingerings by going up to higher positions on a single string rather than crossing over to a new string at a lower position. One example can be found in measures 55-59 of the *Ciaccona* in Example 25. Here, Britten specifies that the lower voice is to be kept on the C string instead of migrating to the G string.

Example 25

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, V. Ciaccona, mm. 55-59

The musical score for Example 25 consists of two staves of music in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff (measures 55-57) features a melodic line with triplets and a lower voice line with chords and a 'f pesante' marking. The second staff (measures 58-59) continues the melodic line with various fingerings and a lower voice line with chords. The score includes numerous fingering numbers (1-4), breath marks (V), and dynamic markings (f, pesante).

At the conclusion of the *Ciaccona*, (Example 26, measures 162-165) three registers are sounded in quick succession. The lowest note, G-sharp, which could easily be fingered on the G-string, is to be played instead in fourth position on the C string.

Example 26

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, V. Ciaccona, mm. 162-165

Many good examples of Britten's most complete application of the use of high-position fingerings to achieve the effect of multi-voicing can also be found in the *Fuga* of the *Suite No. 2*. A particularly good example is seen in measures 32-35 in Example 27, where the lower voice is led up and back down in thumb position on the C string, and the upper voice is played entirely on the D string. In order to reach the notes as Britten fingered them in both voices, a seemingly excessive amount of shifting is required.

Example 27

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, II. Fuga, mm. 32-35

The final means through which Britten achieves the method of multi-voicing is by creating a dissimilar voice by taking advantage on the timbre of natural and artificial harmonics. This is seen in the *Fuga* of the *Suite No. 2* in bars 25-28 (Example 28).

Example 28

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, II. Fuga, mm. 25-28

The image shows a musical score for the Fuga section of Suite No. 2 for Cello in D Major, op. 80, II. The score is written for two staves: a treble clef staff (top) and a bass clef staff (bottom). The key signature is D major (one sharp, F#). The time signature is 4/4. The score begins at measure 25, marked with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The treble staff features a series of notes with various fingering indications (I, II, III, IV, V) and articulation marks. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with notes and rests. The score concludes at measure 28, also marked with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

When Britten employs artificial harmonics to distinguish the multi-voicing, greater technique is involved. Because the interval used to produce the artificial harmonics (in this case, the perfect fourth) changes so quickly, much greater precision of finger placement and stretch is required. Likewise, in measures 55-58 (Example 29), the alternate part suggests artificial harmonics to enhance the quality of the sound between the upper voices and lower voices. The performer must constantly shift to locate the stopped finger (first or the thumb) and sounding finger (third or fourth). In addition, an ongoing readjustment of the pressure and speed of the bow, and distance of the bow from the bridge is necessary.

Example 29

Suite No 2 For Cello in D Major, op. 80, II. Fuga, mm. 55-58

The image displays a musical score for two staves, labeled '55' and 'OSSIA:'. The top staff contains the main musical notation, featuring a series of beamed notes and rests, with dynamic markings such as 'sim.' and 'cresc.'. The bottom staff, marked 'OSSIA:', provides an alternative version of the music. Both staves include detailed fingerings (1-4) and bowing indications. The notation is complex, with many notes beamed together, suggesting a fast and technically demanding passage.

Moto Perpetuo

A new kind of running passagework appears in Britten's *moto perpetuo* movements from the *Moto Perpetuo E Canto Quarto* movement of the *Suite No. 1* and the *Presto* movement of the *Suite No. 3*. *Moto perpetuo* is a device in which "rhythmic motion, often in a single note-value at a rapid tempo, maintains for a period of time."⁴³ The underlying compositional basis of Britten's *moto perpetuo* is constructed of semitones rather than major-minor tonality. Whenever a string player leaves the major-minor system, the fingering and use of position lack the right "fit". Therefore, the traditional finger patterns of the left hand become inappropriate. Instead, the player must adopt chromatic-scale fingerings as the best vehicle for fast semitone passagework. Many portions in the *Presto* movement of the *Suite No.3* are easily executed with the cello fingerings traditionally used for chromatic passages. In Example 30, measures 1-10 are representative of such effective use of chromatic fingerings.

Example 30

Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, VIII. Presto, mm. 1-10

Presto (♩ = c. 152)

The musical notation consists of two staves of music in bass clef with a 3/8 time signature. The tempo is marked 'Presto' with a quarter note equal to approximately 152 beats per minute. The key signature is C major. The first staff shows measures 1 through 5, and the second staff shows measures 6 through 10. The music is a chromatic scale starting on G2, moving up and then down. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 above the notes. The piece is marked 'pp' (pianissimo).

Another feature occurs in conjunction with *moto perpetuo* semitone construction which requires alternative technique. Uneven writing, which prevents the balance of the left hand on any one string at a time, calls for a kind of steady “hopping” of the hand and individual fingers, back and forth among the strings and positions (Example 31). This sort of figuration may be encountered in etudes or orchestral parts, but only very rarely in solo literature for cello. The left hand’s weight must withhold from individual fingertips, so they remain available to reach out for extensions, shifts, and other strings in fast motion.

Example 31

Suite No. 1 in G Major, op. 72, VI. Moto Perpetuo E Canto Quarto, mm. 37- 40



Suite No. 3 in C Major, op. 87, VIII. Presto, mm. 7-8



At times a further complication can be seen. In traditional technique, the fingers must be curved to maintain accuracy in fast passagework. However, Britten’s use of extensions and string crossing in unusual situations requires an alternative

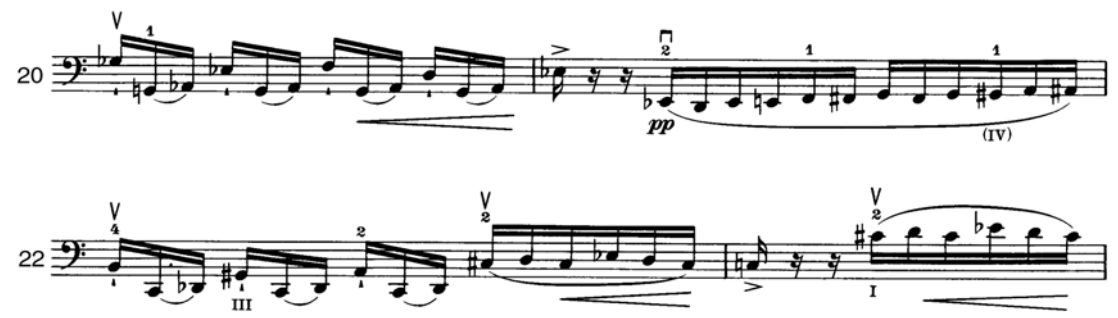
approach. A technique of flattening the top phalanx of a finger across several strings is necessary so that upcoming notes are reachable without slowing the tempo (Example 32). When the open-string notes are combined with stopped notes during some of the grouping of fast notes, there is a need for over-arching the fingers in order to make the open string sound (Example 33). Thus, from the performer’s point of view, choosing the appropriate fingering technique to fit the speed and the context is a great challenge.

Example 32

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, VI. Moto Perpetuo E canto Quart, mm. 23-26



Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, VIII. Presto, mm. 20-22



Example 33

Suite No. 1 for Cello in G Major, op. 72, VI. Moto Perpetuo E canto Quart, mm.29-31



Suite No. 3 for Cello in C Major, op. 87, VIII. Presto, m. 4



What is so impressive about Britten in his handling of these two *presto* movements is that despite the hidden technical difficulties and innovation, the music still sounds agile and playful. Cellists will no doubt always be amazed by Britten's creativity in devising such effective technical challenges.

Clearly, the extra challenges of Britten's cello works are not easily bypassed or ignored. The required new skills must be consciously learned and then made to become automatic through practice so that no technical barrier will control the delivery of the music. In performance preparation, it is important to minimize these foregoing technical difficulties through advanced preparation. It is the player's obligation to create an impression of musical simplicity and tranquility.

CONCLUSION

Throughout my life as a cellist, I have enjoyed playing music written in the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. I have also enjoyed the music of early twentieth-century composers who wrote in the post-Romantic style. I deeply feel the beauty of music that is both melodic and spiritual. As a result I always strive to be an expressive and passionate instrumentalist.

As the history of western music has progressed, music in the twentieth century has developed a new aesthetic attitude. As a result, the language of music has been redefined. Composers may now negate the tonal foundation of functional harmony. Furthermore, individual's craftsmanship in timbres, textures, rhythms, and forms are much more exaggerated. Technical issues may seem to override musical concerns.

This type of modern music is not my preference. Such modern compositions are frequently difficult for me to absorb and understand. I cannot always appreciate the characteristic disjointed melodies and atonal harmonies. Therefore, I often avoid playing contemporary compositions. Wishing to expand upon my modern musicianship and deepen my appreciation for contemporary works, I have chosen a dissertation project devoted to the study of Benjamin Britten, a twentieth-century composer who wrote a variety of astounding and innovative pieces for the cello, inspired by his appreciation for the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich.

In his five works for cello, Britten covered three distinct genres, that of the sonata, the concerto, and the unaccompanied suite. Britten's modern compositional

characteristics include the use of extreme and contrasting colors, contrasting rhythms, and unusual melodic range. Britten also introduced innovative and technically challenging techniques in his cello works. I hoped that as part of this thesis project, I could use my experience as a cellist to identify these challenges and offer suggestions for meeting them. I also hoped that a project concerned with modern cello technique would help me grow as a musician, teacher, and cellist.

Practicing these works, especially the concerto and the suites, was challenging at the beginning. Melodically, I found that the music had a lesser concern for euphony, and was more focused on unique and innovative sonorities. It was hard for me to build a connection with the music. I had no emotional attachment. I was simply practicing notes and trying to perfect the techniques. Fortunately, in the span of one and a half years of my learning and living with these pieces, Britten's music finally came alive. I ultimately developed a relationship with the compositions and was able to put my heart and soul into the music as much as with beloved pieces from earlier periods. I felt that Britten had taken great account of each and every note. I became engaged by his sense of rhythms, musical phrasing, drastic dynamic changes, and personification of the music. Involvement with Britten's music not only brought a new light to my understanding of twentieth-century music in general, I have also developed greater technical skills that help me play familiar works from my past more easily and musically.

As a result, my recommendation for making sense of this music is to immerse oneself through a long period of personal exposure and persistent practice. Clearly, the extra challenges of Britten's cello works cannot be underestimated. I have

discovered to my delight that the new skills required to understand and master these compositions, given adequate time, eventually did begin to evolve, even when they at first seemed impossibly elusive. It is the player's obligation to practice, to never give up, to find some way, however unorthodox, to overcome difficulties so that no technical barrier will control the delivery of the music. I hope this dissertation may be an inspiring and useful resource for cello players, giving them ideas about practicing and incorporating challenging techniques into their playing while also broadening their own appreciation for modern music.

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