

Benjamin Britten's *Spring Symphony* – A Descriptive Analysis
by Jeffrey Baxter, for the ASO Chorus, May 17, 2011

BACKGROUND

Britten's *Spring Symphony*, Opus 44, was commissioned and dedicated to Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra who shared the 1949 premiere with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in July (in Amsterdam) and August (with the BSO at Tanglewood). This choral symphony was written just four years after Britten's widely acclaimed opera, *Peter Grimes*, when the composer was 35.

Britten's passion for and vast knowledge of English literature is matched only by his tremendous gift for matching it so masterfully to music. Such skillful and expressive text-setting is unrivaled since the days of Henry Purcell (and certainly in the arena of English opera). Utilizing springtime texts, chiefly from the 16th and 17th centuries (by poets such as Edmund Spenser, John Milton and George Peele), as well as one notable 20th century inclusion by his friend W.H. Auden, Britten creates a work that, in his own words, represents "the progress of Winter to Spring and the reawakening of the earth and life which that means."

He casts the poetry in the mold of a four-movement "symphony," with full orchestra, chorus, boys' chorus and a trio of soloists (soprano, alto, tenor), but in many ways the piece is a masterful concerto for orchestra that features the various colors of instrumental "choirs" (brass, winds, strings, etc). In this regard it is more of a 17th century Italian "sinfonia," or "sounding together" and, in some ways, a choral response to an earlier (1943) Koussevitsky commission, the Bartok *Concerto for Orchestra*.

FORM

The various poems are grouped into four symphonic "movements:"

Part I - *Allegro with slow introduction*

1. *Introduction* ("Shine out, fair sun" - a 16th century anonymous text)
2. *The Merry Cuckoo* (Edmund Spenser)
3. *Spring, the Sweet Spring* (Thomas Nashe)
4. *The Driving Boy* (George Peele/John Clare)
5. *The Morning Star* (John Milton)

Part II - *Slow movement*

The second part features Alto and Tenor solos, with references to the month of May:

1. *Welcome Maids of Honour* (Robert Herrick)
2. *Waters Above* (Henry Vaughan)
3. *Out on the Lawn I lie in Bed* (W.H. Auden)

Part III - *Scherzo*

The third part looks forward to May and summer:

1. *When will my May come* (Richard Barnefield)
2. *Fair and Fair* (George Peele)
3. *Sound the Flute* (William Blake)

Part IV - *Finale*

1. *Finale* ("London, to Thee I do present" by Beaumont and Fletcher, and "Sumer is icumen in" - a 13th century round)

STRUCTURE

Britten's other great gift (like all artists whom we classify as "great") was that his craft equaled his inspiration; the industry and the artistry are on the highest level and complement each other in a way that one doesn't call attention to the other. Technique is never an end to itself but used as an expressive means, and expression – "communication" if you will – is deepened by technical skill (rather than cheapened by its absence).

Below are a few of the miracles from the mind of Britten that make his *Spring Symphony* sing.

PART ONE – Introduction

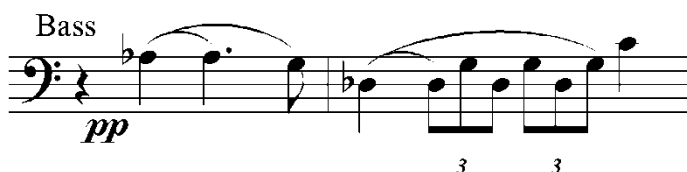
The music composed for this 16th century anonymous text, “Shine Out,” is marked *Lento* and is almost as long as the Symphony’s Finale (and shares with it the only orchestral *tutti*’s). The Introduction stresses the note B-natural in an ultimate progression to the Finale’s C-Major, with key relations along the way mostly by 2nds and 3rds. There are four main musical themes in the Introduction:

Theme #1, introduced by the timpani and harp, outlines two intervals that will be important in this movement: the harmonically unstable tritone [B to F] and the (minor) second [E to F]:



Most importantly, these opening bars evoke the frozen stasis of winter, punctuated by chills depicted by a skillful use of percussion instruments (including vibraphone). A lone A-flat played by Harp II in m. 2 suggests both E-Major (a G-sharp spelled enharmonically) and portends the opening note of the canon that will ensue in Theme #2. Until then, the chorus intones the first line of text, “Shine out, fair sun...” in a static bitonal statement that vacillates between two adjacent, or 2nd related, keys (G-Major and F-Major). The use of two tonalities at once (bitonality) is clever, as it suggests simultaneous perspective (as in Picasso’s cubism) – a dual image one might see staring into frozen water. This choral statement ultimately cadences by fanning out to an open 5th on E (on the word “light”).

Theme #2 begins at Figure [1] with a canon (or “round”) for strings, each starting on the note A-flat, from the double basses to the high 1st violins:



This slow-building, slithering theme – outlining a harmonically unstable tritone on D-flat and G, and juxtaposing duple and triple rhythms – moves glacier-like to the chorus’ next statement. They sing similar music as before, but now up a third, a bitonal expression (A-Major/ B-Major) now intensified. Midway through (on the two rhyming words in the text) they cadence on an open 5th on F (on the word “heat”) and finally an open 5th on B (on the word “seat”). The F and B, of course, are the two main notes (outlining a tritone) in Theme #1.

Theme #3 begins at Figure [3] in the quick-moving notes of the oboes, played frantically over a steady, menacing pedal point G in the strings:



Theme #3 is presented contrapuntally, with oboes answered at the octave by flutes, and then a few measures later by clarinets two octaves apart in inversion (perhaps a musical evocation of the mirrored image of reflections seen in melting ice?). This section builds to a frenzy that gives in to the G-natural pedal. It is handed (*forte*) to the choral sopranos who begin an imitative section on the text “The grey wolf howls, he does so bite.” Britten, ever in touch with the words, informs this music with descending 4ths – some even marked with a sliding *portamento* on the onomatopoeic word “howls.” This leads to the fourth and final bit of thematic material for this large movement.

Verse 3: Melody, modal (Dorian on G – the characteristic sound of lowered 7th in a minor mode)
Harmony, bitonal (E-flat Major/F-Major) – here the original rhythm of the “strumming” is displaced by a whole beat.

The final five measures bring a repeat of the opening line and a return to the movement’s opening tonality.
-Closure, but ending on an ambiguous upbeat and unresolved chord (suggesting there is more to come).

The Driving Boy

Here Britten combines two poems, George Peele’s “A Summer Song” and John Clare’s “The Driving Boy.” The boys’ choir makes their first appearance in the piece, here singing the Peele verse, accompanied by winds, tuba and tambourine. The solo soprano sings the Clare verse, accompanied primarily by the high 1st and 2nd violins. Britten cleverly overlaps the two at certain points and even has the boys whistle (as mentioned in the soprano’s text). The Clare poem is third person (about the boy); the Peele poem is first person (what the boy says and thinks).

Here it is worth mentioning the well observed aesthetic about Britten’s output of “children’s music” and his very different approach to it as, for instance, Mahler (in his *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* settings or Third, Fourth and Eighth Symphonies). Britten often presents a more realistic picture, placing the child in the adult world (where the innocence lost is more pointed) as opposed to Mahler’s idealized memory of childhood. One could say Britten wrote children’s adult-music and Mahler wrote adult’s children-music. It could be described as “child-like” *versus* “childish.” In Britten the most potent example would come in his *War Requiem*, at the moment where the boys sing “ad te omnis caro veniet” [before Thee all flesh shall come] while the tenor intones the Wilfred Owen line “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?”

Here the “boy” (voiced by the boys’ choir) innocently sings of warm-weather joys and the hope that his love will lose her “innocence.” Interestingly, the first two notes heard in the upper winds (D down to G) are the same notes as sung to the text “Spring” in the previous movement.

The Morning Star

Britten sets Milton’s hymn to May for chorus, a warm brass choir and percussion (bells and timpani). Absent is the previous movement’s tuba (as well as strings). The morning star is announced by morning bells, both real (chimes) and imagined (in the bell-like, swinging dotted-quarters alternating in the trumpets and trombones). The star that appears “dancing from the East” is given in melismatic 16th notes (chorus and horns), while later the punctuating brass eighth-notes of Figure [19] measure the “Mirth and youth and warm desire,” befitting Milton’s formal style. This movement (and with it, Part I) ends with an unresolved suspension in the alto voice.

PART TWO – Welcome Maids of Honour

The “Maids of Honour” in Herrick’s poem are, of course, the flowers of spring. Britten begins Part II – the Symphony’s “slow” movement – with the low contralto voice accompanied by violin-less divided low strings moving upwards in parallel seconds (representing the “roses” in the text) and delicate winds and harps (representing the “posies,” or first flowers). The *concertato* style of juxtaposing high winds against low strings accentuates this clever tone-painting.

The alto’s four-note figure (sung twice on “You do bring In the Spring” in m. 6) is later given in inversion at m. 14 (“Fresh and faire; Yet you are”) and at m. 22 (“And so grac’d To be plac’d”). Furthermore, the opening woodwind statements (which recall the opening notes of the previous Nashe setting “Spring”) are also given in inversion at m. 20 and following. It is as if the poor “posies” are trying to “keep up” with their fairer sisters, the roses, by turning their gaze upwards in the same direction of the ascending 2nds in the roses’ string accompaniment. Notably (or sympathetically), the strings take pity at the end and sink downwards on the word “neglected” (repeated by Britten in a three measure sequence), and the woodwinds in the penultimate measure regain their upwards motion (or, original “beauty”).

Waters above

For this Henry Vaughan poem that compares a delicate, welcome evening rainfall to the morning’s gentle dew, Britten assembles an unusually sparse (and delicate) ensemble: solo lyric tenor and only the 1st and 2nd violins. The strings play *sul ponticello* [near the bridge] and in measured *tremolo* (quick “raindrop-like” triplets), evoking an eerie and otherworldly sound, while the tenor sustains his text slowly – awestruck and tranquil (as marked by Britten, *tranquillo*) – with two significant melismas on the word “silvers” in ms. 6-8, and “evening,” four measures from the end.

For such a “modern” sound, Britten has mined the musical past and utilized some ancient, medieval techniques, such as:

1. Modality – Unlike the traditional “church modes” used earlier in this Symphony, Britten here employs the archaic, obscure Locrian mode. The old mode – which runs B to B on a modern keyboard – was rarely used due to its “devilish” tritone at step 5 in the scale. Britten uses a transposed Locrian mode, on A-sharp (whose sustained final note becomes the initial B-flat of the next movement).
2. Polyphony – Britten writes something that resembles a medieval motet, with three lines, or “voices” (tenor, violin 1 and violin 2) that move independently. This is a polyphonic texture, but does not involve counterpoint: the lines are not imitative.
3. Voice crossing – The two violin lines that support the tenor-melody employ the medieval technique of voice-crossing in a *Stimmtausch* fashion, but where the pitches “exchanged” are not identical (the lines merely cross). It happens first at Figure [4], suggesting perhaps the upwards splash of a descending rainfall.
4. Sequence – The technique of melodic sequence is employed in the successive ascending violin lines at ms. 20-22 (three before Figure [5]). It is here, at the only true *forte* in the movement, where the Golden Mean occurs – the emotional and musical high point of this setting where the poets speak of the shining sun in a rainfall.
5. Meter – This movement’s “modernity” may be found in the 5/4 meter chosen, but structurally it behaves like a medieval isorhythmic motet: the rhythmic pattern established at the onset (a regular grouping of 3 plus 2 beats) changes at the halfway point at Figure [4] (to 2 plus 3), and then shifts back for a bit at m. 25, only to get compressed and alternated in the last three measures.

All of these techniques are used expressively (and subtly) to evoke the sense of tension (and suspension) over the tenor’s calm, lyric declamation of the text.

Out on the lawn I lie in bed

The Symphony’s “slow movement” ends with this impressive setting of four stanzas from W.H Auden’s twelve-stanza 1933 poem, “A Summer’s Night.” It is set for alto solo, wordless chorus and a string-less orchestra of winds and percussion – its orchestration perhaps a subtle evocation of the British tradition of outdoor wind bands, inspired by the poem’s first line?

The poet describes a 20th century “spring fever” or apathy that is gently called into question. The poem is pre-war, but the music is not. Britten’s choice to end his setting with Auden’s uneasy eighth stanza is telling, and an instance where historical hindsight is definitely 20/20.

Britten opens the movement with a word-less choral *ostinato*, or repeated refrain, that is used structurally to punctuate the end of each stanza. Its bitonality lends an unsettledness to the seeming calm of this lyric utterance. At the dramatic high-point (once again near the proportional Golden Mean) at Figure [11] in the final stanza, Britten splits the alto’s lines in two (“Where Poland draws her Eastern bow”) by having the chorus sing their wordless refrain *forte* (also marked *espressivo*), only to recede to a *pianissimo* hum to close the movement.

In addition to the sustained and murmuring winds that underline the first few languorous lines of text, Britten’s orchestra also employs polytonal techniques: C-Major pitted against A-minor and F-Major against G-Major (all in m. 5 forward). -Evoking a false sense of calm, perhaps?

The violent interruption of trumpets and trombones after Figure [10] (“Where Poland draws her Eastern bow / What violence is done”) depicts the distant rumblings of war (distant, by the use of mutes on the brass instruments). They play canonically, or antiphonally, in two different keys (trumpets in B-flat minor; trombones in A-minor) – accompanied by military-style drums – foreshadowing what would become the violent call and response in the “Dies irae” of the *War Requiem*.

PART THREE – When will my May come

The Symphony’s “scherzo” movement consists of three short poems of spring and love.

The first of these is from Richard Barnefield’s 1594 work, *The Affectionate Shepherd*, a two-book volume of florid romance poetry, mostly in six-line stanzas. Britten opts for a strophic setting of three verses, with a refrain crafted from two lines of the poem (“When will my may come”) that serves to punctuate the strophes and to end the movement. The third verse, about unrequited love, gets an intensified, expanded setting.

Britten sets the poem for his favored combination of tenor and strings (and in this case, also two harps and no contrabass). It is a setting that calls to mind Britten's other great tenor/string song-cycles composed for and inspired by his partner Peter Pears: the *Serenade* for tenor horn and strings, and *Les Illuminations*.

The careful balance and timbral contrast of Britten's forces convey the young lover's overt impetuosity (with the forceful string *ritornello*) and almost whispered agitation (with the delicateness of the two harps that accompany the tenor's verses).

Not only are two tonalities often pitted against each other from the onset, but two different versions of motion and intervals are used to create this sense of inner struggle and agitation. The ascending melody, outlined by the lowest notes in the first measure (G/A/B-flat), are answered by descending ones in the highest notes of m. 2 (E/D/C). The 3-note triplet figures in m. 1 are inverted in m. 2. -And there is even an inner inversion at play here, as 3^{rds} and 6^{ths} are inversions of each other.

Britten's repetition at the end of the phrase "that I may embrace thee...Embrace thee?" conveys not only the poet's pun on the word may/May, but suggests (from the tone of the last verse) "that I may embrace HER."

The tenor's final sustained A-natural leads, *attacca*, into the next movement:

Fair and fair

Britten takes George Peele's verse (from his 16th century courtly play, *The Arraignment of Paris*) and sets it as a male/female duet (in the original poem, between Paris and a nymph, Oenone). The performing forces are often in pairs, higher instruments (and soprano) pitted against lower instruments (and tenor):

1. A flute and oboe dovetail the soprano's verses, accompanied by plucking upper strings.
2. A bassoon and clarinet dovetail the tenor's verses, accompanied by plucking lower strings.

The ambiguities of old and new love as expressed in the text are given musically by some clever techniques:

1. Polytonality – juxtaposing two or more keys (used throughout the *Spring Symphony*).
2. Rhythmic ambiguities – the opening measures of solo oboe in 6/8 exhibit across the bar phrasing (2-3-4 | 5-6-1), and when "Cupid's curse" is described, the downbeat is obscured, *hemiola*-like, by duple groupings of beats in 6/8: 3-4, 5-6, 1-2 | 3-4, 5-6, 1-2.
3. Canonic imitation – At Figure [7] the first verse is repeated but in a double duet: a canon between soprano and tenor (one 8th note apart) and a canon between the soprano's accompanying oboe and the tenor's accompanying bassoon (three 8th notes apart). –Perhaps inspired by the word "twice" in the text, "Fair and fair, and twice as fair?"

Sound the Flute

Britten's brilliant brief setting of this William Blake poem ("Spring," from the poet's 1794 *Songs of Innocence and Experience*) reintroduces the boys' voices, alternating them with the men's and women's voices of the mixed chorus:

Verse 1 – The tenor and bass choral voices, sing antiphonally back and forth over a rapid, repeated accompaniment of brass instruments. In this orchestral "rat-a-tat" rhythm, Britten cleverly suggests percussion instruments but employs none. There is also a skilful predominance of parallel 2^{nds} that move quickly, enharmonically, through keys and melodies, much like what would later appear in the choral writing for the "Recordare" of the *War Requiem* (and in this Symphony's next movement).

Verse 2 - The chorus sopranos and altos (and woodwinds) take verse two, with almost identical music as the men.

Verse 3 - The boys' choir in two parts (and strings) take verse three. –And with *staccato* marked at this tempo (*Allegretto molto mosso*), the strings must play *spiccato*, or bouncing the bow off the string.

All three "choirs" of instruments and voice-pairs come together in gleeful alternation to finish off the movement at the text "Merrily, to welcome in the year."

PART FOUR – Finale

The Finale is a setting of the final speech of the May-lord from the 1607 play, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Long attributed to the play-writing duo of Richard Beaumont and John Fletcher (by its inclusion in the 1679 second edition of their dramas), this work is actually by Francis Beaumont.

In this setting, Britten bookends his Symphony with a movement like the Introduction that is as long in duration and features the only other full orchestral *tutti* in the work. This time, however, he assembles all the performing forces onstage (including the complete solo-vocal and choral participants).

He also makes much in the Finale of twos and threes, both harmonically and rhythmically – and even melodically. Polyrhythm is a key feature of this movement (meters of 3/4 *versus* 2/4) as well as polytonality (specifically, tertian, or chords built on stacks of 3^{rds}). The melodic parallel seconds of “Sound the Flute” even make a reappearance and are a key feature in the Finale’s middle section.

Britten divides this amusing and slightly self-important speech of the May-lord (reminiscent of his opera, *Albert Herring*) into three distinct sections:

I – Introduction (Waltz)

The Finale begins with one measure of a swelling *ppp* sound of unpitched percussion instruments (cymbal, bass drum, side drum, wood block and castanets) which evokes the chatter of insects. The meter for the orchestra is 3/4 and marked *Moderato alla valse*. Pairs of flutes and oboes introduce a lilting waltz-tune built on rising and falling thirds that will dictate the vacillating harmony in this movement. Their phrase-lengths become shorter and shorter, ending in a trill and a flourish in contrary motion. The gentleness of the orchestration here belies the true intent of this gesture that will be made apparent when this theme is taken up by the full chorus of “revelers:” a drinking song that gets “drunker” as one goes along, with the flourish indicating either hands-in-the-air-spilling-the-drink or flopping down on a bar-stool (either way, the drink gets spilled). Structurally, however, Britten has devised in this waltz a clever musical figure (like many a Bach chorale-prelude) that will be used later in the movement to accompany a pre-existing, famous tune.

While the orchestra dances a waltz in 3/4 time, a cow horn announces the May-lord (tenor), whose music (along with the rest of the solo-trio and chorus) Britten has set in duple time (2/4).

The vocal trio and chorus call all to rejoice: “O city, O town, eke [also] every..... shire,” and on this word, “shire” at Figure [5], we hear the first full *tutti* since the Symphony’s opening, and the Finale’s central section begins.

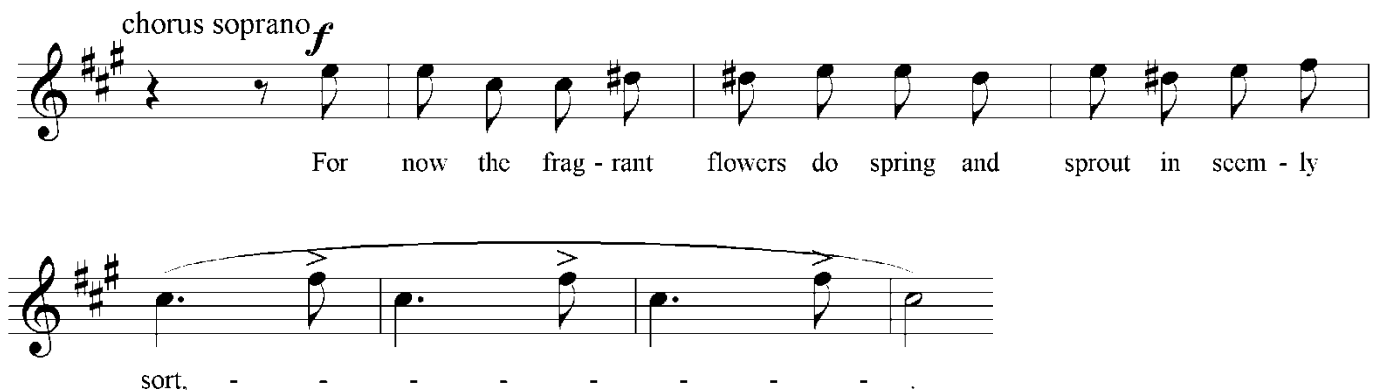
II – Allegro pesante

Britten throws the full weight of his compositional genius into this *tour de force* symphonic Rondo finale. A full-throated Verdian *Falstaff*-like laughing motif in the orchestra cascades downwards in 16th notes (often grouped in twos):



It is immediately inverted to accompany the chorus’s jaunty tune, built on bouncing 8th notes and concluding with a dotted rhythm that will only grow in intensity as the movement progresses (as more “drink” is consumed?):

chorus soprano *f*



For now the frag - rant flowers do spring and sprout in seem - ly
sort. - - - - -

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a soprano voice. The first staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a quarter rest followed by a dotted quarter note, then a series of eighth notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. The piece concludes with a final eighth note G2. The dynamic marking *f* is placed above the staff. The lyrics are written below the staff: "For now the frag - rant flowers do spring and sprout in seem - ly". The second staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a quarter rest followed by a dotted quarter note, then a series of eighth notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. The piece concludes with a final eighth note G2. The lyrics are written below the staff: "sort. - - - - -".

The melodic parallel 2^{nds} of “Sound the Flute” find their way into this tune’s dotted figure at the boys’ choir entrance after Figure [7] on the word “cry.” The flute/oboe flourish heard in the Finale’s first measures now becomes an all-out upwards *portamento* “cry” of a full octave here, and later in the mixed chorus (in their drunken waltz-reprise). The crashing dissonances and “wrong-notes” sung by the chorus before Figure [10] on the word “feateously” also display the melodic descending 2^{nds} heard earlier in “Sound the Flute.”

Both of these abovementioned themes get worked out thoroughly in this section through a variety of techniques (inversion, augmentation, diminution, segmentation, etc) that are at once amazing for their ingenuity and velocity, yet all the while so bound to the declamation and meaning of the text that they seem quite natural and almost unnoticed. Britten possesses in this sense the same kind of genius of inevitability as did Beethoven or Mozart – the uncanny ability of inexorability, of what must come next, the “right” notes (the only notes) that can ensue.

At Figure [13] when the chorus sings “For they are neither good,” they stack up a sustained “block” of thirds (from the top soprano to the lowest bass) that divided strings take over and sustain over the next section of music (a chord, from the bottom up, that is spelled C-E-G-B-D-F, outlining several triads and suggesting several keys at once).

The ensuing vocal music at Figure [14], “Now little fish on tender stone,” is an ingenious vocal version of the orchestral “laughing” theme in augmentation (in groups of two 8th notes, instead of two 16th notes) – it is accompanied in a heterophonic fashion, with winds playing a decorated version of the vocal line simultaneously. The solo trio sings it canonically in a descending pattern, while the choral voices answer with an inverted form sung in an ascending pattern, also canonically:

The musical score for Figure [14] consists of three staves. The top staff is for Soprano solo, the middle for Tenor solo, and the bottom for Bass (Chorus). All staves are in 2/4 time. The Soprano and Tenor parts are marked *poco p e legatissimo* and feature a descending melodic line. The Bass part is marked *ppp legatissimo* and features an ascending melodic line. The lyrics are: Soprano: "Now lit-tle fish on ten-der stone be-gin to"; Tenor: "Now lit-tle fish on ten-der"; Bass: "Now lit - tle fish".

The strings sustain the “block” chord while the winds lay in the 16th note rhythm of the original theme. Such multi-layering of recursive elements not only fits the onomatopoeia in the text (of which Britten makes much by Figure [15] at “shellies”), but at a subconscious level unifies one’s understanding of all the seemingly disparate topics mentioned in this poem. Structurally too, this section (a “development” section, as it were) lends logic to the musical “argument.”

A melodic sequence and compression of material at Figure [22] (“And let it ne’er be said for shame”) propel this section to an end with a recap of the descending parallel 2^{nds} (“and left our custom undone”) and the upwards *portamento* sung and played by all, *fortissimo*. They all come crashing in to the percussion that began the movement (“crickets” and all), triple-*forte*.

The coda (which will bring the movement’s climax) begins, marked “Tempo I”

III – Waltz reprise and coda

The cow horn (and tenor “May-lord”) announces the reprise of the Finale’s opening music, with the duple meter of the solo-trio retained but now with the chorus singing the triple meter waltz-music, wordless on “Ah.” The dance begins softly, marked *ppp*, with the chorus doubled by strings playing *tremolo* in a building excitement.

The May revelers’ ever increasing inebriation is represented by musical “hiccups”(two bars before Figure [26]), as well as some rather unexpected modulations. The solo trio joins in the wordless waltz, and by Figure [28] the final *tutti* is reached when the boys’ voices (doubled by all four horns) re-enter the scene to sing the 13th century round “Sumer is icumen in,” not in its original triple meter, but in duple meter – in contrast to the drunken waltz of the chorus and orchestra.

Things begin to die down as the cow horn returns, announcing once again the May-lord who proclaims:

“Which to prolong, God save our King,
And send his country peace,
And root out treason from the land!
And so, my friends, I cease.”

-and so ceases Britten, with a crashing C-Major chord that brings this 42-minute masterwork to a close.