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Recommended Citation

Tucker, Helen (2013) "Performing Ritual: Physical and Musical Gesture in Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River*," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

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Abstract

Benjamin Britten's *Curlew River* (1964) defies traditional genre labels, exhibiting characteristics of opera, Japanese Noh drama, and religious ritual. Set in medieval England and given a Christian theme, *Curlew River* is based on the Noh play *Sumidagawa* and uses a unique language of physical gesture inspired by Noh traditions. The integration of these physical gestures with the music is one of the ways in which *Curlew River* projects an atmosphere of ritual. In this paper I examine two passages from *Curlew River*, each of which demonstrates a close connection between the development of individual musical gestures and the progression of physical actions performed at the same time. In the arietta "Near the Black Mountains," sung by the character of the Madwoman, the subtle development of a single musical figure is linked to the gradual transformation of the actor's posture. A similar relationship is present in the Ferryman's introductory scene, in which physical movements act as punctuation for a sequence of musical statements. In both instances, musical and physical gesture are integrated into a unified form of expression, the intensity and focus of which lend *Curlew River* its ritual quality.

Keywords

Benjamin Britten, *Curlew River*, Gesture, Ritual, Noh

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In 1959, Benjamin Britten wrote the following to librettist William Plomer (with whom he was collaborating on an adaptation of the Japanese Noh play *Sumidagawa*): “I have been very worried lest the work should seem a pastiche of a Noh play, which however well done, would seem false & thin. I can’t write Japanese music, but might be led into trying if the rest of the production (setting, clothes, moves) were Japanese.”¹ In the same letter Britten suggested transferring the setting to medieval England. Plomer agreed to his proposals, and, when *Curlew River* was written and produced in 1964, the creators felt that they had found a suitable Western parallel to Noh in the medieval church setting and an “all-male cast of ecclesiastics.”² The common thread between the two forms of theatre was an atmosphere of ceremony,

1. Benjamin Britten to William Plomer, 15 April 1959, quoted in Mervyn Cooke, *Britten and the Far East: Asian Influences in the Music of Benjamin Britten* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 143.

2. Benjamin Britten, “Curlew River,” Program note in the 1964 Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book, quoted in Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221.

expressed in austere styles of presentation and plots with straightforward moral messages. Both Noh and medieval English drama are ritualistic forms of theatre, a characteristic that *Curlew River*, with its church setting and formal physical gestures, adopts naturally. In *Curlew River*, music and physical gestures work together as one integrated form of expression, producing a heightened sense of ritual.

Ritual is implied from the very beginning of *Curlew River* when the cast, dressed as monks, processes through the audience singing the Gregorian chant “Te lucis ante terminum.” The work does not, however, serve any strictly liturgical function; its ritualistic quality is achieved instead through the formality of the actors’ movements. Philip Rupprecht remarks that in *Curlew River*, “ritual comes before witnesses in the very nature of the performers’ musical and physical gestures.”³ As Rupprecht asserts, the relation of the formal physical gestures to musical ones is a crucial part of *Curlew River*’s ceremonial aesthetic; the sense of ritual is achieved by the integration of the two types of expression. Original production designer Colin Graham observes in the production notes appended to the musical score that the work, “created a convention of movement and presentation of its own.”⁴ In this article, I will discuss the integration of musical and physical gestures in *Curlew River* by examining two passages in detail, using examples from the musical score as well as Colin Graham’s production notes and diagrams from the original 1964 staging. My analysis of both the music

3. Rupprecht, *Britten’s Musical Language*, 220.

4. Benjamin Britten, *Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance*, libretto by William Plomer, trans. Ludwig Landgraf, production notes by Colin Graham (London: Faber Music, 1983), 143.

and the prescribed physical actions in each of these passages will demonstrate the close relationship between the two forms of expression and will consider the ways in which their integration suggests ritual.

The story of *Curlew River* is framed by the procession and recession of the monks (actors and instrumentalists together), and by a robing ceremony, during which the three principal characters are costumed. The plot itself is uncomplicated: a Madwoman approaches the *Curlew River* looking for her lost son. She begs passage of the Ferryman who, on the journey across the river, tells his passengers of events that occurred there a year before. A foreigner, he says, came through their land with a young boy, and when the boy died on the opposite bank, the local people buried him as a saint. The Madwoman recognizes that the boy was her son and is overcome with grief. His spirit appears and restores her sanity, promising that they will meet again in heaven. The story is opened and closed by an exhortation from the Abbot who addresses the audience as though speaking to a religious congregation.

In the program booklet of the 1964 Aldeburgh Festival, Britten described the aspects of Noh theatre that attracted him: "the economy of the style, the intense slowness of the action, the marvellous skill and control of the performers."⁵ The adaptation of the Noh convention of movement, in which each physical gesture is calculated and executed precisely, is one of the most significant ways in which *Curlew River* approaches ritual. Graham indicates that the actors in *Curlew River* should attempt to make their

5. Britten, "Curlew River," quoted in Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 220.

movements as “unlike naturalistic acting” as possible.⁶ Just as in Noh theatre, the performers are always aware that they are acting as characters, and do not seek the Western theatrical ideal of complete identification with their roles. They also do not express emotion with their faces, which are masked. Their physical performances are entirely concentrated in the predetermined gestures they execute. As he was staging *Curlew River*, Colin Graham drew his knowledge of Noh gestures and their manner of performance from literary sources only. Britten forbade him to see a Noh performance for fear that he would imitate the style too closely and create the pastiche that the composer had been so careful to avoid in the music.⁷ Though Graham borrowed some symbolic postures from Noh, most of the movements he devised were original, influenced only by the principles of Noh.

Focus on gesture in *Curlew River* occurs on a musical level as well as a physical one. Throughout much of the work, there are small, well-defined motives that emerge from the rest of the musical texture. Most of these motives reappear numerous times with various significant, but recognizable, transformations. This focus on musical gesture is similar to the emphasis placed on individual physical gestures, suggesting that there is a close relationship between the two types of expression. Indeed, in remembering *Curlew River*’s creation, Colin Graham noted that Britten was involved in every aspect of the physical staging and that, “final details of the music were worked out simultaneously with the dramatic ideas.”⁸

6. Britten, *Curlew River*, 145.

7. Cooke, *Britten and the Far East*, 154.

8. Ibid.

Most of the physical gestures in *Curlew River*, though stylized, are not elaborate. They involve raising one or both arms in a specific way, kneeling or standing, and other basic bodily movements. The gestures are imbued with ritual significance when the performers execute them in a very slow, deliberate manner, reducing all other movement. As in *Noh*, the performers keep superfluous movement to a minimum in order to enhance the impact of the choreographed actions.⁹ By limiting all other movement, the performers in *Curlew River* draw attention to each individual gesture. A similar effect is achieved with musical gestures, which emerge from a very economical texture. Just as the minimization of unnecessary movement emphasizes the physical gestures, the transparent musical texture makes individual musical gestures clearly audible.

The connection between musical and physical gesture in *Curlew River* is strongest when examined beyond the level of individual gestures. The two types of expression develop in relation to each other throughout entire passages. I will explore this relationship by examining two passages in detail.¹⁰ The Madwoman's arietta "Near the Black Mountains" and

9. Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives*, trans. Jane Corddry and Stephen Comee (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), 216.

10. In my discussion of the physical gestures of *Curlew River*, I shall refer to the original production notes compiled by Colin Graham and published as an appendix to the score. These contain detailed instructions not only for the performance of specific actions, but also for the movement of the performers around the original stage. Each direction is given a number in the musical score that shows exactly when it should be performed. In my analysis I shall be referring to physical gestures using these 'gesture numbers.' These are separate from the standard rehearsal numbers in the score, to which I shall also be referring.

the Ferryman's introductory scene are both taken from the first half of the work and demonstrate different approaches to the integration of physical and musical gesture. In each passage, there is a principal musical gesture that is introduced and then transformed throughout the scene. Both of these motives reappear later in the Parable, but can be most clearly examined in their original situations. Though there are not always direct correlations between individual musical motives and physical actions, in both of the passages there is a greater formal relationship at work.

The Integration of Shape in Music and Posture

One of the most recurrent musical gestures in *Curlew River* is first sung by the Madwoman in the arietta, "Near the Black Mountains," in which she recounts the story of her son's disappearance (rehearsal no. 33). The musical gesture consists of a series of evenly spaced repeated notes ending in a glissando up a whole tone (ex. 1). Although this motive is sounded in previous passages by other characters, such as the Ferryman, this is the first time that it is the dominant musical gesture. Indeed, it is the only musical gesture used in the entire arietta and Britten develops it by transposition, change of direction of the glissando, and thickening and thinning of the instrumental texture. The Madwoman is given very few directions for physical gestures in this arietta, reflecting the economy and restraint of the musical texture. Just as the single musical motive is maintained through a number of obvious transformations, so the Madwoman moves through several basic postures and gestures, each performed by the actor with great formality. By limiting the musical material and the physical motion, each gesture is made conspicuous.

Though the Madwoman's physical gestures do not strictly represent the musical gesture, the progression of her movements mirrors the motive's development through the arietta. There is a particularly strong connection in this passage between the musical gesture's transformation and the gradual changes to the actor's posture. When "Near the Black Mountains" begins, the musical gesture is played by solo instruments, and the repeated notes, marked with tenuto signs, are tentative and heavy, indicative of great effort (ex. 2). In the opening, the Madwoman is bent over, kneeling on the ground, a posture into which she has collapsed in grief in the previous section (ex. 3). This posture provides a physical parallel to the heaviness of the musical motive. The clarity of this passage, its transparent texture, and the steadiness of the pulsing eighth notes suggest the Madwoman's lucidity, which is in stark contrast to the erratic motives she has sung previously.

The Madwoman remains in her posture on the ground for the first seven bars of the arietta, during which the musical gesture also changes very little; the instrumental entrances overlap only slightly, the Madwoman sings in the middle of her range, and the glissando at the end always rises a whole tone. At rehearsal number 34, however, the horn takes up the motive for the first time, which gives the musical gesture a harsher, more strident sound. In conjunction with this, the Madwoman begins to sit up and her vocal line moves a major third above its opening pitch. The repeated eighth notes at this point become urgent rather than heavy and suddenly the glissando at the end of the gesture slides down a whole tone, which has the effect of turning the motive into a stylized sob. Over the next six bars, the intensity increases dramatically as the Madwoman's voice rises another third, and

the instrumental texture thickens rapidly until the repeated notes become a tremolo (ex. 4). The slow transition of the actor's posture in this passage, gradually raising himself to a sitting position, enhances the impact of both the gradually intensifying musical texture and the transformation of the musical gesture.

At rehearsal number 35, the Madwoman suddenly "kneels bolt upright with convulsive movement, arms stretched out forwards."¹¹ This is the physical reflection of the intensifying musical texture, rising pitch, and increasing dynamic. At the same instant, the accompanying instruments begin playing in ferocious unison. The Madwoman has physically raised herself as much as she can without standing up, and her vocal line has almost reached its highest pitch. The musical gesture has again been transformed in response to the heightened emotion: the glissando at the end now falls only a semitone, expressing the tension and strain of the Madwoman's posture (ex. 4, highlighted).

After this climax, the musical gesture fragments and becomes irregular. The Madwoman's vocal line and her physical movements have a rare moment of direct alignment when she gradually raises her arms to the east and uses the glissando fragment to rise slowly to a high B-flat on the words "Along the track East." This note is the highest her line reaches in the arietta, though it is less emotionally intense than the previous peak. There is no instrumental accompaniment when she reaches it; the only physical manifestation is the raising of her arms. The Madwoman returns to her original posture in the final bars of "Near the Black Mountains." The instruments, too, revert to the sparse

11. Britten, *Curlew River*, 150.

texture of the opening and the pitch lowers. Unlike the opening, however, the glissando slides downward, and as the Madwoman sings her final phrase, she weeps.

In pitch, texture, and alteration of the glissando, the musical gesture follows a clear arc throughout this arietta. The Madwoman mirrors this shape with her body, beginning low to the ground, gradually moving on to her knees, raising her arms to stretch upwards, and then sinking down again. The two climactic moments in the music are particularly highlighted by her body: when the musical gesture is played most directly by all of the instruments in unison (rehearsal no. 35), the Madwoman reaches straight forward to the audience and, when her vocal line reaches its highest pitch, her arms move upwards with the music. The musical gesture and the Madwoman's posture follow the same arc as they develop throughout this arietta. Musical and physical expression are integrated in this passage by the overall shape they create, a fusion that evokes the formality of ritual.

Musical Phrases with Physical Punctuation

A different type of relationship between musical and physical gesture is evident in a passage from earlier in *Curlew River* when the story proper begins, immediately following the instrumental interlude that accompanies the ceremonial robing (rehearsal no. 8). In this instance, there are three distinct elements that work together: the physical gestures, the vocal line, and the instrumental part. The musical phrases of the voice and instruments, particularly the horn, parallel the physical gestures of the Ferryman, which are usually performed at the beginning of each phrase. This correlation is highlighted by the drums, which, in the style of Noh theatre,

cue the Ferryman's physical actions, further framing each individual phrase. The physical gestures in this passage act as visual punctuation for the music by outlining and defining the relationships between phrases.

The first musical gesture in this passage introduces the Ferryman. He comes forward and announces, "I am the ferryman. I row the ferry boat over the Curlew, Our wide and reedy Fenland river."¹² The distinctive musical gesture in this opening is played by the horn, the Ferryman's characteristic instrument. After a first note, marked *forte*, the horn plays a sixteenth-note figure of three sets of two alternating notes that push upwards to a final sustained note (ex. 5, highlight). This gesture is both a stylized trill and a fanfare, and it appears at various points in *Curlew River* to announce that the Ferryman is about to sing. The musical gesture is unique to the horn and the horn's timbre is part of its character.

Throughout this opening scene, the Ferryman's vocal line consists mostly of short, straightforward declarations, each preceded by a flourish gesture from the horn. As in the first two bars (ex. 5), both parts usually have the same pitch range and basic contour in each statement, a result of the heterophonic texture. The Ferryman is also directed to perform a series of physical gestures at specific points. Made conspicuous by the lack of excess movement, the Ferryman's physical actions mirror the structure of the individual phrases of the horn and the voice. For the first three of the Ferryman's statements the voice and horn are staggered and appear to be in dialogue or in opposition to one another. Rather than working separately, however, the voice and horn function together with the physical gestures, producing a

12. Britten, *Curlew River*, 10.

series of unified musical and physical utterances. The three components of each utterance (vocal, instrumental, and physical) together form the character of the Ferryman.

The first two declarations the Ferryman sings are particularly short and concise (ex. 5). The second follows naturally from the first, and their relation is reflected in the small variation made to the second vocal phrase (the step up to C-sharp). Similarly, the horn flourishes proceeding these two statements are brief, the second, an answer to the first, is varied by a change of direction and by the concluding turn. Each of these constitutes a separate utterance, defined by the physical gestures that accompany them. In the first statement, "I am the Ferryman," the actor stands facing forward with his arms apart to reinforce the declaration (ex. 7). In the second, he maintains the same basic posture, but brings his arm up to indicate the ferry boat, a physical gesture which, like the music, follows naturally from the first and is a variation of it.

The third time the horn plays the flourish gesture it is extended and is almost a composite of the previous two musical gestures (ex. 6, highlight). Phrase 3 heralds a similar extension of the Ferryman's previous statements ("Over the Curlew..."), during which the vocal line combines the pitch range of the first two, rising a major third instead of remaining around a single note. The physical gesture that accompanies the third phrase is also a composite of the first two gestures: the Ferryman moves his arm to indicate the river, an extension of the second action. Following this the voice and horn sound together during the dependent clause, a phrase that is a significant departure from the first three; the horn gesture is fragmented and the vocal line gets more complex rhythmically and chromatically. Reflecting this change with his body, the Ferryman alters his basic posture

for the first time, and leans to the right, bringing his left arm in front of him (ex. 8).

As if in explanation of the relationship between the voice, horn, and physical actions, the Ferryman's voice later (gesture no. 20) adopts the shape of the horn gesture in augmentation with the words, "I row, row, row the ferry boat."¹³ Illustrative rowing motions with his arms accompany this gesture. During the extended horn flourish that follows, the Ferryman raises his left hand in a call, illustrating that the horn is simply part of his voice. The heterophonic musical texture also suggests a fusion of the musical parts; the horn and voice actually sound the same basic line in different states of elaboration.

The pattern established by the Ferryman's opening statements is repeated consistently for most of the first scene, in which the Ferryman is the principal speaker. Though this type of relationship between music and gesture, in which physical actions act as punctuation for the musical phrases, is more transparent than the relationship in the Madwoman's scene, the result is the same: both vocal and instrumental music, as well as physical movement are integrated and follow parallel progressions throughout the passage. With this formality of this structure and economy of physical movement, Britten emphasizes individual gestures, both physical and musical.

13. Britten, *Curlew River*, 11.

Conclusion

In both of these passages there is a discernible connection between the musical and physical forms of expression. Though the way in which music and movement relate differs from scene to scene, the development of musical elements is consistently integrated with the sequence of physical gestures. In the Madwoman's arietta "Near the Black Mountains," the integration is evident in the overall shape created by musical texture and pitch, as well as the actor's posture. Physical gestures in the Ferryman's scene follow the straightforward structure of the musical phrases, acting as punctuation. Through this integration, musical and physical gestures are experienced as a single, unified form of expression. This, "linkage of sensory channels," as described by Rupprecht, is one of the key ways in which *Curlew River* achieves its ritual quality.¹⁴ When the two spheres of performance have a common expression, the result is more concentrated and more intense than normal activity. As Rupprecht points out, the performance of *Curlew River* achieves a "suspending of human time" because the integration of music and movement focus the attention of the observer.¹⁵

Benjamin Britten, William Plomer, and Colin Graham produced two more Church Parables in the style of *Curlew River*. *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968) employ both musical and physical expression in similar ways. Whether there is as close integration between music and movement as there is in *Curlew River* has not, to

14. Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language*, 225.

15. *Ibid.*, 228.

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my knowledge, been yet explored. The conclusions I have reached regarding the ways in which musical and physical gesture are related in *Curlew River* are based on the original 1964 production. The parable offers potential, however, for different staging in which ritual can be created with fresh approaches to the integration of music and physical gesture.

Appendix

Example 1: *Curlew River*, pg. 31, Rehearsal no. 33.

Example 2: *Curlew River*, pg. 32.

Madwoman

Flute

Viola

Db.

There I was living With my child, —
Dort leb-te ich mit mei-nem Kind, —

There with my on-ly child, —
Mit mei-nem ein-z-gen Kind, —

7

pp

(< >)

A musical score for four parts: Madwoman (voice), Flute, Viola, and Double Bass (Db.). The Madwoman part has two lines of lyrics in English and German. The Flute part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and a tempo marking of 7. The Viola and Db. parts also have a tempo marking of 7. Performance instructions in parentheses, (< >), are present for the Flute and Db. parts.

Example 3: *Curlew River*, pg. 150.

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Example 4: *Curlew River*, pg. 33.

Madwoman *f* Roaring (like the sea!) *f* My on-ly child was lost, *f*
Brüllend wie die See! *Mein einzig Kind ver-schwand,*

Flute *f* *ff*

Horn *f* *ff*

Viola *f* *ff*

Db. *f* *ff*

35 67

Example 5: *Curlew River*, pg. 10.

FERRYMAN *f* *f* *f*
 FÄHRMANN

1 am the fer-ry-man. *f* 1 row the fer-ry boat *f*
 Ich bin der Fähr-mann. *f* Ich fähr das Fähr boot *f*

Horn *f* *p* *f* *p*

1 2

Example 6: *Curlew River*, pg. 11.

Ferryman

O - ver the Cur - lew,
Ü - ber den Fluß hier,

Our wide and reed - y
Den weit - ver - schif - y
ten

Horn

Example 7: *Curlew River*, pg. 147.

Fig. 15

- (16) raises left arm to indicate boat;
- (17) moves left arm forward to indicate river;

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Example 8: *Curlew River*, pg. 147.

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