

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S VIOLIN CONCERTO, OP.15: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO
COMPOSITION

by

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To my dear parents in Korea, who always give me endless love and support.

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Introduction

“A composer’s job is to create, not to comment; and this is not a theory, but a conviction & an inclination. I hate talking about my own music, or my own musical inclination, & avoid it whenever I can.”¹

Benjamin Britten, widely regarded as one of the greatest British composers after Purcell, believed that music should speak for itself without lengthy explanation. Because he was opposed to revealing the compositional intentions behind his works, there are few existing texts containing firsthand information for analysis or interpretations of his *Violin Concerto*. Despite a lack of scholarly literature, this work holds substantial significance in Britten’s oeuvre as it shows signs of compositional maturity and the development of Britten’s unique compositional language. The *Violin Concerto* is an amalgamation of influences from historically significant events of the time, along with elements from the Baroque period and Britten’s contemporaries. This research sheds light on the larger historical context and presents analytical information on Britten’s *Violin Concerto, Op. 15* from a performer’s perspective.

Benjamin Britten’s *Violin Concerto, Op. 15*, one of his significant early compositions, was completed in the summer and autumn of 1939 during his stay in America. He was still in his twenties and the concerto was his first composition completed after arriving in the USA. In 1938, Britten expressed satisfaction with the work in his letters to Wulff Scherchen. He wrote, “...started the new concerto — it’s going fine so far — & it’s the best so far I’m sure. I’m feeling cheerful about that —.”² In a separate letter to the publisher Ralph Hawkes, Britten mentions, “... I’m pretty pleased with it so far. It’s very serious — & should please the critics anyhow in that respect.”³

¹ Paul Kildea, ed., *Britten on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239.

² Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976, Volume One 1923–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 596.

³ Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1939–1945, Volume Two 1939–1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 665.

The premiere happened in March of 1940 at Carnegie Hall. The *Violin Concerto* was performed by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of celebrated conductor, Sir John Barbirolli (1899–1970) and with the Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa (1894–1979) as a soloist. The premiere was successful and resulted in many favorable reviews. Renowned music critic Olin Downes at the *New York Times* described the piece’s orchestration as “sometimes very simple, often very brilliant, [but] nevertheless so expert that the violin is never covered when it is intended to show forth, while at no time does the writing appear impractical or ineffective.”⁴

Britten’s concerto has received scant attention since its premiere and has had garnered fewer performances than violin concertos of Britten’s contemporaries. Furthermore, his large-scale vocal works such as the *War Requiem* and the opera *Peter Grimes* were favored over the *Violin Concerto*, achieving more attention and praise from both the public and critics.

There are a number of reasons as to why the *Violin Concerto* has been unpopular for almost half a century. For example, the complex structure and sophisticated motifs were driven from various challenging historical and cultural influences. Written between the two World Wars and right after the end of the Spanish Civil War, Britten’s concerto embodies his views on war. Due to the serious nature of the extra-musical influences, the *Violin Concerto* developed into a work that seemed difficult to access emotionally for audiences. Also, the technical difficulty required of the soloist was a contributing factor in why the *Violin Concerto* was under performed. Especially for the left hand, technical challenges such as an extensive use of multiple stops have discouraged soloists.

Regardless of its reception, Britten’s *Violin Concerto* is a masterpiece that is worthy of a place in the standard violin concerto repertoire. Recently, there has been a growing number of performances and recordings of the *Violin Concerto* allowing it to receive its well-deserved recognition. As this concerto slowly gains fame, an in-depth research is necessary to support the production of thoughtful and effective performances. This research aims to examine the *Violin*

⁴ Olin Downes, “Britten Concerto in Premiere Here,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1940, final edition.

Concerto's historical and cultural context, to provide analysis of Britten's sense of craft and compositional vocabulary, and to discuss issues of style and technique related to the performance of the work.

Chapter 1: Benjamin Britten's Early Life and the Background of Violin Concerto

A. Britten's life until 1939

Born into a middle-class family in Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast, Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) started his musical education with his mother Edith Britten (1872–1937). Edith served as the secretary at Lowestoft Choral Society, was also an amateur singer and pianist. Through his mother's guidance, Britten's musical talent stood out from an early age. From age seven Britten studied piano and music theory with Ethel Astle (1876–1952), an associate at the Royal College of Music, and at age ten he started viola lessons with Audrey Alston (1883–1966) in Norwich. It was Alston who introduced the fourteen year old Britten to the composer, Frank Bridge (1879–1941). This took place at the Norfolk and Norwich Triennial Festival concert in 1927, where Bridge's orchestral composition *Enter Spring* was performed. Britten later reflected how he appreciated Astle's teaching. He wrote in his letter to Astle in 1942, "I can never say enough how much I personally benefited from your teaching & knowing you all those years."¹ Also regarding Alston, Britten recognized how Alston contributed to shaping his early personality and musicality. In recognition of this, Britten dedicated his *Simple Symphony, Op. 4* to her in 1933.

It is well known that one of the major influences on Britten's compositional development was Frank Bridge.² Bridge immediately recognized Britten's remarkable talent and was deeply impressed by his compositions. Bridge offered Britten private lessons, a gesture that impacted Britten profoundly as Britten was Bridge's one and only composition student. Britten started taking regular trips to London to have lessons with Bridge in 1928. Bridge's two cardinal principles of teaching were "find yourself and be true to what you

¹ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 1069.

² Christopher Mark, "Juvenilia (1922–1932)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

found,” and “scrupulous attention to good technique, the business of saying clearly what was in one’s mind.”³ These ideas were instilled through intense and devoted lesson sessions that were demanding for the teenage boy. Britten himself revealed an episode when Mrs. Bridge interrupted their lesson and said “Really, you must give the boy a break.”⁴ Bridge was more than just a ‘teacher’ for Britten. He regarded Bridge highly as his ‘musical father.’ Renowned Britten biographer John Bridcut quotes Britten’s own words as following: “If anything happened to my musical father, I don’t know what I should do.”⁵

Bridge also encouraged Britten to be more adventurous in his compositional language. Britten specialist Christopher Mark mentions that the composer’s initial musical efforts were too representative of the conservativeness and provinciality of English music making.⁶ Britten himself wrote, “By the time I was 13 or 14 I was beginning to get more adventurous. Before then, what I’d been writing had been sort of early 19th century in style.”⁷

Britten’s skill and ambition were evident during his formative years. In 1928 he entered Gresham’s School, a public boarding school in the small town of Holt in Norfolk, with a music scholarship. However, he faced challenges at school in his early years. Walter Greatorex (1877–1949), the music director of the school did not like the ‘special treatment’ that Britten was given. The young composer was permitted to travel to London for lessons with Bridge that took place during the school term. This resulted in Greatorex forbidding Britten to perform in a school concert. Despite Greatorex's discouragement, Britten became one of the most outstanding students of the school by his second year. He was finally granted an appearance at a school concert at the end of the Easter term in 1930, and received immense compliments from the school chaplain:

³ Benjamin Britten, “Benjamin looking back”, *Sunday Telegraph* (17 Nov. 1963): 9.

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 16–17.

⁵ John Bridcut, *Essential Britten: A Pocket Guide for the Britten Centenary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 31.

⁶ Christopher Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten: A Study of Stylistic and Technical Evolution* (New York and London: Garland, 1995), 7.

⁷ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 15–16.

The apex of the concert was the playing of Britten. ... The interpretation of Rachmaninoff's *Fileuse* alone was enough to establish him as a past-master of delicate workmanship, but the *Polichinelle* of Rachmaninoff held one bewildered, spellbound. Two thoughts arose: 1. How on earth could anyone have written? 2. How on earth could anyone play it? The effect was devastating. The more the fire and fury, or the leaping and plunging increased, the more rapturously I could have shouted for joy...of course Britten was encored.⁸

While other students at Gresham's would normally stay longer to pursue the Higher Certificate, Britten was firmly determined to leave school after his sixth term. In the summer of 1930, Britten was awarded the annual music composition scholarship examination by the Royal College of Music. Winning the scholarship led him to start a new life in London the same year. English composer and composition professor John Ireland (1893–1962) was assigned as composition teacher for Britten at RCM. According to Britten's diary, Ireland was not punctual for their lesson time. Ireland often did not appear for scheduled lessons, or had Britten wait outside for over half an hour. Even though Ireland seemed to be somewhat apathetic of teaching Britten, Ireland's teaching style was intense and strict. Under his guidance, Britten had to exert himself vigorously on the basic compositional techniques such as counterpoint, fugue and aspects of general musicianship during the first two years at RCM. After his first full-length lesson, Britten complained in his diary, "He is terribly critical and enough to take the heart out of anyone!"⁹

Arthur Benjamin (1893–1962), an Australian composer and pianist, became Britten's piano teacher. Although Benjamin did not believe that Britten could become a solo pianist, he was an enthusiastic and encouraging teacher for the young composer.¹⁰ Britten later admitted that while Ireland and Benjamin were positive influences on him, Bridge remained his most significant mentor until he left for America.

⁸ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 31–32.

⁹ John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928-1938* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

In 1932, while Britten was still at the RCM, he completed *Sinfonietta, Op. 1* and *Phantasy for String Quintet*. Both works won a prize from the school, but they were rejected by the ISCM (International Society of Contemporary Music) festival to be held in December 1933. At the end of his last term at RCM (December 1933), Britten planned a special visit to Vienna to study with Alban Berg whom Britten greatly admired. However, the plan could not move forward due to a couple of substantial reasons: at the RCM, Berg was considered a composer of ‘bad influence’ and Britten’s parents who equated Berg’s lawless and degenerate music with equivalent morality and behaviors believed that studying with Berg would cause Britten harm.¹¹ Furthermore, with the ascent of the Nazis, Berg’s music quickly became prohibited due to his association with the Jewish composer, Arnold Schoenberg. Britten never had a chance to study with Berg again as Berg died the following year, in 1935.¹²

During the RCM years, his appreciation for the contemporary composers of the time expanded greatly. He became fond of the music of Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and especially Mahler. Before the exposure to his senior contemporaries, Britten admired triple Bs: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. In his diary on November 13 1928, he wrote, “Brahms has gone up one place in my list of composers. Beethoven is still first, and I think will always be, Bach or Brahms comes next, I don’t know which!”¹³ His passion about Beethoven had remained a little longer, but his enthusiasm for Brahms was significantly diminished during his RCM years. In 1936, he noted in his diary that composer Ernest John Moeran’s *Symphony in G minor* was terribly under the influence of Sibelius. “This is going to be almost as bad as the Brahms influence on English music I fear.”¹⁴ The love lost for Brahms never returned afterwards. In

¹¹ Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 80.

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 14.

¹⁴ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 397.

1952, Britten also recorded that “ I play through all his [Brahms’s] music every so often to see if I am right about him; I usually find that I underestimated last time how bad it was!”¹⁵

As soon as Britten received his degree from RCM, he searched for a job that could provide him with financial stability. In April 1935, he was approached by the General Post Office Film Unit to write music for their short documentary called *The King Stamp*. It led him to work on more than two-dozen film commissions over the following three years. The cinematic techniques that Britten learned through GPO nourished his music for the rest of his life. Later, Britten reflected that he never forgot the discipline of writing music in such a short time with low budgets.¹⁶ Writing for the GPO not only enabled him to make a stable income but also provided him with new artistic and intellectual inspirations.

Among his new friends from GPO, the most important person to Britten personally was the poet, Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973). Auden introduced Britten to his ‘gang’ of artists and writers and Britten quickly became the composer of this group.¹⁷ This new environment led Britten to become interested in politics, and to develop an awareness of his sexuality. It is obvious that these new friends including Auden had strong influences on Britten in many areas — left-wing, pacifism, agnosticism and homosexuality. In addition, Auden’s departure for America in early 1939 was one of the major factors that triggered Britten’s decision to visit America in April 1939.

He left for North America in April 1939. The initial purpose of the visit was for leisure. However, the composer later decided to live in New York City in August of the same year. Britten had many motivations for making the city his home. In addition to visiting Auden, he was able to make personal connections with the prominent music community of New York City and seek more professional opportunities.

¹⁵ The Earl of Harewood, “The Man,” in *Benjamin Britten: a Commentary on his works from a group of specialists*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (Westport: Greenwood, 1972), 6.

¹⁶ Bridcut, *Essential Britten*, 64.

¹⁷ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 70.

Before returning to Great Britain in 1942, Britten added a number of compositions to his oeuvre. These included the *Violin Concerto*, *Les Illumination*, *Sinfonia da Requiem*, the first String Quartet, and the two pieces for two pianos. His continued collaboration with Auden in the United States also resulted in his first operetta *Paul Bunyan* and the choral piece *Hymn to St. Cecilia*.

During his stay in the United States, Britten went through significant changes in his view of himself as an artist. He was ready to establish himself as a mature artist, able to accept and be at peace with his sexual identity. As Britten scholar Suzanne Robinson states, the years in which Benjamin Britten lived in the United States are customarily portrayed as “years of personal and professional maturity.”¹⁸ Starting with the *Violin Concerto*, the works he composed in this period displayed more consistent sensitivity and depth without shifting his musical style.¹⁹

In Britten’s own words from the printed article, *English and the Folk-Art Problem*, he expressed these newly developed ideas on originality:

The English composers of today have consciously or unconsciously seen the danger-signal ahead. They are avoiding the pitfalls that some of their musical fathers and uncles have dug for them. It is only those who accept their loneliness and refuse all the refuges, whether of tribal nationalism or airtight intellectual systems, who will carry on the human heritage.²⁰

Britten made the initial plan of another noteworthy major work during his US period, the opera *Peter Grimes*. The original conception came from reading the article from *The Listener*, written by E.M. Forster concerning the poet, George Crabbe. *The Borough* is a collection of poems by Crabbe, and *Peter Grimes* is one of those poems. It is about a fisherman who lives in a fictional village, similar to that of Crabbe’s own hometown, Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Aldeburgh is also where Britten would later settle in during his late years.

¹⁸ Suzanne Robinson, “‘An English Composer Sees America’: Benjamin Britten and the North American Press, 1939-42.” *American music* 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 321.

¹⁹ The Earl of Harewood, *Benjamin Britten*, 4.

²⁰ Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 35.

The encounter with George Crabbe's poems made Britten realize two things: "that I must write an opera, and where I belonged".²¹

B. The 1930s and the *Violin Concerto*

The 1930s was a fascinating decade for violinists, during which more great concertos for their instrument appeared than at any other time in the Modern era. Stravinsky, Bartók, Bloch, Hindemith, Schoenberg, Berg, Prokofiev, Sessions, and Walton completed their violin concerti during this time. Furthermore, in the single year of 1939, many composers such as Walton, Barber, Hindemith and Hartmann added their violin concertos in the oeuvre.

In the "Cambridge Companion to the Concerto," David Schneider categorized concertos written between 1900 and 1945 into three groups. The first group was between 1900 and World War I, showing expansive and expressive characteristics of 19th century concertos. The second group was between the 1920 and early 1930s, exhibiting the opposite style — shorter, simply scored, more rhythmical, more dissonant, reminiscent of the pre-19th century musical style. The third group was between the mid 1930s and 1945 and included Britten's *Violin Concerto*. This group had characteristics of both of the previous groups. They are longer, more lyrical, more fully scored, but more dissonant and shorter in duration than those written before World War I.²²

This outpouring of violin concerti in the 1930s can be attributed to the unusual proliferation of virtuoso violinists. The 1930s was considered a golden era for violinists. The greatest violinists of the 20th century, such as Fritz Kreisler, Mischa Elman, Jascha Heifetz, Nathan Milstein, David Oistrakh and Yehudi Menuhin were actively concertizing during this period. Violinists commissioned composers to write violin concertos: Alban Berg's concerto was composed on a commission from Ukrainian born American violinist Louis Krasner, and Stravinsky was asked to compose a violin concerto for violinist Samuel Dushkin. Not only did

²¹ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 962.

²² David E. Schneider, "Contrasts and Common Concerns in the Concerto 1900-1945," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, ed. Simon P. Keefe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 140.

violinists commission composers, but composers were also inspired by individual violinists. For example, Oistrakh became the muse of Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's violin works, and Walton wrote a concerto for Heifetz. Therefore, Britten was not exceptional to have written a large violin work for Antonio Brosa, a Spanish violinist whom he greatly admired.

Historically, the 1930s (a.k.a. "The Turbulent Thirties") was an era of conflict. Europe had never fully recovered from the devastation caused by World War I. In America, the Great Depression brought the traumatic effects of unemployment and poverty. The arts community had to produce works that would appeal to a mass audience in order to survive. There was little money to support less commercially viable and more adventurous works. In Hollywood many independent studios and theaters were forced to close, while the major studios turned to lavish musicals, thrillers, horror movies, and popular dramas that attracted larger audiences.

After World War I, many composers sought inspiration from balanced forms and clearly perceptible thematic processes of earlier styles, replacing the seeming formlessness of late Romanticism.²³ One of the representative works is Stravinsky's *Violin Concerto* (1931), which makes references to the concerto grosso genre of the Baroque period.

The February 2014 issue of *The Strad* magazine features the article, "The Irresistible Lure of 1930s Violin Concertos" by a violinist Gil Shaham:

An eloquent person once said that in the '30s the whole world was dancing on a volcano, waiting for it to erupt. Somehow these composers responded to the events of that decade in their violin concertos. The conductor Hugh Wolff once said the last movement of the Barber Concerto sounded like Big City America, with the traffic noise, the skyscrapers going up, the sound of sirens. By contrast, the slow movement is like the plight of rural America, the Dust Bowl farmers and the Great Depression. An element of nostalgia runs through many of these pieces, as in Berg's Concerto, in the fourth-movement variations on the Bach chorale *Ich habe genug*, where the composer switches between a twelve-tone setting of the melody, with the weeping solo violin on top, to suddenly juxtaposing it with the same phrase echoed by Bach's original harmony in the clarinets, imitating an organ. There is a sense here of

²³ Arnold Whithall, "Neo-Classicism." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 11 Sep. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com>.

longing for the past and anxiety at what's to come. What has happened to old Europe? Where are we going now?²⁴

Thus, “the turbulent thirties” saw a diversity of stylistic idioms in violin concerti. Furthermore, the era saw the prosperous bloom in creative arts such as movies, literature, fine and performing arts. However, the rise of Nazism eventually led to the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the world swirled back into destruction and chaos.

C. Britten Violin Concerto and Antonio Brosa

Britten's compositional development was greatly influenced by his various musician friends from his entire career. Britten's focus on writing vocal music was directly related to his lifetime partnership with the tenor Peter Pears. His encounter with Rostropovich resulted in four cello suites, a cello sonata and a cello symphony that is actually a form of cello concerto. Britten's muse for violin music was undoubtedly Antonio Brosa, who was directly connected to the composer's three violin pieces written in the late 1930s.

The Spanish violinist Antonio Brosa (1894–1979) settled in London in 1914. Brosa and Britten were first introduced to each other by Frank Bridge when Britten was 17 years old and attending RCM. They formed a recital partnership in the 1930s. Britten was the one who persuaded Brosa to follow him from London to New York, where he gave the first performance of Britten's *Violin Concerto* under Babirolli's baton. Until Britten's America visit in 1939, Brosa seemed to be the only professional violinist who was also personally well connected to the composer. There are only three pieces that Britten composed solely for violin; *Violin Suite, Op.6* (1934–5), *Reveille* (1937), *Violin Concerto, Op.15* (1938–9). Considering these three violin works were written between 1935–1939, it is natural to deduce that the works are directly linked to Brosa. Actually, Britten did not write the *Violin Suite, Op.6* for Brosa, but they presented the

²⁴ Gil Shaham, “The Irresistible Lure of 1930s Violin Concertos”, *The Strad*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.thestrad.com/violinist-gil-shaham-on-the-irresistible-lure-of-1930s-violin-concertos/6044.article?adredir=1> (accessed December 18, 2018).

first complete performances together through a BBC broadcast in March 1936 and at ISCM festival in Barcelona in April of the same year.

During this period, Britten often expressed his admiration of Brosa's technique and tone quality. Britten's diary contains an entry that reads: "... He is simply superb. Incredible technique, with beautiful interpretation.... A great violinist."²⁵ A short concert study, *Reveille* was written between March 9–15 in 1937 for Brosa and pianist Franz Reizenstein's duo recital at Wigmore Hall, London in the following month. This five-minute long concert study maintains its drowsy mood until the last few seconds under the tempo marking '*rubato e pigro* (sluggish, lazy)'.²⁶ Driven from the French word, *réveillé* means "to wake up". The title suggests that Brosa was not a morning person and it was a private joke of Britten making fun of Brosa's morning laziness. Presumably, this was evidence of their intimate relationship both professionally and personally. More serious than his two previous violin works, the *Violin Concerto, Op. 15* was also composed for Brosa. Britten's *Violin Concerto* was, however, dedicated not to Brosa but to Henry Boys, who was Britten's close school friend and a music critic. The concerto was written during the summer of 1939 in St. Jorite, Quebec and in Amityville, Long Island. In 1938, Henry Boys wrote one of the earliest and most important articles on Britten²⁷:

Britten's very spare harmony looks as though it might be a reaction against English lushness [...]. it keeps a semblance of tonality without the organic functions of tonality, thereby becoming empty.²⁸

Another Britten's scholar, Arnold Whithall, argues that the reason Britten dedicated his *Violin Concerto* to Henry Boys and not to Brosa, was due to Boys' critique:

[The] most compelling of all is not the way in which [in the passacaglia] the return to D major is plotted and placed, but the treatment of the re-established

²⁵ Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 67.

²⁶ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 483.

²⁷ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 399.

²⁸ Henry Boys, "The Younger English Composers: V. Benjamin Britten," *The Monthly Musical Record* 68 (1938): 235.

D major to fill out the final, most memorable pages of the concerto. Here is the direct and decisive answer to Henry Boys.²⁹

The premiere was given at Carnegie hall, New York, with Brosa as soloist and the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Barbirolli on March 27, 1940. Although the work is dedicated to Boys, Britten obviously had Brosa in his mind from the beginning of the sketch of *Violin Concerto* until its completion. Based on Britten's two letters to his publisher, Ralph Hawkes, Britten consistently asked for Brosa's help on the violin part: "... I've already finished the second movement of the fiddle concerto — & the third should be done at the end of the week. The scoring shouldn't take long — but I may leave that till Toni Brosa's seen the violin part — which I'll copy & send to him within a few weeks".³⁰

As we can see from this letter, Britten clearly needed Brosa's approval on the violin writing. Britten's faith in Brosa can be found in another letter to Ralph Hawkes in November 1939, a few months after Britten completed the piece: "Re the printing of this, it seems a little risky without me having heard Toni play it to engrave it, but I have written to him, asking him to be honest and tell me what passages are ineffective and what alterations he suggests. Also I am hoping that he will finger and bow the part for the edition ("edited by Antonio Brosa")."³¹

D. War and Pacifism — Spanish Civil War

Benjamin Britten, being born only eight months before World War I, experienced war and its aftermath during his early childhood. He later recalled hearing the sound of a bomb explosion from the German Zeppelin raid of April, 1916 as his first memorable non-musical sound.³² Throughout his life, war and violence were always at the forefront of his work. In 1930, pacifism was a popular topic among young intellectuals in Britain. While the country was talking

²⁹ Arnold Whithall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 48.

³⁰ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 648.

³¹ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 735.

³² Peter J. Hodgson, *Benjamin Britten: A Guide to Research* (New York and London: Garland, 1996), 3.

about rearming as violent sentiments arose, young artists and writers were actively discussing nonviolence and peacemaking. Britten actively engaged himself in this social movement, which mirrored the anti-violent convictions formed in his very early years. When he attended South Lodge School, a small prep school in Lowestoft, he wrote a passionate essay condemning hunting and cruelty to animals, which led to harsh censure from the school faculty.³³

Britten's underlying anti-violent beliefs are clearly set forth in his Statement to the Local Tribunal Registration of Conscientious Objectors in 1942. He wrote, "The whole of my life has been devoted to acts of creation (being by profession a composer) and I cannot take part in acts of destruction."³⁴ Previous to the statement, Britten joined the 'Peace Pledge Union', a non-governmental organization that promotes pacifism initiated in England, whose members include Peter Pears, and Michael Tippett. Britten composed the *Pacifist March* for the union in 1937.

The year of the concerto's completion, 1939, is placed between two wars: the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Regarding the date of the composition, it is natural to assume that Britten's *Violin Concerto* reflects the composer's growing concerns about war and world hostility. Despite the arguments that Britten's scholars have, that his *Violin Concerto* was written as a reaction to the Spanish Civil War, Britten himself never disclosed that the *Violin Concerto* was influenced by the Spanish Civil War (for his other work, *Ballade of Hero*, Britten specifically mentioned that the work is written for the fallen heroes of Spanish Civil War³⁵). Gil Shaham mentioned in an interview, "the passacaglia at the end; the ominous drum beats at the beginning introduced by the timpani, resembling sections of Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* in its use of military elements, especially in the first movement; The second movement recalling a battle scene, with a beautiful trio with a haunting melody that also brings reminiscence of a Spanish tune."³⁶

³³ Kildea, *Benjamin Britten*, 39.

³⁴ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 1046.

³⁵ Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 365.

³⁶ Shaham, "The Irresistible Lure of 1930s Violin Concertos", *The Strad*, February 25, 2014.

Antonio Brosa strongly claimed Spanish influence in the concerto, describing it as “perhaps a sadness for the Spain Britten had visited and then seen torn by its civil war.”³⁷ He recognized the opening rhythm as ‘Spanish Rhythm’ on drums. Brosa later disclosed in his interview, “The conclusion is a lament, leaving in its wake an inevitable question about the significance of the ‘Spanish rhythm’, in a concerto begun during the Spanish Civil War, for an expatriate Spaniard, and concluded in a World War for which the Spanish conflict seemed to many like a sinister rehearsal.”³⁸

Another Britten scholar, David E. Schneider, wrote, “his *Violin Concerto* is also a response to the defeat of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Britten’s sympathy for the Spanish Republicans stemmed in part from his trip to the 1936 meeting of the International Society for Contemporary Music in Barcelona ... The last movement of Britten’s three-movement work is a passacaglia, which, like the chorale for the German, served as a national emblem of mourning for the British.”³⁹

Britten was certainly questioning himself about the role of the artist in a time of war. As he was fleeing to North America before the war, he heard reports of war-related horrors occurring in Europe. This made Britten’s initial plan to enlist even more pressing. However, Aaron Copland persuaded Britten against the idea. Copland told Britten: “After all anyone can shoot a gun — but how many can write music like you?”⁴⁰

E. Influences from Britten’s contemporaries on the *Violin Concerto, Op.15*

“Britten’s love of Russian music in general — in particular his life-long fascination with the Tchaikovsky ballet scores, his attraction towards Prokofiev and, to a more reserved extent, Stravinsky — as an acknowledged

³⁷ Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ David E. Schneider, *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, 147.

⁴⁰ Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 133.

fact in the critical and biographical literature, and not hard to pinpoint in the music itself.”⁴¹

As mentioned in this quote by Eric Roseberry, Britten’s early attraction towards Russian composers is well documented in his diary. The following table from Cameron Pike’s book, *Benjamin Britten and Russia*, shows how many times Britten mentioned those composers' names and works in his diary from 1928 to 1938.

Table 1. References to Russian composers in Britten’s Diaries, 1928 to June 1938 (Britten-Pears Foundation Archive and Library)⁴²

	1928-9	1930-1	1932-3	1934-5	1936-8	total
Stravinsky	1	6	23	18	19	67
Tchaikovsky	12	8	18	16	5	59
Rimsky-Korsakov	1	4	7	6	0	18
Prokofiev	0	3	3	8	1	15
Shostakovich	0	0	0	4	5	9
Borodin	1	1	1	4	1	8
Rachmaninoff	0	2	2	2	0	6
Glinka	0	2	1	1	0	4
Musorgsky	0	3	0	0	0	3
Scriabin	0	1	1	0	0	2

With regards to the *Violin Concerto*, there are four composers who influenced Britten in particular: Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Berg and Shostakovich. According to a recent graduate thesis project by Pieter van Nes, “Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative”, the *Violin Concerto* shows certain reminiscences from the above named composers.⁴³

⁴¹ Eric Roseberry, “A debt repaid? Some observations on Shostakovich and his late- period recognition of Britten,” in *Shostakovich Studies*, ed. David Fanning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 234.

⁴² Cameron Pyke, *Benjamin Britten and Russia* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016), 21.

⁴³ Pieter van Nes, “Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative” (B.A. thesis, Utrecht University, 2013), 8–9.

Britten often wrote his personal opinions about his contemporaries (both composers and performers) in his diary. For example, on March 31, 1935, after listening to Shostakovich’s first symphony, Britten wrote, “a miracle for a boy of 17, very uneven, but with some splendid imagination.”⁴⁴ The May 15, 1933 entry reads, “... concert began with Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony. Brilliant, witty scoring. Rather dull second movement.”⁴⁵ His diary is a significant resource because it allows us to get a sense of the influences that shaped the composer’s musical preferences. Several stylistic traits adopted from the above-mentioned composers can be found in Britten’s *Violin Concerto*.

1. Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

When Britten first heard Prokofiev’s *Violin Concerto, No. 1*, he was critical of the work. His diary contains an entry that mentions, “Prokofiev’s Op.19 Violin Concerto didn’t contain much music, but was rather like a compendium of School for Virtuosity Violin Exercise.”⁴⁶ Lyn Handerson, who discussed Prokofiev’s influence on Britten in *The Musical Times* commented that “although Britten’s immediate response to Prokofiev’s first violin concerto was not positive, a lingering remembrance of Prokofiev’s work is still perhaps to be felt in Britten’s much later concerto, and especially in the second movement’s predominantly stepwise-rising outlines.”⁴⁷



Example 1.1. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 24, m. 4.

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⁴⁴ Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 254.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁷ Lyn Handerson, “His influence on Britten: The Vital Prokofiev,” *The Musical Times* 144, No. 1882 (Spring, 2003): 19.



Example 1.2. Prokofiev *Violin Concerto No.1*, 2nd movement, mm. 3–4.

The formal structure of Britten’s *Violin Concerto* having two outer slow movements with faster middle movement also shows a connection with Prokofiev’s *Violin Concerto No. 1*. David E. Schneider writes:

Prokofiev’s First Violin Concerto is a highly original work — it may well be both the first twentieth century violin concerto in three movements to break from the fast–slow–fast pattern, the first twentieth-century concerto to end slowly and softly, and, on a lighter note, the first concerto to contain a tuba solo (one of several details that seem to have inspired Britten).⁴⁸

Elliott Carter commented in a review of the concerto’s premiere in New York in March 1940 that he thought Britten’s work was “an English counterpart of recent Prokofiev and Shostakovich Music.”⁴⁹

2. Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

Stravinsky was one of the most important contemporary composers for Britten. As Table 1 shows, Britten clearly favored Stravinsky, particularly for his vocal and ballet compositions. Nevertheless, Britten also enjoyed Stravinsky’s instrumental music. Pieter van Nes claims that some of the violin passages from Britten’s earlier works, *Our Hunting Fathers* and *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, resemble Stravinsky’s neoclassical style of violin writing.⁵⁰ The characteristics of Stravinsky’s string writing can be associated with his ‘percussive’ use of the

⁴⁸ Schneider, *The Cambridge Companion to the Concerto*, 148.

⁴⁹ Elliott Carter, “The Changing Scene, New York 1940,” *Modern Music* 17, No.4 (May–June 1940): 240.

⁵⁰ Nes, “Benjamin Britten’s Violin concerto: A Musicological Narrative”, 26.

violin. The most prevalent ‘percussive’ writings are displayed in his repeated up-bows, down-bows and chords. In addition, simultaneously utilizing both pizzicato and *arco* highlights the percussive sound effect.⁵¹ As Britten kept a miniature score of Stravinsky’s *Violin Concerto*, which he used for rehearsals with Brosa (Britten himself at the piano) while writing his own concerto, it is inevitable that even small elements of this concerto influenced Britten.⁵² Some of the examples from Britten’s *Violin Concerto* that resemble Stravinsky’s are shown below.



Example 1.3. Stravinsky *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 11.

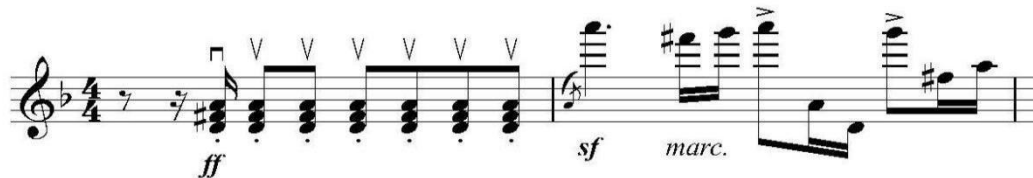
Stravinsky VIOLIN CONCERTO

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Example 1.4. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 3.

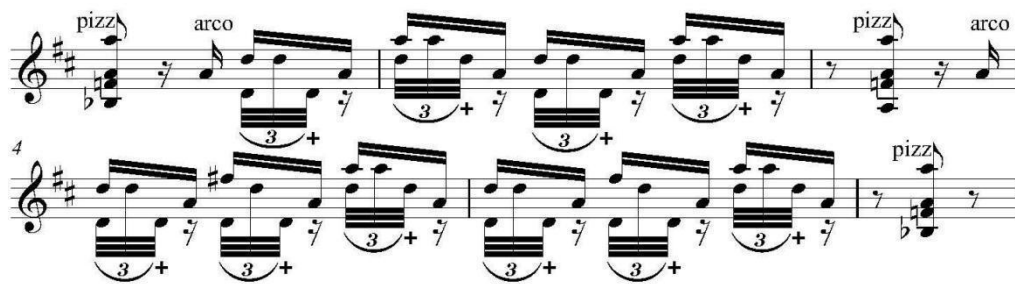
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⁵¹ Lena Seeger, “Stravinsky and the Violin: Aspects of Style in Stravinsky’s Violin Transcriptions” (D.M.A. diss., Michigan State University, 2015), 20.

⁵² Evans, *Journeying Boys*, 269.



Example 1.5. Stravinsky *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 124.

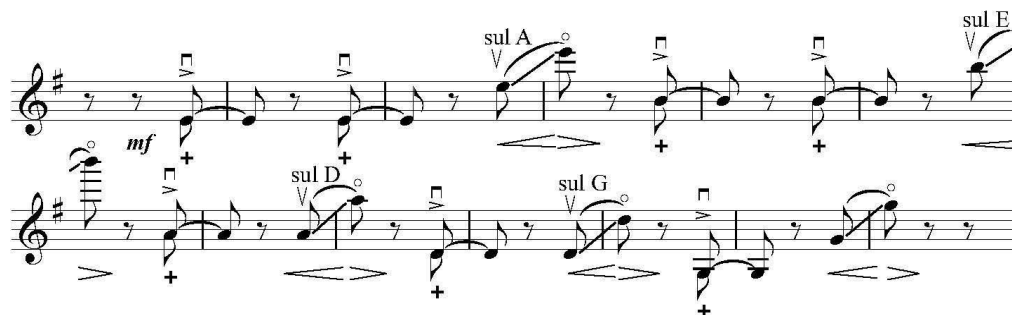
Stravinsky VIOLIN CONCERTO

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Example 1.6. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 27.

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3. Alban Berg (1885–1935)

Britten also admired the music of Alban Berg. He personally purchased Berg’s music and studied it in depth. Britten heard the world premiere of Berg’s *Violin Concerto* at the ISCM Festival in 1936. Since the premiere, Britten never missed any opportunities to hear the work live or broadcast. He greatly adored the piece and made a remark at the memorial concert for Berg hosted by the BBC: “It certainly is a very great work, & at the end I feel pretty wet with anger

about losing a genius like this”⁵³ On another occasion, he praised the work as “It is a grand work — & has an extremely moving effect on me like no other stuff. It is so vital & so intellectually emotional.”⁵⁴

There are certain resemblances between the music of Berg and Britten in terms of their approach to musical structure. Scholars such as Eric Roseberry and Christopher Mark argue that there is clear evidence of Berg’s influence in Britten’s *Violin Concerto*. Roseberry claims, “Certain correspondences between the Berg and Britten concertos are unmistakable, especially the conception of a slow (variation) finale; a thematic connection with Berg suggests itself in the main theme of the first movement, its falling shape and tonic-dominant accompaniment corresponding strikingly with the theme of the famous ‘*adagio*’ interlude in D minor after the death of the title character in *Wozzeck*.”⁵⁵ See example 1.7 and 1.8. Also, Mark remarks in his book, *Early Benjamin Britten*, “[the] final variation [of Britten’s passacaglia], an impassioned arioso for the violin against a solemn, hymn-like texture in the orchestra, is distantly reminiscent of the final section of Berg’s *Violin Concerto*.”⁵⁶



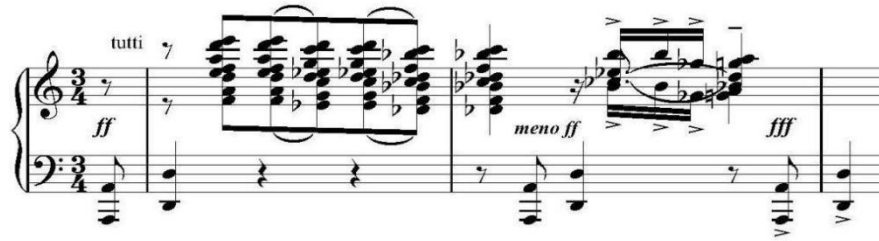
Example 1.7. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 1.
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⁵³ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume One*, 426.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁵⁵ Eric Roseberry, “The concertos and early orchestral scores,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 238.

⁵⁶ Christopher Mark, *Early Benjamin Britten: A Study of Stylistic and Technical Evolution* (New York: Garland Press, 1995), 167.



Example 1.8. Berg *Adagio* from *Wozzeck*.⁵⁷

Another example of Berg's influence on Britten's *Violin Concerto* can be traced in the second half of the final movement, specifically in the use of a ground bass. Pieter van Nes, in his thesis, argues that the second half of Britten's passacaglia pattern in the third movement is most likely a reference to the opening of the first of the *Drei Bruchstücke* (Berg's own excerpts from *Wozzeck* for concert performances at the suggestion of Hermann Scherchen in 1924).⁵⁸



Example 1.9. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 3 measures before rehearsal 32.

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Example 1.10. Berg *Drei Bruchstücke* from *Wozzeck*, I. m. 302.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Roseberry, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 239.

⁵⁸ Nes, “Benjamin Britten’s Violin concerto: A Musicological Narrative”, 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

4. Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Although the composers were familiar with each others' music, Britten and Shostakovich did not actually meet in person until the 1960s. Britten expressed his fondness toward Shostakovich and his music multiple times in his early years. The English composer and musicologist Christopher Headington clearly described this relationship: "Britten 'knew his Prokofiev and Shostakovich.' This is especially evident when one examines Britten's violin and piano concertos."⁶⁰

Despite the fact that Britten's *Violin Concerto* precedes Shostakovich's first Violin Concerto by almost a decade, there are clear connections that can be drawn between Britten's *Violin Concerto* and the music of Shostakovich. The music critic Micheal Kennedy noted in his liner notes to Theo Olaf's 1948 recording of the *Violin Concerto* that it was "[keeping] step with the world of Shostakovich".⁶¹

Britten was especially fond of Shostakovich's opera *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*. Britten wrote in his diary of Wednesday, March 18, 1936:

There is some terrific music in the entr'acts. But I will defend it through thick & thin against these charges of 'lack of style'. People will not differentiate between style & manner. It is the composer's heritage to take what he wants from where he wants — & to write music. There is a consistency of style & method throughout. The satire is biting & brilliant. It is never boring for a second — even in this form. Some of the vocal writing is extravagant. But he may have special singers in view. [...] The 'eminent English Renaissance' composers sniggering in the stalls was typical. There is more music in a page of Macbeth than in the whole of their 'elegant' output!⁶²

Shostakovich's opera serves as an important role model for the last movement of Britten's *Violin Concerto*, entitled "Passacaglia". Britten frequently employed passacaglias in his works; *Peter Grimes* and *Cello Symphony* for example, make substantial use of passacaglia. The implementation of this technique functions as a tie between Britten and Shostakovich, which is

⁶⁰ Christopher Headington, *Britten*, 53.

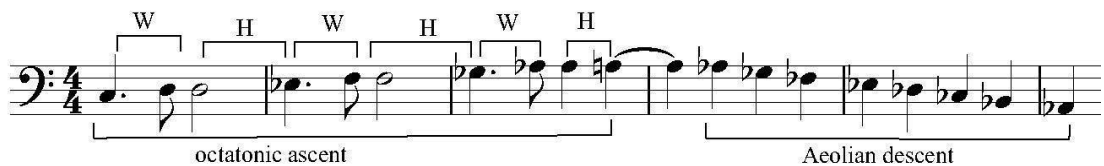
⁶¹ Michael Kennedy, liner notes for *British Composers — Britten, Berkeley & Rubbra*, compact disc 3, EMI 029006 2, 2011.

⁶² Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 409.

evident in the adoption of models from Shostakovich's entr'acte from *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* displayed in the third movement of the *Violin Concerto*. Roseberry argues this point:

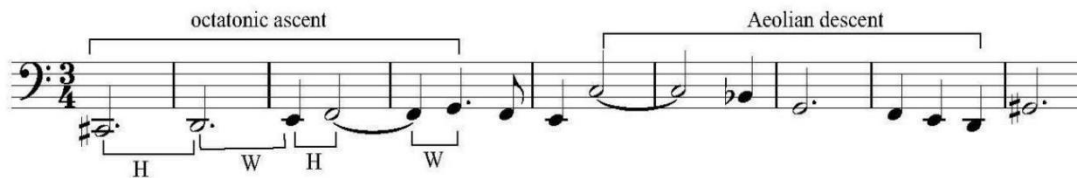
Shostakovich, however, might have been the first to show Britten how to incorporate such a powerful, but outdated form in a contemporary musical language more similar to his own: [with Britten and Shostakovich,] there is the striking common attachment to Baroque stylization (especially passacaglia and fugue), a rich mixed-modal and tonally ambiguous language which, as it happens, is emblemized in a common use of the famous D–S–C–H motif, a pronounced degree of motivic obsessiveness, and the crucial importance to their musico-dramatic work of the art of thematic transformation.⁶³

The similarity between the two composers is well articulated in the ground bass of the third movement as Britten uses an ascending octatonic scale and descending Aeolian mode in sequence. Shostakovich's passacaglia in *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* shows the combination in a similar method.



Example 1.11. Britten, Ground bass from the *Violin Concerto*.

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Example 1.12. Shostakovich, Ground bass from Opera *Lady Macbeth*.⁶⁴

⁶³ Roseberry, *Shostakovich Studies*, 232.

⁶⁴ Nes, “Benjamin Britten’s Violin Concerto: A Musicological Narrative”, 35.

Chapter 2: Analysis

A. First movement: Moderato con moto

1. Overview

The first movement, Moderato con moto, uses a three-part sonata form. However, there are certain structural ambiguities that Britten employs and transforms. The movement could be thought of as a reformed sonata form. There are clear indications of contrasting first and second themes in the exposition, significant development material, and intelligible tonality (although at times ambiguous) which resemble traditional sonata form structure. Yet, the placement and length of recapitulation challenges the listener to determine it as a complete sonata form. From the traditional standpoint, the first theme returns in the primary key with the orchestra, only to return much later with the soloist offering the material in a different key.

The first theme (rehearsal 1) has a lyrical, *cantabile*-like quality while the second theme (rehearsal 4) has a rhythmic, assertive quality. Britten clearly provides ‘*dolciss. ed espress.*’ and ‘*agitato ma espress*’ markings for the first theme. For the second theme, in addition to the dramatic dynamic contrast, instruments are more adventurous in terms of register (especially for higher passages). The use of a descending chromatic line to conclude the exposition foreshadows a sense of mystery present in the development. The use of chromaticism to conclude a section that would typically end with a clear affirmation of the secondary key is interesting. The trumpets initiate this descending line followed by the woodwinds from rehearsal 6.

Following the second theme, the development begins at rehearsal 7 with the use of bitonal passages. See example 2.7. The three-note motif from the second theme returns in a triadic figure in pianissimo. The development lasts only twenty five measures with the descending chromatic line in the solo violin part. During the recapitulation, Britten employs a subtle pedal tone on the dominant scale degree A. This occurs six measures before rehearsal 8. The A is held by the first violins with extremely thin and soft dynamics that contribute to hinting

at the D major key arrival at rehearsal 8. The key relationships here conflict with the traditional idea of a recapitulation.

The recapitulation starts with switching of the roles between orchestra and soloist. While the first theme is performed by the high strings, the solo violin performs some initial rhythmic gestures and an accompanimental motif that appears at the second theme with the meter change to 3/2. The solo violin takes over at rehearsal 9 with a cadenza-like ascending passage, only to return to the first theme in a murky suggestion of the G minor key. When the unaccompanied solo violin commences on the third measure after rehearsal 9, the orchestra is holding B-flat and D, implying a G minor chord. Here, the roles of the instruments revert to the same as the beginning. This substantial change is achieved by the return of the original key signature in addition to the meter returning to 3/2 to accommodate the rhythmic figure, which is a transformation of the first rhythmic figure (see example 2.1.) to a canonic gesture performed by the orchestra's strings. In contrast, the repeated note motif from the second theme does not return. When the meter is reestablished as the original 4/4 (this occurs six measures before rehearsal 10), the orchestra begins an ascending chromatic gesture leading towards D minor, which is finally confirmed at rehearsal 10. In the program note of Aldeburgh Festival in 1971, written by Britten himself, rehearsal 10 is described as "a melodic cadenza descending slowly from the violin's highest notes, in double- and triple-stopping."¹ This 'melodic cadenza' competently exhibits solo violin's capacity in executing polyphonic, virtuosic passages with only timpani and cymbals accompanying the solo in pianissimo. Here, the tonality is ultimately confirmed as D minor for eight measures, which is unusually long considering the use of modulation and harmonic ambiguity in this movement. Nevertheless, Britten startles the listeners again for the last eight measures by employing the unexpected D major chord performed by the strings' pizzicati while solo violin holds long notes with double harmonics and finishes the movement quietly.

¹ Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 365.

Animando solo violin

Timp.
p

Example 2.3. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 3, the second rhythmic figure.

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The second rhythmic figure featured in this movement contains repeated-notes in a percussive rhythm. See example 2.3. The figure is first introduced in rehearsal 3, varying the length of the motif as the figure repeats itself. As soon as the second rhythmic figure is established by both the orchestra (timpani) and solo violin, they part ways: the solo violin presents materials from the secondary theme, while the section violins taking turn in bringing back the primary theme subtly in pianissimo. See example 2.4.

Animando
Solo violin

Timp.
p

sf Vn2
pp *espress.*

sf

Example 2.4. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 3, mm. 1–3.

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As the subtle recurrence of the primary theme dissipates, solo violin confirms the secondary theme in rehearsal 4. Repeated-note figure continuously transforms in various lengths while the secondary theme is presented. See example 2.5.

Example 2.5. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 4.

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The development expands upon the secondary theme. Gestures from the secondary theme appear in varied lengths throughout while the second rhythmic figure occurs consistently in other voices. After the elaborate journey through various harmonies, the recapitulation arrives with the return of the primary theme in the orchestra. Here, not only the role of solo versus accompaniment has switched, but also the meter has been extended from 4/4 to 3/2 in order to accommodate both primary and secondary rhythmic figures in the solo violin. Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, the secondary theme never returns; the primary theme dominates the recapitulation.

3. Tonality

Tonal ambiguity prevails throughout the movement. Britten avoids any strong establishment of the key until the final coda at rehearsal 10. To quote Peter Evans regarding the tonal ambiguity, he claims:

[...] tonality is far more original than that of the earlier concerto (Piano Concerto Op.13), utilizing the sonata principle to arrive at a structure which in

some respects is not a sonata at all. ... This exposition is more ‘against F’ than for anything in particular. Though the blatant definition of a root position is never admitted, the violin’s broad opening melody, of a rather studied lyricism, is evidently centered on F.²

The introduction starts as F major, only to divert to other keys by the third measure.

When the primary theme arrives, the descending figure in the solo violin moves around the tonic pitch; major 3rds and minor 3rds, often outlining C to A, C to A-flat, A-flat to F-flat and A-flat to F. Inevitably, these intervals emphasize harmonic triads. Britten also employed quartal harmonies in between the triads to achieve unusual accidentals. See Example 2.6.

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet and a solo violin. The top staff is labeled 'Str.' and the bottom staff is for the solo violin. The score is in 4/4 time. The top staff has a key signature of one flat (B-flat major) and a common time signature. The bottom staff has a key signature of two flats (D minor) and a common time signature. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'espress.', 'mf', 'p', and 'pp', and tempo markings 'poco rit.' and 'a tempo'. The music features a descending figure in the solo violin and quartal harmonies in the strings.

Example 2.6. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 1st movement, mm. 4–7.

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There are several instances where Britten uses polychordal harmonies and bitonality. The first significant instance is shown at rehearsal 3, with the entrance of the second rhythmic figure. While the violin solo is in the D major triad, the timpani is in E-flat major creating an audible dissonance from the clash of these harmonies. See example 2.3. Such harmonic idioms continue until rehearsal 4. For example, the solo violin plays in A major while the strings and harp support the violin using the F major key. A low F serves as a pedal point for eight measures, then using the second rhythmic figure, the bass descends until it arrives in A.

² Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 47.

The next significant area displaying a hint of bitonality is rehearsal 7, where the orchestra is divided into B minor and B diminished triads. The solo violin plays the material focused on a B minor chord, while the accompanimental strings hold a B diminished chord at pianissimo.

Example 2.7. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 7.

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Rehearsal 8 offers a controversial recapitulation. Again, the recapitulation is in D major instead of F, which breaks the traditional rule of returning to the home key in the recapitulation. Due to the unsatisfied tonal return, the precise moment where the recapitulation begins remains ambiguous.

Ultimately, the tonality stabilizes at rehearsal 9 moving from the key of D major to G minor. Then the G minor journeys through to G-sharp and A to arrive in D minor at rehearsal 10 where the central tone is established fully. And as the final echo as sung by the solo violin, the timpani brings back the first rhythmic figure only to transition to D major at the last eight measures with the second rhythmic figure, completing a kind of modal mixture. See example 2.8.

a tempo

The image shows a musical score for the last 8 measures of the first movement of Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto, Op. 15. The score is in 4/4 time and D major. It features a violin part with a long note, a piano part with 'Str. pizz.' and 'Harp' markings, and a 'ppp morendo' section ending with an 'attacca' marking.

Example 2.8. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 1st movement, last 8 measures.

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Britten starts with a traditional sonata form as the base, then integrates the new tonal scheme to create his own modernized sonata form.

B. Second movement: Vivace – Cadenza

The second movement is a fierce *danse macabre* which resembles a battle scene from the *Sinfonia da Requiem*.³ This feverish movement requires not only well-controlled stamina but also a virtuosic technique from the soloist. As Roseberry claimed, “... element of burlesque is confined to a percussive second-movement scherzo of considerable ferocity and menace.”⁴

The unexpected ending of the first movement in D major, far from the original key signature, is connected by the use of an *attacca* marking. There is a clear continuity of

³ Roseberry, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

momentum built upon the D major sonority between movements: The first movement ends with the string section in pizzicati, and while maintaining the same D major sonority, the second movement begins despite the change in key signature to one sharp, which can be interpreted as a dominant chord of G major.

The second movement is a scherzo and trio form in 3/8 time. To quote Britten himself, the trio is “a pleading middle section” compared to the “acrobatic vivace.”⁵ The solo violin launches into an accompanimental motif which consists of three eighth-notes while the orchestra performs the fragment of the rhythmic figure from the first movement.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the second movement of Britten's Violin Concerto, Op. 15. The score is in 3/8 time and features a solo violin and string ensemble. The tempo is marked 'Vivace'. The violin part begins with a series of eighth notes, and the strings play a rhythmic figure of two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'f' and 'con tutta forza sempre', and performance instructions like 'pizz.' for pizzicato.

Example 2.9. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 2nd movement, mm. 1–6.

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After the introductory section, when the solo violin first states the refrain, the key is finally confirmed as E minor. Here, the solo violin presents the second motif, also using three-notes figure: two sixteenth notes followed by one eighth note.

⁵ Kildea, *Britten on Music*, 365.

Excluding the solo sections, the orchestra condenses previous motivic materials in mostly muted dynamics to accompany the melody.

The solo violin's accelerating melody leads back to the scherzo section. The fast sixteenth notes in the high register oscillate among three notes in pianissimo while the orchestra is holding chords quietly in the background. The oscillating three-note figure is passed on to the two piccolos to prepare for the tuba's entrance in the bass six octaves lower than the piccolos. The use of a ground bass, an ascending octatonic scale figure, plays an important role here as the pattern foreshadows in the next movement of the concerto.



Example 2.12. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 23, m. 4.

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The return of the scherzo is presented with some ambiguity in terms of key. E minor is briefly presented at rehearsal 27. The materials from the initial scherzo are modified in terms of the order of their appearance and are at times abbreviated. At rehearsal 29, the accompanimental rhythmic motif (the three eighth-note figure) is combined with the chromatically inflected sixths in the strings to build a sense of anticipation for the arrival of the climax at rehearsal 30. At rehearsal 30 and 31, for 20 measures, the previous melodic fragment from the trio is performed by the strings and flutes in unison. While the ostinato material in a chromatic ascending line is performed by the wind and brass, the harp continues the initial accompanimental motif to build momentum for the arrival of cadenza. To create a sense of unity throughout the movements, Britten carefully places the *attacca* at the end of the first movement and the cadenza at the end of

the second movement. The use of these two musical ideas creates a ceaseless flow from the previous movements to the next. The cadenza not only bridges the second and third movements but also reclaims all the materials from both first and second movements.

Example 2.13. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 31.

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Example 2.14. Britten *Violin Concerto*, Cadenza, rhythmic motifs from the 1st movement.

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Example 2.15. Britten *Violin Concerto*, Cadenza, combination of the first theme and the first rhythmic motif from the 1st movement.

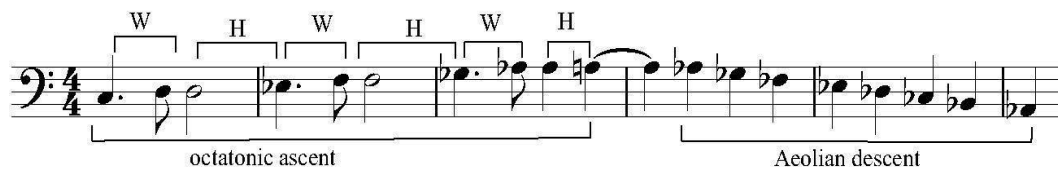
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C. Passacaglia: Andante lento (*Un poco meno mosso*)

The final movement is a passacaglia, a form that was gradually regaining its popularity in the early twentieth century. Composers such as Hindemith, Berg, Barber, Dohnanyi used passacaglias for compositions in multiple genres. This movement represents Britten's first use of the passacaglia. (The passacaglia of his *Piano Concerto, Op.13*, dates from the revision of 1945.⁶)

The overall form of the movement is theme and variations: the main theme continues until rehearsal 34, followed by a total of nine variations.

Similar to the beginning of the second movement, the first section of the third movement is also connected by a cadenza with an *attacca* marking. The solo violin connects the cadenza with the last movement by reinstating the falling melody pattern from the first movement. The main theme of the first section, the original ground bass, is presented with the fugal opening by the trombones, which make their first appearance in the concerto. The ground bass is accommodated in an arch contour with the octatonic ascent and aeolian descent. As mentioned previously, the first half of the statement is retrieved from the tuba solo in the second movement.



Example 2.16. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 5 measures before rehearsal 32.

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Before the descent of the first statement is over, violins and violas come in with the second statement creating an overlapping stretto. The ostinato statement continues its staggered

⁶ Bernadette De Villiers, “Benjamin Britten’s use of the Passacaglia” (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 1986), 44.

entries by different groups of instruments, and the point of entry changes each time the statement emerges. This overlapping gesture creates the polyphonic texture with dissonances.

With the new key signature of D minor, the solo violin appears for the first time in this movement, ornamenting the music with melodic figures during the first variation of the passacaglia at rehearsal 34 (*Con moto*). The ground bass is first presented by the cellos, which change the rhythm from the dotted to the short–long sequence. The ground bass is introduced in this order: cello, viola, second violin, and first violin in tremolos, also in an overlapping fashion. The dynamic level remains soft throughout the variation and the tremolo motion is continued; thus, the presence of the ground bass is significantly weakened.

The second variation (rehearsal 35, *Pesante*) opens with a three-note ground bass fragmentation by horns. The combination of a whole tone followed by a semitone fragment presents itself over the C tremolo performed by the double bass and timpani to create the overall feeling of C minor. There are two main voices concurrently engaged in a dialogue: the first dialogue is between the horns and the rest of the orchestra, and the second dialogue is between the orchestra and soloist. Each entrance of the ground bass rises by a whole tone. After the initial entry of the ground bass by the horns on C, the winds respond on D, then the horns re-enter on E, followed by the winds on F-sharp. Then the fragments stagger in a canonic gesture by different instrument groups to ultimately arrive on the E-flat by the trumpets. The presentation of these fragmentation is well highlighted by the device that Britten employed here — the last note of each fragmentation becomes the entry note of the solo violin.

The third variation starting at rehearsal 36 (*Tranquillo*) is only eleven measures long. The time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4, with the strings and the harp playing a slow sarabande rhythm. The ground bass is presented twice within the variation. On the first presentation, cello and double bass perform the ascending line followed by the first violin performing the descending figures. Then for the second entrance, cello and double bass ascend, followed by the solo oboe and the second violin in descent.

The next variation starts on rehearsal 37 (*Con moto*). The solo violin takes the lead for the first half of the variation by reserving the ground bass. The string accompaniment mimics castanet rhythms and strumming flamenco-like guitar sonorities⁷ which soon transfer to the solo violin at the '*poco animando*' marking. This occurs on top of a ground bass performed by the solo bassoon and double bass. See example 2.17.

Example 2.17. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 37, mm. 12–14.

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The tuba joins in two measures after each entry, creating an effect of an echo. Despite the complex texture, the solo violin maintains the role of principal voice by providing the descending melody of the ground bass.

The fifth variation, starting at rehearsal 38, offers dance-like gestures in clear triple time. The timpani and clarinets relentlessly sustain on F, while the cello and harp oscillate between two notes, E-flat and B-flat. The ground bass appears in an inverted format, first introduced by the solo violin, then transferred to the orchestra performed by different groups of instruments.

The key of the next variation is introduced by the cadence in C from three measures prior to rehearsal 39. The cadence figure begins with the leading tone triad, moving through a mixture of tonic and dominant seventh chords before completing the C major cadence. The meter returns

⁷ Roseberry, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, 238.

to 4/4 by the sixth variation at *alla marcia*, with the trumpets and timpani leading the march rhythm.

Tr. 1 & 2 in C

mf

Timp.

mf

p cresc.

Example 2.18. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 39.

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The trumpets provide the foundation of the march using a double-dotted figure of the ascending portion of the ground bass, followed by the horns in quarter notes playing a descending line. At rehearsal 40, the trombones take over with a fragmented octatonic descending figure from the ground bass, while the tuba, harp and double bass invade the horns and perform another fragmented ascending (descending for the very last instance) line in a staggered manner.

The seventh variation starts at rehearsal 41 with a changed tempo and expressive marking, *molto animato*. The solo violin’s chirping gestures in the high register resemble the piccolos from the second movement’s trio section. The solo bassoon takes on the role of performing the ground bass while horns consistently state a muted E until rehearsal 42, only to take over the ground bass from the bassoons. At the tempo primo that is placed six measures before rehearsal 43, common time returns yet again with the grand appearance of the ground bass in its original format by the solo violin. Here, each note of the ground bass is accented and articulated by the down bow for the descending ones, followed by a rising scale in D major leading to the next variation in the same key.

The next variation, *Largamente*, has an undeniable sense of D major with an affirmative statement of the ground bass performed by the trombone and tuba. The powerful D major scale

by the orchestra supports the arrival of the climax along with the ground bass. Strikingly, the solo violin is absent from this epic moment of climax. The ground bass borrows from different modes: the ascending line displays D, E, F-sharp, G-sharp, A, B as D Lydian mode, and the descending line displays C, B, A, G, F-sharp, E, D as D Mixolydian mode. The second return of the ground bass is now in B Mixolydian mode for the ascending motion, then in D Mixolydian for the descending line. The last reiteration of the ground bass finally returns to the original octatonic ascending pattern to arrive at the dominant of D for two measures, solidifying the cadential gesture before the entrance of solo violin. From rehearsal 44, the previous material from the orchestra is switched over to the solo violin. The ground bass is now played only by the horns, with the timpani's tremolo on the bass D. The tuba and double bass enhance the bass by holding the D throughout the section. The ground bass only shows the ascending motion without the descending one. Rather than following the original form of the ground bass faithfully, this time the ascent ends with chromatic intervals on the last three: E, F, F-sharp, which portend the arrival of the solo violin's G-sharp, A, B-flat. The aftermath of the tumultuous climax, rehearsal 44 returns to a calm and soft gesture preparing the arrival of the coda.

The coda, which takes place from rehearsal 45 to the end of the movement displays the most remarkable portrayal of Britten's use of 'old' forms: the ground bass is presented in a choral-like texture (see example 2.19.) while the solo violin performs a chant-like soliloquy with limited intervals, and repeated notes. Last variation is marked as '*Lento e solenne*' with the new meter, 3/2. Here, for the first time, the tempo of the ground bass is in a sedated manner with the notion of time standing still. The trombones start the ground bass. The ground bass then transitions to the violins, and finally to the harp (overlapped by the first violin and oboe) with a long decay.

The image shows a musical score for a solo violin and tuba. The violin part is in the treble clef, 3/2 time, with a key signature of two sharps (D major). It begins with a *pp* dynamic and a five-measure rest. The melody is characterized by a chromatic interval that circles around F-sharp. There are two triplet figures marked with '3'. The tuba part is in the bass clef, also in 3/2 time, with a key signature of two sharps. It starts with a *ppp* dynamic and is marked '(colla parte)'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 2.19. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 45, *Lento e solenne*.

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In the chant-like melody of the solo violin, the obsession on the three-note figure in a chromatic interval returns, circling around the F-sharp for the first half, then moving on to the F. Britten sustains the tonal ambiguity to the end by alternating between D major and D minor, ending the epic story in a question mark rather than a period. With regards to the striking emotional effect of the music resulting from the use of polytonality in the coda, violinist Janin Jansen claims, “the whole coda — this is the most impressive moment. It starts like a prayer, but it ends in a kind of scream, it’s incredible. Every time one plays it, one can’t move afterwards, physically and emotionally.”⁸

⁸ Laurie Niles, “Janine Jensen on the Britten Violin Concerto,” Violinist.com, entry posted March 30, 2010, <http://www.violinst.com/blog/laurie/20103/11103> (accessed July 6, 2020).

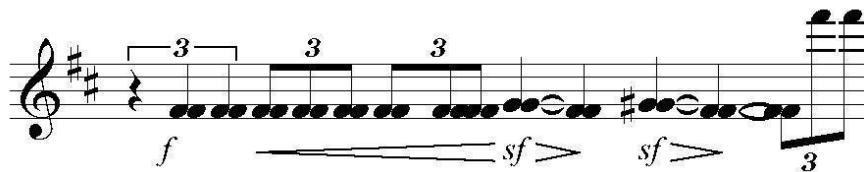
Chapter 3: Performance Practice

The violin techniques used in Britten's *Violin Concerto* are extremely demanding for a soloist. As Antonio Brosa was the first editor to supply fingerings and bowings, one can see his interpretation and technical fluidity from the selected methods and indications. Although the bow techniques featured in the concerto are relatively easy, the left hand techniques required for this concerto are significantly challenging.

A. Left hand techniques

1. Finger Extension

Finger extension in violin music is a common, necessary technique to play certain types of double stops such as unisons and tenths and for playing chords. It is also frequently used to avoid unnecessary string crosses or shiftings. Britten's *Violin Concerto* incorporates numerous types of finger extensions. For instance, he included unison passages without using open strings, and broken chords that require a specific finger to be extended.

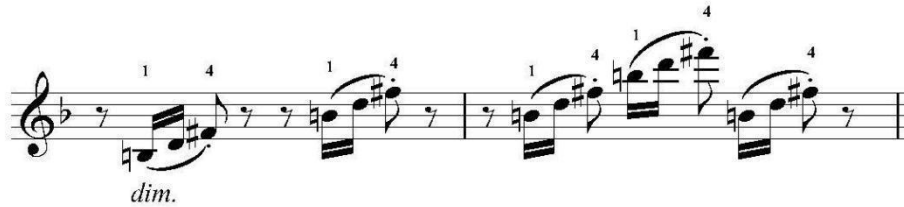


Example 3.1. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 47, m. 3.

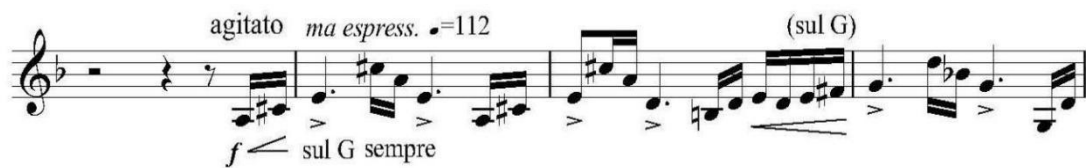
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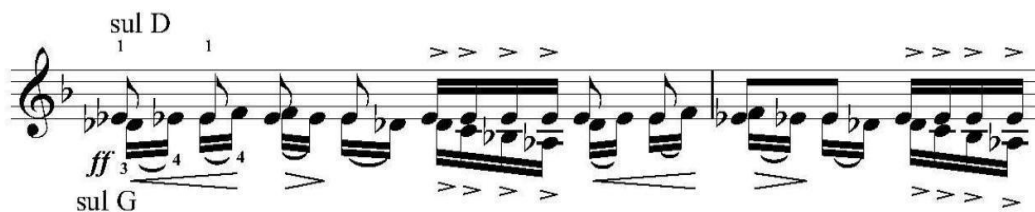


Example 3.2. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 7.
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Example 3.3. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 4.
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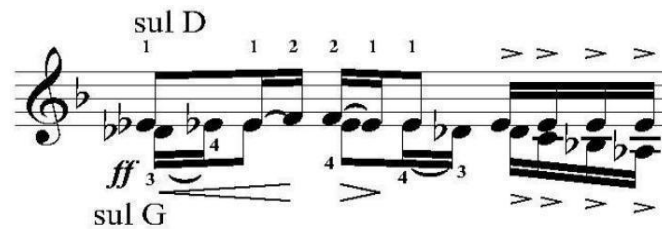
Due to the indication of ‘*Sul G*’, finger extension is necessary here. The passage requires a performer to place the first finger on E of the G string, the fifth position, and extend the third finger to A and the fourth finger to C-sharp, in order to execute the passage on the G String.



Example 3.4a. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 2 measures before rehearsal 2.
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The example above shows the technical problem of finger extension due to Britten’s indication of specific strings to be used. The lower voice should be done solely on the G string

when the top note E-flat is fixed on the D string in the first position. Specifically, when the E-flat is fixed in the D string, the first position, the G string notes are stretched to the third position. If these notes were all placed on the same string, the interval between two notes would be the major sixth, which makes the passage close to impossible for performers who have small hands. Due to those challenges, performers often use the fingering shown below instead of following the composer's direction.



Example 3.4b. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 2 measures before rehearsal 2, suggested fingerings.

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2. Double stops — 3rds, 6ths, octaves and 10ths

Double stopping is a common violin technique that has been used in many violin compositions for the purpose of achieving multiple voicing or to show virtuosity. Baroque composers such as Bach, Vivaldi, Tartini and Locatelli frequently used the technique in their works. Among the commonly used double stops 3rds and 6ths are more accessible, consecutive octaves and 10ths are technically more challenging. Octaves and 10th were more frequently used in the nineteenth century by composers such as Paganini, Vieuxtemps, Wieniawski, and Sarasate.

With the Concerto, one can see how Britten utilized double stop technique to achieve virtuosic playing. In the second movement, where double stop technique is applied at its peak of difficulty, Britten employed all types of double stops — 3rds, 6ths, octaves and 10ths. A good example of this can be found at rehearsal number 17. All 3rds, 6ths, octaves, and 10ths occur in an ascending manner in a fast tempo (dotted quarter note equals 140), making the precise shifts to

be done in time extremely difficult. After the trio section, this fierce section returns — between rehearsal number 25 and 26. This time, 3rds, 6ths, and 10ths return with the changed dynamic (pianissimo) and articulations (slurred staccato bows), which result in increasing the difficulty of the double stops.

The image shows a musical score for three staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and includes a *cresc.* marking. A *sul G-* instruction is present above the staff. The middle staff also starts with *ff*. The bottom staff begins with *ff* and ends with *sf*. There are various articulation markings, including slurs and accents, throughout the score.

Example 3.5. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 17, mm. 7–22.

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The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* and includes a *sul A, D-* instruction. The bottom staff begins with a dynamic marking of *(pp)*. There are various articulation markings, including slurs and accents, throughout the score.

Example 3.6. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, mm. 5–13.

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3. Chord technique: consecutive three or four-note chords

The use of polyphonic texture frequently appears in Britten's violin works. Example 3.7 shows how Britten adapted such technique in the Violin Concerto. Because playing three or four-note chords simultaneously is technically challenging for performers, it has become a common practice to break these chords into two groups of strings as an arpeggio. However, Britten's own instruction (*non arpeggiando*) tells the performer "not to break the chord as an arpeggio." In order to achieve a good sound quality in this passage, the performer need to find the right bow speed and bow pressure with the corresponding sounding points.



Example 3.7. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 4 measures before rehearsal 43.

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Example 3.8. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 4 measures before rehearsal 2.

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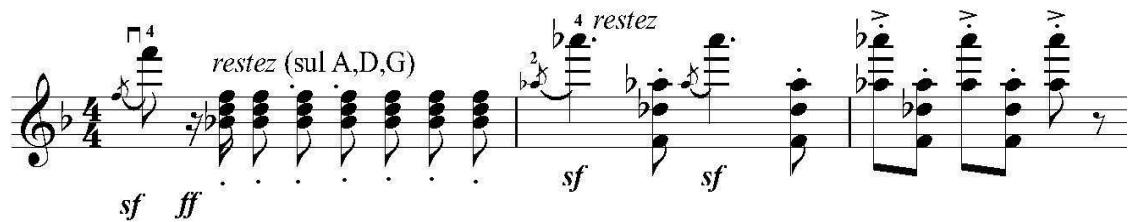
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Example 3.8 shows another technical challenge. As consecutive three-note chords are all written as sixteenth notes grouped in slurs, there is no possibility of breaking them as an arpeggio

due to the time constraint. With its fast tempo and slur indications, the left hand must be agile enough to perform each chord.

The *restez* marking (see example 3.9.) brings technical challenges as it requires the chords to be played in high positions. Playing chords in higher positions create more technical difficulty than in lower positions as the distance between the strings and the fingerboard increases. An adequate corresponding left finger pressure and bow pressure is necessary to meet the challenge.



Example 3.9. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 8 measures before rehearsal 4.

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In this example, without *restez* marking, one can easily be tempted to play these chords in the first position with the stretched 4th finger (with *sul E, A, D*). However, playing these chords in the fifth and sixth position with the stretched fourth finger makes more sense due to the note A-flat placed between two chords with a grace note, which is required to be performed in the sixth position.

4. Double harmonics

The very first extended harmonic practices were introduced by the French violinist and composer Jean-Joseph de Mondonville (1711–1772) in the preface of his work, *Les sons*

harmoniques Op.4, in 1738.¹ Since then, harmonics technique has become a recurrent compositional language in violin repertoire. Composers such as Paganini and Sarasate frequently utilized harmonics in their compositions. The extensive harmonics are well-displayed in violin concertos by Paganini and the third movement from *Romanian Folk Dances* by Béla Bartók (arranged by Zoltán Székely).

There are two ways to indicate natural harmonics in music — one by a ‘o’ sign directly above a designated sounding note, and the other by a diamond shaped note where the finger should be placed specifically. As for the artificial harmonics, a small diamond shape (where the finger should be lightly touched) is written above the regular-shaped fundamental note.

To summarize Paul Zukofsky’s article on violin harmonics, “The most frequently used artificial harmonics are touched fifth, fourth, and major/minor thirds. When the distance between fundamentals and nodes (where the finger should be lightly touched) gets shorter, the clarity of resultants gets lower as well as the dynamics. For this reason, third harmonics, especially minor third harmonics, require precise and delicate touch to achieve the desired sound. Despite the difficulty the third harmonics bring, it is also indispensable in double harmonics.”² For double harmonics, there are three possible combinations: Both strings can be all natural harmonics or all artificial harmonics, or one natural and one artificial harmonic. Britten uses all three combinations in his concerto.

To examine Britten’s use of harmonics, two main examples are reviewed. In the coda section of the first movement, the double harmonics are written with an extreme stretch which makes the passage impossibly challenging for performers with small hands. Considerately, Britten provided an option to perform it as a single harmonic note. However, the intention behind Britten’s original notation is aimed toward showing the precise pitch rather than playing as it is. As the touched fourth harmonics sound two octaves higher than the fundamental note, they are

¹ Marc Signorile, “Mondonville, Jean-joseph Cassanéa de.” *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 3 Aug. 2020. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com>.

² Paul Zukofsky, “On Violin Harmonics,” *Perspectives of New Music* 6, No.2 (1968): 176.

easier to read the exact aimed pitch. Thus, performers are challenged to search for other fingering options to achieve the same pitch. The suggested fingerings are shown below.

Example 3.10a. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 1st movement, last 4 measures.

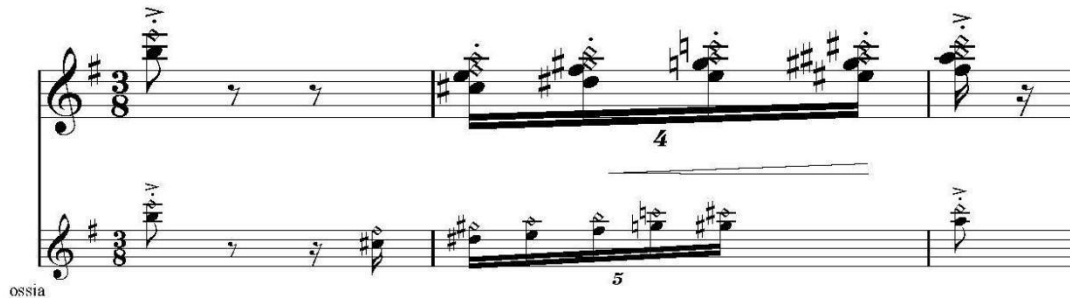
“Violin Concerto Op.15” By Benjamin Britten
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Example 3.10b. Britten *Violin Concerto*, 1st movement, last 4 measures, suggested fingerings.

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Similar to the coda of the first movement, the double harmonics in the second movement are nearly to impossible to perform with the given fingerings. See examples 3.11a, 3.12a and 3.13a. To keep the fingering faithful to the score, all four fingers must be used with extreme stretching. Thus, the second examples are included to show the altered fingerings which achieve

desired pitches without a strenuous stretch. Regardless, Britten did provide a single harmonics line for example 3.11a as the inner string harmonics are unstable in its sound production. With such a fast tempo (dotted quarter note equals 140), it is difficult to make a clear sound. Therefore, an educated decision for the right bow speed and sounding point should be made by the performer to achieve the best result.



Example 3.11a. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 17.

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Example 3.11b. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 17, suggested fingerings.

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Example 3.12a. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 21.

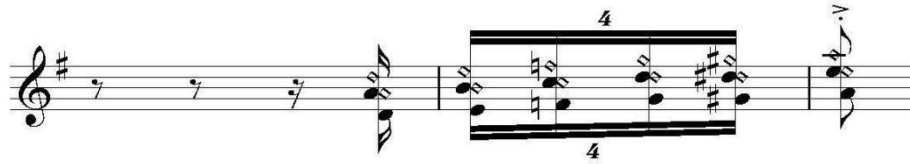
“Violin Concerto Op.15” By Benjamin Britten

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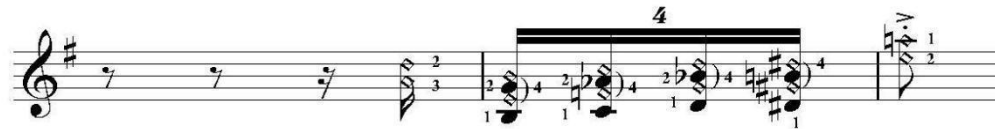
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Example 3.12b. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 21, suggested fingerings.
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Example 3.13a. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 23.
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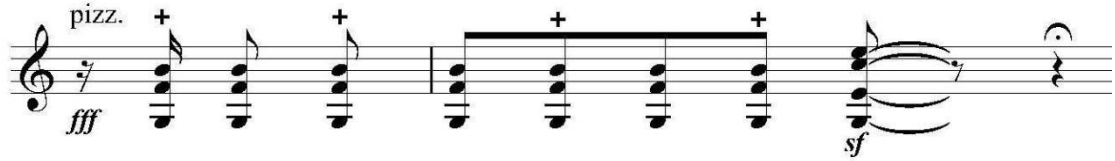


Example 3.13b. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 25, m. 23, suggested fingerings.
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5. Left hand pizzicato

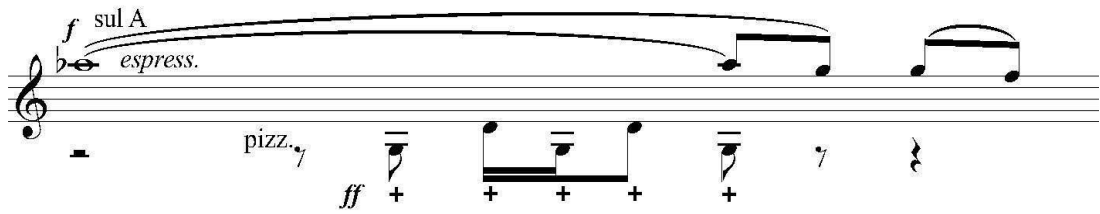
Another advanced violin technique used in Britten’s *Violin concerto* is left hand pizzicato. Left hand pizzicato is relatively less common than regular pizzicato. However, it has appeared in many violin solo repertoires since the late nineteenth century such as Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst’s *Grand Caprices* and Eugène Ysaÿe’s *Six Solo Sonata for Violin Op.27*.

The regular pizzicato sign is notated as 'pizz.'. For the left hand pizzicato, a cross sign is marked above the designated notes.



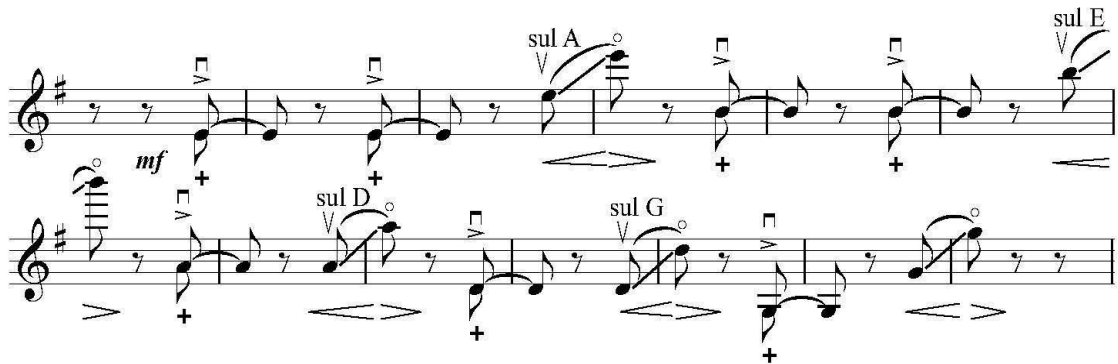
Example 3.14. Britten *Violin Concerto*, Cadenza, m. 24.
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In the above example, Britten used both left and right hand pizzicato for consecutive chords. Here, the challenge lies on dynamic production. As the left hand pizzicato often results in softer dynamics, the above example will be performed soft–strong–soft–strong in terms of dynamic despite the written triple forte. The most perplexing note in the above chord is the top note B in A string when played as left hand pizzicato. If the B is performed as a single note pizzicato, the produced sound will be much clearer. However, as the B is written as a chord and the first and second fingers are occupied, the only options the performer has to choose for pizzicato are either the third or the fourth fingers. Furthermore, if the second finger while already holding the A string touches the A string, the top note will not sound at all. Regardless, plucking motion will inevitably be done diagonally from G string to E string towards the scroll, which will result in the softest sound for the A string. This sound will likely be covered by the sound of the G string.



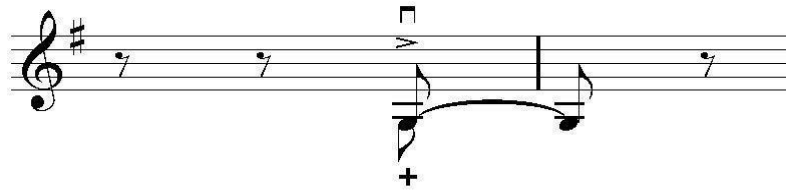
Example 3.15. Britten *Violin Concerto*, Cadenza, m. 41.
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The second example, also derived from the cadenza, shows how left hand pizzicato is used to depict rhythmic motif while the lyrical subject from the first movement returns through the bow. The difficulty lies in continuing the expressive legato while the left hand plucks the string in fortissimo.



Example 3.16. Britten *Violin Concerto*, Rehearsal 27, mm. 10–22.
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Here, the unison notes have two instructions: *arco* and *pizz.* For the unison E, the performer is expected to stretch the fourth finger on G string to reach E, while the first finger holds on D string E and plucks the D string with the second or third finger. It is not impossible to perform, however, the dynamic of pizzicato will inevitably be less than the *arco* and thus the precise pitch from pizzicato will be difficult to achieve.



Example 3.17. Britten *Violin Concerto*, rehearsal 27, mm. 20–21

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The troublesome unison is the G as shown above. Unlike previous examples, this G cannot be played as unison. In order for the pizzicato to sound, the string should vibrate. Nevertheless, as soon as the bow touches the string to perform *arco*, the vibration will stop. Therefore, here, the pizzicato serves to imitate a percussive sound in lieu of producing precise pitch.

B. Revisions

Britten revised the Concerto three times with minor changes in 1950, 1954 and 1965. Britten himself mentioned in his letter to Albert Goldberg, “There is no structural change in the work — a shortening here and a rewriting there is all I’ve done.”³ The small changes that Britten made in the revisions are: omitting a measure or few measures in every movement, changing the violin solo part for better fluidity. There is no doubt that Brosa played a crucial role for the first edition of the Concerto, however, According to Mitchell and Reed, “Brosa did indeed edit the original solo violin part, but perhaps rather more extensively and ambitiously than the composer had originally intended.”⁴ In his revision of the work in 1958 Britten removed Brosa’s virtuoso accretions, on the solo violin part with the assistance of Armenian-British violinist Manoug

³ Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke, eds., *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1939–1945, Volume Three 1946–1951* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 621.

⁴ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Two*, 737

Parikian (1920–1987).⁵ It is noteworthy to see why Britten tried to remove the link between Brosa and the *Violin Concerto* through the revision process. As the friendship between Brosa and Britten declined after the mid 1940s, Brosa’s name was rarely mentioned in Britten’s letters. The exact reason why their friendship became diminished is unknown. However, according to Kathleen Mitchell, a close friend of Britten, he seemed to be aware that Brosa had fallen on difficult times. “... at the interval Ben told us the sad story of the man for whom it was written [Antonio Brosa]. He seems to have fallen on to stony times.”⁶ Mitchell and Britten were attending the concert at Edinburgh Festival in 1968 when this conversation took place. The concert featured violinist Yehudi Menuhin’s performance of Britten’s *Violin Concerto*.

Additional evidence of the estrangement between Brosa and Britten can be found in his other work, *Reveille*, specifically written for Brosa’s solo recital at the Wigmore Hall. Britten composed *Reveille* in 1937, nonetheless, it was not published until after Britten’s death. 11 years after the composer's death, in 1987, a posthumous edition for the piece was published by Faber Music, unearthed from the composer's own collection and its manuscripts in BBC Music Library.

Despite the hardships Britten faced, his fondness towards this concerto is represented by his earnest revision process over 25 years. Recently, the concerto is finally drawing the attention it deserves from performers. Therefore, one hopes to see a corresponding increase in further scholastic research in the near future.

⁵ Mitchell and Reed, *Letters from a Life: Volume Three*, 307.

⁶ Kathleen Mitchell, “Edinburgh Diary 1968,” in *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Philip Reed (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 196.

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