Jumbrils

No: 15

T U M B R I L S

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DISCOURSE ON PROSODY

For a long time I've been vaguely bothered by the fact that it is extremely difficult to get one's hands upon any sort of volume which contains all the pertinent information on the technical aspects of poetry under one cover. Some high school and college English texts treat the subject in an off-hand, random manner, listing about half the metrical feet, a third of the established stanza-forms, most of the usual rime-schemes, and so on, together with examples from the Victorian or watered-down school of English poetry; some critical texts discuss the problems of ambiguity, dissonance, and similar recondite matters; some essays here and there will tell you what sprung verse is, a preface to some other volume will discuss the metrics of outriders and vers libre, but in order to have all this information on hand you have to have a virtual five-foot shelf.

I have what amounts to that five-foot shelf, but I'd like to have it collated. It occured to me that a fair percentage of Vanguard members are interested in writing poetry, and that many of them have had the same troubles in getting any sort of reliable technical information. (Witness Judy's delight at finding in Ted Sturgeon a person who knew metrics and some other formal material.) I have undertaken, therefore, to summarise every piece of information I have on the subject in the essay which follows. I do not pretend that I have dredged all this out of the no-doubt capacious Blish memory. Most of it is simply codified from texts which I have on hand, from articles, prefaces, fugitive paragraphs, and so on. I've tried to present it in simple, direct form, in a way which might prove most useful for those of us who are trying to be poets. I learned a great deal doing this job, and I hope others will find it as fascinating.

I. METRICS

Conventionally, and for purposes of analysis, English poetry is scanned by lines, and the lines broken up into segments or "feet" in accordance with the number of strong accents in the line. Ordinarily a foot contains only one heavy accent and no more than two light ones, though there are a few exceptions; in this article I will use the symbol "-" for a stressed accent and "u" for an unaccented syllable or word, and will divide feet by diagonals (/). Thus, Virginia Blish's opening line of her "The Prodigal Child" would be beaten thus:

Trundling progress jerks him to her bed.
- u / - u / - u / - u / - /

The scansion of any given line is described first of all in terms of the number of feet it has; thus, the line quoted above is pentameter; the opening line of Alexandra Krinkin's "Premonition,"

You shall cross your border
- u / - u / - u /

is trimeter; and both monometer and octometer occur now and then, particularly in free verse of the Whitman-Jeffers persuasion. (Both may be found in J. Blish's "Auto-da-Fe," but such simultaniety is rare -- and, of course, not necessarily a virtue.)

The second method of labelling a given metrical form is by the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in the single foot. The most common and most natural foot in English poetry is the iambus, which consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. This beat is so characteristic of our language that it is usually referred to as "common time." Dragonette-Dye's poem "Daemmerung" is mostly iambic:

The uncut edges of the day are dark
u -/ u -/ u - / u - / u - /
To lie more sharply at the dulling flesh.
u - / u - / u - / u - /u - /

All sonnets are iambic, and indeed, almost all Elizabethan verse is iambic, whether blank or rimed.

This foot, especially in pentameter, seems to be the basic rhythm of English.

The next most common beat is the trochee, where the first syllable is accented, the second, not. Both of our initial examples are trochaic, though the V. Blish quote leaves one foot incomplete (since the end beat is a strong one, this is usually called a "masculine ending.") The iambus and trochee, obviously, are simple opposites.

A second set of opposities is the anapest and the dactyl. Both are three-beat feet. The anapest goes / u u - /:

In the emperor's cloaks
u u - / u u - /

(Chan Davis: "Song and Dance")

or, more sustained:

You could hardly imagine a lovlier world than this,
u u - / u u - / u u - , u u - // u - /

from Henry Sostman's "Winter Arrangement" (the double-diagonal is a caesura, a pause substituted for a weak beat; usually written, as in music, (').

The opposite case is the dactyl, / - u u /, of which Lowndes' "Jeremy III" provides an example:

told of the city, repeated;
- u u / - u u / - u //
gathered about him the listening few, summoned
- u u / - u u / - u u / - u u /

This foot is fairly common in Latin:

Quadrupedante a putrum sonatu in ungula campum (Virgil)
- u u / - u u / - u u / - u u / - u u / - u //

and is familiar in English mainly through waltz-time:

Down in the valley, the valley so low,
- u u / - u u / - u u / - //
Hang your head over, hear the wind blow. (Folktune.)
- u u / - u // - u u / - //

(This pattern -- two weak beats unspoken at the end of each line, and a caesura in the middle of every other line -- is characteristic of most song forms.)

Since the dactyl begins on a strong beat, without any preparatory upstroke, and ends with two weak beats, it is sometimes bounded with a split iambus, as in V. Blish's "Thingmote:"

Her glance will not see and her ears will not hear and her conscience is
u / - u u / - u u / - u u / - u u / - u u /
Business where Heart holds no stock.
- u u / - u u / -

which ends the line with a solid swat, since it happens to be a final line.

It is rare to find a foot which does not fall into one of these classifications. There are three other English feet, but very few lines can be unearthed which follow one of them uniformly; they are usually dropped into a dactylic, iambic, spondaic, or anapestic rhythm for variety's sake. Of these uncommon three, the most common is the three-beat amphibrach, / u - u /:

Foregoing the leaf for the cord and the logwood for steeping
u - u / u - u / u - u / u - u / u - u /

(from J. Blish's Auto-da-Fe.) Amphibrach lines which are carried all the way through are very rare because of the feminine ending they require; usually they are bounded; the limerick is the only familiar English form which uses pure amphibrach.

There was a young man from Japan
u - u / u - u / u - //

uses a masculine ending, but most of Lear's products are straight:

There was a young lady of Niger
u - u / u - u / u - u /
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger . . .
u - u / u - u / u - u / Note that Lear's limericks concerning youmg men all have masculine endings, and vice versa -- a neat bit of spoofing.

(Note, by the way, that "Thingmote" may both formally and metrically be regarded as an expanded limerick; and that as such, its lines are masculine, though they deal with a woman. I doubt that this was premeditated, but the poet's scorn for her subject is hardly injured by the procedure.)

The other two feet are again mirror images of each other. One is the spondee, which consists of two accented syllables -- I know of no line in English which is all spondees, nor of any poem in VAPA which has included more than one. The spondee is almost invariably marked off by commas:

My father poorly led? World, World, O world! (King Lear)
u - / u - / u - / - - / u - /

The spondee, with its two unexpected successive emphases -- the only foot which contains two strong beats - led directly to sprung verse, where a whole series of strong beats may follow each other. Tennyson is almost alone among Victorian poets in employing nothing but strong beats in some of his lines:

Break, break, break,
- / - / - /
On thy cold grey stones, O sea
u /u - / - - / u -

The second of these lines (from "In Memoriam") is peculiarly difficult to scan; it might also be marked uu/---/u-, perhaps the more natural way to read it, if less easy to classify. In this latter version, we encounter the pyrrhic foot which consists of two unaccented syllables, / u u / . This foot is the least common one in English; it is most common in French, where a whole series of syllables may be read at a dead level, without any one being accented. This also happens frequently in German, since German often takes some time to get to a strong syllable.

As we have already seen, lines often either begin or end with extra syllables. This simple fact is the excuse for a great deal of technical terminology. A "filled" line -- that is, one which contains complete the number of feet which prevail through most of the poem -- which has extra syllables at its beginning is called anacrustic; at the end, weak or feminine. (We'll use weak, since the masculine-feminine terms have already been put to use to describe the nature of the beat ending a line.) If the line is <u>short</u> one or two beats at the beginning, it is called truncated; if at the end, catalectic.

This is just the beginning of the process called "variation" in poetry. We have next the mixed line, which, though consisting predominantly of one type of foot, occasionally uses one or more other types. A "strict" mixed line puts the subsidiary foot always in the same position in each line; a "free" mixed line just drops it in any old place. In formal verse strict mixtures are most common; in free verse, the mixture is free, too.

When carried far enough, the strict mixed line brings us to what is called sprung verse. The first poem to make use of sprung verse in English is Coleridge's <u>Christabel</u>. The principle is simple: one does not count the unaccented syllables at all, but only the accented ones. Every line in <u>Christabel</u> has four accents; what comes between the accents is not considered to be important.

There is not wind enough to twirl
u - / u - /u - /u - /
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
u - / u - / u - / u u - /
That dances as often as dance it can,
u -/ u u - /u u - / u - /
Hanging so light and hanging so high
- /u u - / u -/ u u - /
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.
u u - / u - / u u -/ u u - /

Some sprung verse has appeared in VAPA; the writer's "Tabby, Dead" uses a five-beat sprung line, though not throughout:

Father of gods, dreaming of swords, hear
- u u / - / - u u / - / - /
The silver child content to yield up his small joy.
u - /u - / u - /u - u / u u - /

The real king of this kind of verse is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who used it constantly and to terrific effect. His rhythmic patterns occasionally became so complex that he resorted to placing accent-marks over the strong words; thus, we know beyond all doubt how he intended this line to be read:

Now her all in two flocks, two folds -- black, white; right, wrong; rock-
- u / - u / - u / - u // - - // - - / -
on but, rock but, mind
u u / - u / u
But these two; ware of a world where but these two tell, each off the
u / - u / - u u / - u / - u // - u / - u u /
pther;
- u //

(from "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves.") The odd accent-placement and the unexpected pauses seem capricious; yet if one attempts to read any late Hopkins poem without due regard for the markings, it is likely to make no sense whatsodamnever; their syntax is much too knotty to be unravelled carelessly. (The poem excerpted above has a ten-beat line; the missing three beats in the second line quoted are there, but were deleted because they lead on into a following line.) Mr. Danner will doubtless be flabbergasted to know that "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" is a sonnet, though some of its lines contain 28 syllables; the secret is that five of the ten beats in each line are subsidiary.

The free-verse poet rarely works this intricately with rhythmic figures; but a thorough study of Hopkins' work cannot help but enrich any poet's rhythmic vocabulary. Hopkins frequently takes a standard form, such as the sonnet, and attaches to each line an "outrider" -- that is, a number of additional sprung feet; occasionally he works in the other direction (for instance, in "The Windhover," a poem about a hawk, conventional sonnet lines are each prefaced by feet in sprung falling rhythm, giving the reader the feeling of a plunging swoop across the very face of the verse.)

I see we haven't yet discussed rising and falling rhythm. Rising meters are the anapest and the iamb; falling meters, the trochee and the dactyl; in the first group the accented syllable is preceded by one or more unaccented ones, in the second, the heavy beat comes first and the others "fall off" from it. (Daniel Gregory Mason, in "Our Modern Music," makes a fascinating comparison with poetic and musical rhythmic effects; he notes, among other things, that most of Richard Strauss' themes derive their almost boundless forward-moving energy from a use of what poets would call rising rhythms, and suggests that Strauss' habit of winding up in what seems a strangely unrelated key is the result of his having failed to complete a "stanza" rhythmically by the time the normal harmonic cadence has arrived.)

A final word about the caesura. Most experts consider that every line of poetry contains one caesura; in rare cases, such as Hopkins, there may be two or even three. A caesura which follows a weak beat is called a feminine one, for obvious reasons; if it follows a strong one, it is of course called masculine.

/Section II: <u>Rhetoric</u>, will follow next issue./

How High Is the Sky?

All the signs and portents suggest that a serious attempt to rocket to the moon will be made within the lifetimes of most people now living, and maybe within the next decade. Even the greater, uniformed body of the public finds itself accepting the once-fantastic notion -- mostly because German V2s have emphasised explosively the great efficiency of supersonic rockets. Further publicity of less dramatic nature has made moon-gallivanting an idea verging on the commonplace.

Already an improved V2 has soared up to an altitude somewhat better than 200 miles, making its gratified designers decide that it is now feasible to boost one so high that it will never come down. The American Rocket Society is girding its loins for action. The British Interplanetary Society has designed a moon-rocket, a coelostat and one or two other peculiar skeezits essential to astronavigation. With pioneering abandon understandable these nervy days, both societies can produce persons willing to sit on the blast and go up with it. That's one way out if you can't think of a better.

Not so long ago London's "Britain-Can-Make-It" exhibition was adorned by a model spaceship designed by F. J. Camm, an editor with a formidable reputation for concocting things mechanical. When interplanetary spaceships get shoved among aluminum coffee percolators, patents of hair-curlers and chromium-plated rat-traps, we're entitled to think that the amazing has been brought down to the level of the very ordinary.

The conception that someday soon we're going to land on the moon has become uncomfortably orthodox. Ideas of what we'll find when we get there are equally orthodox. We'll travel about a quarter of a million miles (because professional astronomers have pronounced that th be the distance,) and find the moon completely uninhabited (because professional astronomers have pronounced it completely uninhabited,) and absolutely airless (because...aw, hock, you've got the idea by now.)

What the space-venturers will do with their moon, too uninhabited to be seduced by gin and missionaries, too uninhabitable to be developed by the brawn of dopes and the brains of smarties, is their worry. But, according to authoritative pronouncements, they're going to risk their necks and travel a long, long way to find nix, nil, nothing -- or nothing in the true sense of anything likely to return a dividend of not less than ten percent.

Things don't always come up to expectations, as the Venusian remarked while reclining on his potty-chair. The reality may prove astoundingly different from the imagined. Such, at any rate, is the firm and considered opinion of two Italians, P. A. Pollini and E. I. Azzario, to whom it is thinkable that the moon may be somewhat larger and nearer than any astronomers have pronounced it to be, that it may have an atmosphere, and that it may be inhabited by the remnants of the long-lost half of the species homo sapiens.

Pollini and Azzario have been driven to these strange conclusions as a result of striking attitudes considered rude in observatories. What they've been doing is -- hold your hats! -- looking at the moon! They've been staring at it for seventeen solid years.* We say that it is rude of them because these days professional astronomers seldom bother to look at anything other than copies of Eyes Without Leaves; they're too busy writing books designed further to befuddle the lower orders, or fooling with mathematics, or skinning each other at gin-rummy, and they trust the amateurs to phone them and complain about any unfamiliar phenomenon in the sky.

*This may explain, if not excuse. -- ed.

For the sake of any of the faithful sufficiently far gone in dogma to think us peevish, we may say that we've an imposing list of celestial discoveries about which professional astronomers know nothing whatever until informed of same by wildly excited amateurs. The Cosik comet was a fair sample.[1] Quite recently we struck jackpot when we phoned Bidston Observatory (England) at 10:00 P.M., only to be told by this temple-of-science's female night operator that the staff worked daytimes, starting at 9:30 A.M. -- and there ain't nobody hosh but this chicken![2]

Unastronomically and vulgarly, Pollini and Azzario have insisted on gaping at the moon, and the more they've gaped the more they've felt that it isn't a moon at all, but merely an image of one. The real Moon, they deduce, may be anywhere, its real position depending upon the angle of reledtion and the refractive index of whatever-it-is that is casting the image.

Not satisfied with that, they've had a look at the sun.[3] It made them go the whole hog by observing the stars. After a while they decided that people in observatories are riding in a sort of astronomical ghost-train...for all is illusion! One cannot decide that all is illusion without writing a book about it. Which they did.

Their tome is the Bible of the Halonic Theory, a new conception of the nature of the cosmos which manages to be pre-Copernican and post-Einsteinian at one and the same time. The Halonic Theory postulates a dual cosmos. One is an actual, concrete conglomeration of bodies which is unknown and unknowable by any present-day method of observation; though, of course, it is discoverable by astronautical exploration. The other is the apparent cosmos we all see and at which astronomers may condescend to peer whenever someone disturbs them from their slumbers. This latter cosmos is nothing but a ghost, a multiple phantom builded of warped light-rays and cockeyed theories. It is imaginary, as distinct from the first cosmos, which is substantial.

The real, concrete cosmos, says the Halonic Theory, is hyper-crystalline and has orbs of electro-magnetic potential embedded in its stratified ether.[4] These orbs may be so concentrated that they appear to our particular senses as matter and are referred to by us as heavenly bodies of one sort or another. The stratified ether -- which accords with the Theories of Dante[5] -- has both reflecting and absorbing powers which may vary with each stratum according to its own individual nature. Light bounced by any one stratum may curve, spiral or indulge any antics except perhaps that of travelling in a straight line. Its velocity likewise may vary in keeping with the pattern of its path and the impedance of its medium.

All orbs of concentrated potential (heavenly bodies to you,) radiate energies around them, and these may either augment or clash with the radiations of neighboring orbs, the type of reaction depending upon whether the potentials originating the radiations are equal or unequal, similar in character or opposite.

This conception is not so difficult to grasp as first may seem. What is conceived is something like a Creation-wide and extremely complex version of a disturbed magnetic field in which gauss-nodes (the heavenly bodies) re-radiate their own force-lines, some mutually attracting, some repelling, some reflecting said lines through the oddest angles.

The most noteworthy effect of this gigantic setup, suggest Pollini and Azzario, is to cause the real, actual cosmos to be filled with radiant phenomena and with misleading images of itself. Even the students of other heavenly bodies (Eyes Without Leaves) concede a point to these Italian fidgets, inasmuch as they

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5. 1265-1321. Also Italian.

4. That is to say, it is hyper-magnetic and has strata of electro-potential embedded in its ethereal orbs; or, to be specific, it has . . .

3. At night, of course; wouldn't be astronomical otherwise.

2. Why not? The sun was an astronomical object the last I heard.

1. It is my guess that EFR knows that comets and variable stars are two subjects for the observation of which professional astronomers have organized amateurs all over the world. -- ed.

often assert that one cannot look at a star, one can only look at the light which left it a million eons ago, which is another way of saying that one can only observe the star's long-coming image'.

Dogma and crackpotia meet in agreement on another point. Light, claims the Halonic theory, may jitter around in all sorts of ways and at all sorts of velocities. Before orthodoxy changed its tune (for which the faithful may read "Made further refinements") light travelled in a line so all-fired straight that it made an engineer's straight-edge look more crooked than a fiddler's elbow. Then Einstein -- another fidget -- came along with bent light which explained the apparent displacement of certain stars, and now it is accepted that light's path may be skew-whiff enough to curl your optics around your beak. Back in those dear, dead days when we were even more dopey than we are now, the gin-rummy skinners made it a law that the velocity of light was a constant. Nothing could vary it -- nothing. Now -- how time marches on! -- its velocity is said to depend upon the nature of the medium through which it is travelling.[1] A few more such "refinements" will leave Pollini and Azzario without their pants.[2]

The gist...is that the moon which lovers sigh under and dogs bark at ain't the moon at all. It's a specter. It's a visible reflection cast from someplace else. This is said to hold good in spite of radar soundings of the moon in which, so 'tis alleged, all blips were eliminated except those which agreed more or less with orthodoxy's estimate of the satellite's distance. Nutty, isn't it?[3]

But the nuttishness evaporates slightly when the theory is considered along with a couple of other familiar phenomena which Pollini and Azzario either overlook or modestly omit to mention. To wit: mirages and tides.

Mirages by the dozens. We have data on them ranging from Vicksburg to Vladivostok, in all sizes from five yards wide to five miles, over ranges from ten miles to eight-fifty. The only twelve men who can understand Einstein opine that they're caused by deflection of light-rays through a cold stratum high in the atmosphere, especially one holding ice-crystals in suspension. The Halonic Theory says the same thing in bigger[4] terms: that an ether-stratum in a crystalline cosmos can and does reflect accurate but misleading images.

The visible moon-image is thought to be a mirage which persists solely because the conditions causing it similarly persist and are likely to persist and are likely to do so for eons to come. Therefore the actual, geological moon must be someplace else, not necessarily far away, but certainly not where it seems to be. Professional astronomers maintain that the moon is where you see it. They also say that the moon causes tides -- moon-tides as distinct from sun-tides or sun-moon-tides -- and thus it is possible to predict tide-heights and tide-times. Just to prove it, they publish tables of predictions.

Some years ago Science's Dead End Kids, who masquerade as the Fortean Society, got hold of the official tables for New York Tides and for several weeks carefully checked them against the official tide-gauge at the foot of Whitehall Street. It was naughty of them, for it made liars of their betters. They found the prophets out in their calculations by an average of twenty minutes. Until Pollini and Azzario popped up we were uncharitable enough to think that maybe this represented the normal margin of expert inaccuracy. Now, the Halonic theory suggests that the poor prophets have been excusably misled -- for the real moon is

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4. Or, anyhow, emptier. The analysis Milton Rothman makes of crackpot notions in general in a recent FAPA mailing would be well worth consulting here. The crucial term is "ether;" P & A are a little belated in their faith in this word.

3. Yes.

2. Two paragraphs of quotation from P & A's book have been cut here, on the grounds that they make rather less sense than the rest of the article, and are one hell of a lot worse-written.

1. Nevertheless, c is still a constant in the Einsteinian sense: as a limit. As far as I am able to discover it was never considered to be a constant in any other sense. -- od

twenty minutes away from its own image in terms of its own velocity! Quite a distance![1]

Say the Halonists -- and this is interesting -- "The much proclaimed airlessness of the moon, and its consequent uninhabitability, is no more than the result of persisting in regarding the vision as a real, geological body. The presence of atmosphere need not be revealed in the lunar vision as it may not have the power to radiate energy through cosmic spaces and project its elements in our halonic sky, where the geological body is reproduced."[2] In other words, the crystalline halo cannot project a vision on a screen of the same index, just as a mirage never includes the atmosphere around it unless said atmosphere has an index sufficiently different to register. You can't see a drop of water in a glass of water unless the drop is colored.

There are other plausible Halonic explanations of eclipses and other infrequent phenomena, but we'd need another five thousand words to deal with them here, and maybe we've bored you enough. Our interest in Pollini and Azzario is due mostly to the fact that they're the first to argue plausibly that the moon is inhabitable and probably inhabited. Thereby, they've added excitement to the coming rocket-shot. Personally, we think they're crazy--- but so were the Wright brothers!

Oh, well, most of us can do little more than wait and see. A rocket will go the the moon lots sooner than you think, and in due time you'll be able to see at the downtown cinema whatever the daring astronauts saw in actuality. Orthodoxy insists that all you'll get will be enormous craters, fantastic horizons, and maybe an imposing shot of far-off Earth. Pollini and Azzario believe that you are more likely to see something that will lift you right out of your pants and leave your suspenders dangling. Take your pick and bide your time -- it's coming!

-- Eric Frank Russell

/In a covering letter, Russell asks that you pick your fights with P & A, not with him; he doesn't feel very feisty these days. The book is Assalto alla Luna, Casa Editrice Pollini, Milan. Russell also sent the authors' address, which I will forward to anyone interested./

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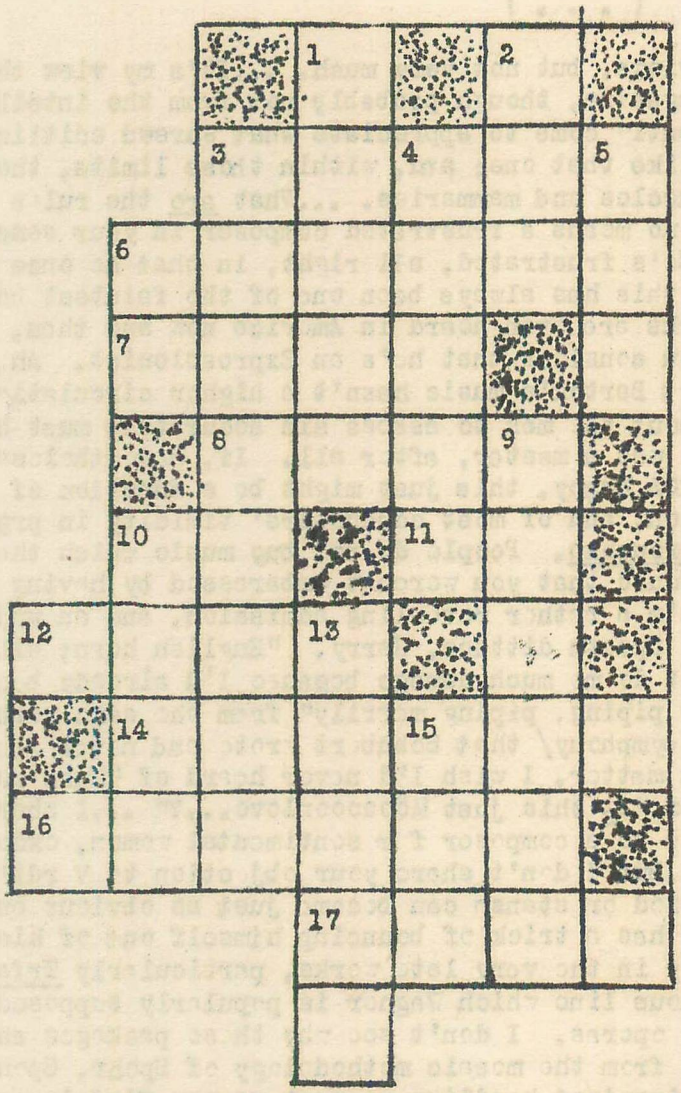
2. Aren't you glad I cut that other quotation?

1. The Forteans ran their "test" from 6/25/37 to 7/25/37/, and charted their results in the Oct. '37 edition of their publication, VI#2. The chart shows that the predictions anticipated "most extremes from 14 to 20 minutes." The predictions, by the U. S. Coast & Geodetic Survey, were made a year in advance. The chart also shows, by arrows, that the tide was still in motion toward the predicted point during 25% of the Society's observations, and that prediction and observation jibed about 30%. Over the given 31 days all those figures are perfectly meaningless..



ACROSS

3. Danner can do it
6. Color
7. VKEB writes one now and then
8. The opposition press
10. Proper answer to Blish
11. Service abbreviation
12. Sturgeon makes them
14. Says "no" to
16. Benevolent Manager
17. What it is to disagree with Blish

DOWN

1. Theater
2. Common suffix
3. Defiler
4. Like Davis' poetry
5. First name of eminent author
9. Advantages
10. Belligerant ex-vapan
13. Production of Co-ordination (service abbr.)
15. Feminine name

VANGUARD CROSSWORD # 3 by H. Chandler Davis

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pootoyouHarrypootoyouVirginiapootoyouBurtonpooeyonyoutooDavisnowwhohaveImissed??

Nihil obstat dept.

1935: BUY U.S. POSTAL SAVINGS BONDS
1940: BUY DEFENSE BONDS AND STAMPS
1942: BUY AND HOLD WAR BONDS
1944: BUY VICTORY BONDS
1948: BUY SECURITY BONDS
1952: ASSORTED BONDS* TO SWAP FOR GOOD GRADE BOG PEAT

*Half-life: five years.

(. . .)

HORIZONS V6: I miss the FAPA reviews, but not very much. ...It's my view that Planet is a good magazine, though probably not from the intelligent fan's point of view. I've only recently come to appreciate what shrewd editiing it takes to put out a consistent book like that one; and, within those limits, there's often good stuff hidden among the muscles and mammaries. ...What are the rules of puzzle-making, Harry? ...List is by no means a frustrated composer in your sense; his stuff sees frequent performances. He's frustrated, all right, in that he once hoped to make a living as a composer; but this has always been one of the faintest hopes one could find anywhere. List's works are even heard in America now and then, which is really a remarkable thing when you consider that he's an Expressionist. Ah, now, wait a minute; whose fault is it that Bartok's music hasn't a higher circulation? Every music lover who knew enough about the man to assess him accurately must have bought all the available records; he was a master, after all. If, nevertheless, not enough records were bought to keep RCA happy, this just might be a function of RCA's unwillingness to record on speculation, and of most conductors' timidity in programming anything more esoteric than Petrouchka. People do not buy music which they have heard only once or not at all. ...Would that you weren't embarassed by having nothing FAPA-centered to talk about. It's a rather revealing admission, and an unjust one. ...I know your trouble with the Spaeth ditties, Harry. "English horn; all forlorn; pipe your plaintive lay" didn't do me much damage because I'd already been corrupted by "Goin' home;" but "Merrily piping, piping merrily" from the same work is in my head to stay, as is "This is the symphony/ that Schubert wrote and never finished (Forgot to, my wife adds)/" For that matter, I wish I'd never heard of "Muss es sein" and "Es muss sein," to say nothing of "Is this just Mooooonlove...?" ...I share your distrust of Chopin; he seems to me to be a composer f r sentimental women, except for a few astonishingly strong works. ...But I don't share your objection to Verdi's symmetrical phrases. The Wagnerian period or stanza can become just as obvious and annoying, despite the fact that Wagner has a trick of bouncing himself out of his key at the end of each 16-bar group; only in the very late works, particularly Tristan and Parsifal, do you get the continuous line which Wagner is popularly supposed to have perfected long before those two operas. I don't see why these packages should be considered bad per se. They come from the mosaic methodology of Spohr, Spontini, and, above all, Meyerbeer, and with inspired handling -- such as you find in page after page of Lohengrin -- can make up as valid an operatic procedure as any other. I am inclined to think that aesthetically Wagner's Leitmotif system was much the more artificial and ultimately annoying. To quote Abner Dean -- "Everyone must have a label." ...I would vote "Otello" to be a better opera than almost any single opera of Wagner's, excepting the two named above, and possibly Meistersinger. For your major point -- that Wagner as an artist was perhaps the greatest known to us today, no matter what the art under discussion -- I must add only an abject nod, however. I am a pretty complete Wagnerian, with an unfortunately pretty complete catalogue of leading motives ensconced in my memory, and know a number of the operas very intimately from scores and many performances; and still all the later works, excepting only Rheingold, knock me flat on my face every time. Leslie remarks that Wagner was, by all ordinary standards, three men -- each one a great genius: Meyerbeer-Wagner, Ring-Wagner, and Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal Wagner. It's quite so; any one of these creative periods would have been a life's work for anyone else. ...While I'm slamming my forehead against the floorboards, let me also bow down before Tovey; the best musicologist I know. ...If ever there was a living fossil, it is Vaughan Williams. Can you place such a dullard above Hindemith on your survival scale? Evidently you can, but I m damned if I can see why. I don't know Raff and Hummel, but on the other hand I know Stamitz; absolute merit has some vitality. Williams' old dead modality and weathercocking after The Very Latest hasn't; I will take bets that Walton, Britten, and Elgar will survive him by a century at least -- these being only RVW's English contemporaries. Then there's Prokofieff, von Webern, Berg,.. And Bartok!

(Several mailings have passed since I stencilled the previous page. Without batting an eyelash, we skip several mailings and go on to):

VANGUARD AMATEUR: But who wants to be a Lone Indian?

AGENBITE OF INWIT, Supplement '47: I cannot agree that the Seventh is the best Shostakovitch symphony, even in the rather weird special sense of the word "best" you are using here. Verbal trickery aside, it seems plain enough that the First contains quite a bit of solid writing; and even the Sixth is not totally devoid of interest. Nose-thumbing is a valid artistic activity, providing that the joke is not on the thumber rather than on the thumbee; and the talent the Russian has for kidding the late 19th Century ballet is not to be sneezed at. The last movement of the Sixth is almost a critical essay -- a little crude, perhaps, but ninetheless pointed. As an exemplar of the way most moderns -- listeners and composers alike -- feel about Ponchielli and Rossini (to say nothing of Cole Porter,) it will probably have historical interest for a long time to come, and in our time is bound to be rib-tickling. Shostakovitch serious -- to paraphrase a famous remark -- is Shostakovitch stiff; but Shostakovitch burlesquing the mannerisms of other men is in his element, and he does it very well indeed. Critical music is a phenomenon of our century; besides Shostakovitch, men such as Strauss, Bliss, Prokofieff, Piston have written it; few have done it as well as Shostakovitch. Late Shostakovitch is something else again. After the Sixth, there's little to be heard but phony profundity and a sort of embarassed grotesquerie-for-its-own-sake -- but let's give even a bad composer his due. ...Your list of recommendations from 1947 recordings is not mine; however I notice one curious matter that I think is probably not yours, either. The only single records you list are those that you and I put out. It seems hardly likely that among all the singles you've heard in the past year, only the two we put out should prove memorable to any listener without an axe to grind. Couldn't you at least have planted a few ringers?

SNARK #9: Okay, Tolstoy. As a rather famous semanticist once remarked, a difference which makes no difference is no difference. ...Did I predict a chorus of disapproval on Triumph and Credo? If so, where? Seems unlikely. It isn't typical of me to give as large a number of people as it requires to make a chorus credit for good taste. ...Given up commenting on poetry, Bob? Or is a stale pun your idea of a cutting comment?

UPBEAT #1: The Floren verse was a sonnet: common time with outriders, altho I doubt that Floren was aware of it. Tripe, all the same....The section purporting to be about Existentialism in Agenbite is about something else; exactly what, I leave up to Lundes. However, I doubt that you'd like the real thing any better; you'd find most of it better-written, but that's all. ... Yes, let's by all means stop refighting the last war. But how do you tell the difference between the last one and the next one? The procedures are generally similar. What I have been seeking is some sort of individual activity which isn't duplicated all the way back to the Peloponnesian wars which may actually stop governments' refighting that same damned last war over and over again on an increasingly destructive scale. Thus far I have been able to find nothing which offers any promise but the very basic and "radical" (of Marx) refusal of the individual to fight; plus what seems to be a fair summary of human behaviour patterns, reading: Violence begets violence. God knows I am in no position to advocate immediate adoption of passive resistance by everyone in sight, for I'm not convinced that it is even the best answer; it is only the best one I've seen thus far; if I find one I think better, you'll hear from me, and loudly. It could even be your answer, Burton -- how about a word on the subject? ...The

problem of whether or not the Nazis could have occupied America as quasi-successfully as they occupied Europe, and whether or not they could have reduced the Jewish population here proportionately, is not a question of psychology, but of (a) geography, and (b) population statistics. ...There was indeed a surrender offer from Japan before the Bomb was dropped. It wasn't an unconditional surrender offer, and so it was rejected. As I remarked in a pre-Stevenson Tumbrils the unconditional surrender policy apparently was formulated with full knowledge of the fact that no government on the Axis side could possibly accept it; it was one of the implementations of the only Allied war aim which makes any sense in the light of later events: "Make it last longer and cost more." ... No, I was not contending that work and pay for all who want it is obtainable only by totalitarian methods; what I was attempting to point out to Judy is that concentration upon this objective -- what Wallace likes to call "economic democracy" -- thus far has led invariably to abrogation of what he calls "political democracy"--in short, that there is usually a man in uniform at the business end of the breadline. Heinlein assumes that this objective could be obtained without the surrender of the right of juridical defense, and so did Judy; but Mostpeople are more than willing to surrender juridical defense at the very promise of Workorpayforallwhowantit, and I'm not sure that the saints yet exist who could operate the world of "Beyond This Horizon" without making a police-state of it. ...I have heard before the statement that geographical environment affects character; it is a favorite theory of Jay Stanton's. It seems to me to be ridiculous. It is of course true that a generation within a given group can be conditioned by the propoganda of a sufficiently-determined leader-group, but my blast at Stanley was not about this at all; it was at his geographical predetermination of the characteristics of a group which had been subjected to the same kind of leadership for centuries. It would be interesting to explore the reasons for the ascendancy of this kind of crowd over so long a period, but what those reasons are is still anyone's guess; it might easily be that the first irruption of that kind of leadership predetermined the others, as one dominoe knocks down the next one; or it might be that there is no reason; but, pending investigation, we can rule out at once the notion that six million people are predisposed to a certain kind of complex political orientation simply because they happen to live in a given, arbitrary area -- we can rule it out without question on the ground that it is out-and-out unsane.

UPBEAT #2: Try translating directly from Latin into German. The Latin line is ordinarily longer, but its construction remains clear; there's nothing like Teutonic grammar for phony profundity. But no, I didn't intend the regularized English to be taken seriously. It was fun, though.

HORIZONS VAPA 7: I can only repeat what I've said before: I class myself as a most attentive listener, since I still have hopes of doing serious composition at some not-too-remote date; and even without that particular special aim, I have always been passionately interested in what composers of all stripes have to say and how they go about saying it. I listen intently, study scores, occasionally rewrite a page or so of a given score to see if it might have been done better, sometimes play the same composition or one side of the same composition over and over again either to test my first impressions or to see what and why and how what has struck me is the way it is; and I can do this for from two to six hours at a stretch. I'd like to add, however, that since almost any given composition that you and I would agree to be great lasts longer than half an hour, your listening period is selbstverstaendlich abnormally short. ...A battle with the Scriabine 4th Sonata not so many years ago has convinced me that six fingers per hand is often not enough. It's a wild and wonderful work, providing that you're octopus enough to play it. Are you familiar with it, Harry?

PHANTEUR: Greetings, D. B. The cover is funny, and the blurb for it even funnier; but I'm not much impressed by the remainder of the issue. The political dissertation suffers badly from the author's lack of information on the things he wants to discuss. To adduce a single example: Thompson talks about the dictatorship of the proletariat, not as it was originally proposed, but as he conceives it to be from the sound the words make in his head. He is inclined to believe that All Dictatorships are Bad, and that therefore anything that is called a Dictatorship is also Bad; he does not, however, know to what the D. of the P. actually refers, and so is simply flailing a dummy. ...Book reviews occasionally interesting, but not very illuminating. ...Perhaps DB will do better with further acquaintance with Vanguard -- this issue seems to be FAPA-centered.

QUARTERLY I, 3: This poem has always seemed to me to be one of Henry's most brilliant; I was sorry that it couldn't have been published in toto, but the two excerpted sections here make surprisingly good sense as independent entities. Perhaps some day he'll allow the whole thing to see print.

RINGEL, RINGEL, ROSENKRANTZ

The engineer is the man who drives the train.
At night he goes down our stairs with noisy shoes.
The cats watch him go as if he were just a man
But the mark of his black glove is on our brows for always.

He has bright china eyes and a dusty tool-box.
He will whistle a prayer at the crossroad, but he will not stop.
He carries what was ours to a dark place;
The rails rust behind him; now the stairs are quiet.

-- James Blish

PETER GRIMES: a review

This past season the Metropolitan, in a burst of daring which must have shaken the trustees down to their socks, mounted an opera whose composer was not yet dead. The farthest the Met has managed to drive itself in this direction for many years has been to Rosenkavalier and an occasional confection by Gian-Carlo Menotti, but the '48 season, faced with really serious rivalry from the progressive New York City Center (Pelleas with Maggie Teyte; Salome; Ariadne auf Naxos; Werther; Eugen Onegin; etc.), saw the production of Benjamin Britten's brand new (1945) Peter Grimes.

Thanks to the spectacular success this opera has enjoyed both abroad and in America -- Koussevitsky imported it for Tanglewood -- I had already had a chance to hear some of the music: namely, the so-called five Sea Pieces. Of these I had heard one live performance (Koussevitsky with the Boston, At Newark) and one broadcast performance (Bernard Herrmann with the CBS Symphony,) as well

as several hearings of a gorgeous English Decca ffrr recording. Of this much of the opera, then -- comprising the Prologue, the Introduction to Act I, the Storm (between Scenes 1 and 2 of Act 1,) the Introduction to Act II, the Passacaglia which comprises almost the whole of Scene 2, Act II, and the Introduction to Act III* -- I account myself a fair judge. The remainder of the music I've heard once, on a Met Saturday afternoon broadcast, without, unfortunately, a chance to see the score.

This experience, coming as a climax to performances of other Britten works I'd heard (1st string quartet, 1st piano concerto, Young People's Guide to the Orchestra, one song,) has given me rather a new picture of the Met's putative "daring." For Britten is certainly not a modern composer, in the sense that Berg or Stravinsky can be called moderns. He is, instead, an extremely conservative young man, though I think it is safe enough to call him a genius nonetheless. He shares with most of today's young composers an eclecticism of approach which makes his work very widely in strength and interest. At his worst (the piano concerto, in my opinion,) he verges on that sorry group of men like Shostakovitch,# Siegmeister, Grofe, Antheil, and Gruenberg, whom Kurt List has aptly grouped under the heading of Populists -- the folk-melody-inflaters, the writers-down-to-the-masses, the men whose work is a mishmash of not-quite-placeable quotes from their betters. His most usual tone, as in Peter Grimes, reminds one of Bernstein on the one hand for its adeptness at learning other men's lessons, and of Barber on the other for the lack of strain it places upon conservative ears, but with an overall sense of purpose and strength, and beyond that a feeling for organization to implement that sense, which makes him twice the artist that either of the Americans is. At his very best, which seems to be rare, the eclectic elements take fire and fuse -- the way any masterwork takes form. This happens in Peter Grimes, but not to Peter Grimes, unfortunately; it also happens in two of the movements of the string quartet.

The opera is a wonderful case in point. I have never before been so thoroughly aware of how much all modern music owes to the insufficiently-honored genius of Gustav Mahler. The Britten orchestration, which certainly reminds one of Shostakovitch, does so not because the one was copied from the other, but because both come from the same Mahlerian source. Unlike Shostakovitch, Britten has also learned some of the things Mahler had to teach about construction; so that in the Storm scene one has the eerie impression that one is really listening to the sturmisch bewegt movement of some symphony Mahler was at that moment dreaming about in the grave. It is all there: the wide-spread, skirling, flamboyant instrumentation, the clarion calls, the two-bar phrases tumbling pell-mell over each other in their haste to leave a mind too fertile to emit them one at a time, and above all, that titanic Rondo-Principle -- no mere classical rondo ever could support such a massive structure of ideas -- which Mahler brought to perfection in his Fifth Symphony.

Of course, the Storm is not simply imitation Mahler. It is, perhaps, the rondo movement he would write with the twenty-five years of experience between Peter Grimes and his death at his fingertips. Elsewhere in the opera his shade is equally evident, but the tendency Britten has to edge toward Populism when stuck for an idea -- and particularly when writing for voices -- reminds one that this is not, after all, some ÜberMahler, but only a composer who might yet become one. The impression here is equally eerie; for the quasi-Populist ideas placed in the Mahlerian structures forcibly clash two completely antithetical schools in the listener's mind: the Expressionists, who were the only moderns until Britten to realize exactly what lay in Mahler's formal innovations; and the Populists themselves, who learned nothing from Mahler but orchestration. If you imagine what would come out if Schoenberg and Kachaturian were somehow

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*You can see why I said "so-called five Sea Pieces" instead of "five so-called Sea Pieces." Count 'em.

#Late; the early works have some vitality and integrity.

jammed into one composer, your inner ear will get some idea of what the poorest pages in Peter Grimes are like.

Not that Mahler is the only ghost who walks through Britten's gloomy sea-side town. Far from it. Much has been made, for instance, of the complete domination which the sea itself has over the people in the story and over the music itself. The domination is there, and to establish it Britten has gone to an unexpected source: Debussy. The surging of the waves, the crying of gulls, and all the rest of the sounds Britten evokes again and again, are all implicit in the cave scene of Pelleas et Melisande.

This sounds like tune-detecting at its worst, I admit; yet I don't mean the comparison to be derogatory. Britten is an eclectic; he takes what he wants. A lesser composer would have wanted something quite different. He would most probably have wanted La Mer, or, worse, Der fliegende Hollaendor. Britten had the perception to see how much was buried in that one short scene in Debussy's only opera. He got it out. I hesitate to say that he got it all out -- I am fresh from the Teyte-Morel Pelleas as I write, and impressed anew with what a one-man revolution in musico-dramatic technique that opera is -- but what he got was good and to the point.

Composers, like other artists, have an opportunity not granted most of us. They can choose their ancestors. Good composers choose well, if sometimes -- or, perhaps, necessarily -- unexpectedly.

II.

As a progressive entity the opera leaves something to be desired. The Prologue is in Britten's quasi-Populist vein, based upon a repeated rhythmic figure which has little to recommend it but its insistence. As the inquest begins, this figure becomes the theme for a short and rather mechanical fugato, against which the villagers question Grimes. An effective moment occurs as Peter is sworn in, with the magistrate picking up each of his hypocritical phrases before Peter has quite finished repeating them after him; and as the inquest closes, leaving Ellen and Peter alone on the stage, the opera finally begins to glow. There is a short recitativ between the two, sung in different keys, which finally reaches tonal unity as the two come into agreement. This section, sung without accompaniment, is fiendishly difficult, and perhaps not worth all the effort it requires of the singers, but it is the first moment of genuine emotion in the score. There follows the first Interlude, which has earned its reputation -- it is here that Britten first begins to apply the techniques which he has borrowed from Debussy, and the whole passage is beautifully brought off. The symbology is simple: a series of appogiaturas suggests gulls wheeling and crying; a rock-solid Ab major chord, the broad uniform eternal body of the sea; harp and woodwind arpeggios, the flying foam. These three elements are combined after being stated seperately to form an accompaniment to a long descending melody suggesting the far reaches of the marine horizon, invoking unobtrusively the Prelude to Act III of Tristan und Isolde.

It is worth examining this passage more closely to see how a gifted composer "does it." First of all, we have the Debussy symbols: the gull-cry being the most important of these. But in Pelleas, where we hear that cry first of all in operatic music, it is voiced hoarsely by the muted horn, then later by a hotter, sharper sound, the muted trumpet. The orchestration of the Debussy scene is throughout intended to convey menace; the leading characters are deep in the complexities of the plot, they are terrified, the cave is a place of mystery where even the cry of a gull is awful.

Nothing has happened yet in Peter Grimes. Peter has been tried and acquitted in the Prologue; the opera is now officially about to begin. We are asked to hear nothing but the sea -- not the sea as seen by two people in a terrifying situation, but simply the sea as it is. The gulls are gulls, not demon's voices; they cry in the sky over the sea, not in a dark cave into which the sea washes. In Britten's orchestra, therefore, they cry at regular intervals, wide-

ly spaced out among the violins and clarinets; their cry is monotonous, but not unexpected -- indeed, it is rhythmic, since they are in flight, not at rest.

Similarly, there is not much dissonance in this Prelude. There are , to be sure, two contrasting keys; the Ab of the bedrock chord, and the Eb of the flying spray; but the two keys are closely related, and the distance of a fifth between their root tones simply adds to the effect of emptiness and distance, while the other chordal elements put a frothy topping of a lyrical key over the base of a solid and serious one. Once more, the reason is the same; dissonance is dramatic, and Debussy has used it as such; but there is no reason for drama yet in Britten's opera. In Pelleas the ground tone comes growling and roaring in over or against the other elements of the music, as the waves boom into the cave; in Peter Grimes, the ground tone is the basis of reality itself, not a nerve-racking intrusion upon it.

Finally, the image of the wide sky: in the Wagnerian context where it originated, this was a series of rising chordal tones, more or less melodic in linear effect, which finally melted into the highest harmonics of the violins. As this phrase is used in the ensuing action, it is intended to convey Kurvenal's scanning of the sea for Isolde's ship; his glance finally goes all the way out to the horizon, but still he sees nothing. "Oed' und leer das Meer." Britton's sea is waste and empty, too, but his villagers have no need to scan the sea itself; it is the sky which interests them; how is the weather today? Britten therefore inverts Wagner's symbol: the strings begin at their highest point and sweep slowly down toward the water. He makes this point doubly clear by placing both his sea symbols -- the water and the froth -- in approximately the same orchestral register, and the gulls and the high melody several octaves above these two; then by combining gulls, waves, and froth, and making of them an accompaniment for the only thing which might some days be different: the sky.

The total effect is one of desolation, but a desolation without the fear which animates the similar music in Pelleas, and without the human suffering which informs the Wagnerian prelude. No one is afraid, no one has suffered, yet; but the sea is always a desert.

Thus given to understand upon what kind of a stage the human characters must move, we are admitted to the drama. Within the first eight or ten pages we hear also some of the very best Britten: after the scorn which is heaped upon Peter by the fishermen, Ellen strikes in with an aria -- there is no other word for it -- to the text, "Who is there among ye that would cast the first stone?" Strikingly, the melodic line here is a variation of the long melody of the Prelude; anyone may make his own guess as to what Britten intended to convey here, but primarily what strikes the listener is the reminder of the emptiness of the fishermen's existence as opposed to the pettiness of their hatred of Peter.

The bridge between the two scenes of the first act is the Storm; I have already said something about this, but it is worth noting that the symbology here is again Debussyesque, despite the otherwise Mahlerian treatment. Here we have the sea personalized and menacing; the harmonic construction is almost exactly Debussy's, and the coloring of the orchestra too. Again we hear the gulls -- screaming and snarling in the muted brasses; the surging water -- slamming dissonantly into the general texture of the other elements; the leaping spray -- leaping blindingly in a rain of piercing, staccato piccolo and clarinet tones; all piled on a furious rondo-theme whose repetitions become more implacably hate-filled with every return.

In the midst of this we are brought back to the tavern, and to the grotesque assault of the village preacher upon the town gossip -- "He's not used to liquor," Grimes' principal enemy says indulgently. Against the storm music, the assembled fishermen intone the town's credo: "We live and let live, and keep our hands to ourselves." The hypocritical hymn, cast in a very strict, academically harmonized form, is forced to contend with the continuing roar of the storm, and the resultant effect upon the listener may well be imagined. I don't remember ever hating anybody in opera more thoroughly than I did those people.

A similar effect is attempted in the Second Act, wherein we are offered a quarrel between Grimes and Ellen against a background of hymns and sermons going on inside the church. For some reason, it does not come off very well. This is one of the points in the opera where it seemed to me that Britten was at a loss for a suitable way of doing what he wanted to do; Ellen's aria on the beauties of the day is a sort of exercise in scale-running, and her questioning of Peter's new assistant is about as effective as one would expect from Gershwin; the choiring of the invisible villagers is just choiring, and fails to produce the intended irony. The succeeding action, as the villagers go off to Peter's cottage to demand an accounting of him with the village drummer at the head of the procession, is effective only in retrospect, in that the sound of the drum in the second scene of the Act builds tension. In the first scene it is only a noise.

The second scene is from end to end a masterpiece. It is the Passacaglia which is presented in concert, over which the action proceeds. This work again is worth thorough examination. Its one and only theme is a seven-bar melody*-- not the usual eight bars -- which is sounded on each repeat by one plucked double-bass. Only in the next-to-last variation do the other double-basses join in, and in the last variation, the first instrument is once more alone.

Over this steadily repeated, slightly lopsided theme, the variations are introduced. The first of them is built around the Storm motive, here transformed into a jerky, fantastic Laendler, Mahlerian in origin, but quite unMahlerian in its erratic transfers across the barlines of the chaconne theme. As Grimes' madness gathers momentum, the piling up of dance-forms over the bass figuration becomes wilder and wilder; at the climax, where Grimes sings his magnificent 5/4 apostrophe to his own future greatness,# the whole structure is systematically destroyed by the 6/8 irruption of the drum heading the procession of the villagers.

There is left behind only the Passacaglia theme, thudding its way downward as the sea-captain looks over the cliff and finds the boy's body. There is no orchestral scream, no Wagnerian outburst; nothing. The last dance whistles away, and the solo instrument plays the theme. The whole sequence has been inevitable from the start; Britten knew that nothing could make this point more dramatic than it was in itself.

III

From here on, the music may best be described as an extended coda. We hear the old sea symbols, this time veiled by fog; then the hunt for Peter, taking place entirely off-stage to echoing choral cries of Peter's name. As Peter goes offstage to his doom, the desolate, emotionless music of the first sea images returns.

It is all over, but the sea has not changed. Nothing, essentially, has happened.

IV

It is, for all its conservative approach, a great opera. This is almost enough to guarantee that the Met will not do it again; but perhaps the bad spots will give it a good enough box-office.

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*By definition, anyhow. It is a descending whole-tone scale, with the final tone repeated.

#Act III of Tristan is again felt here; Tristan's delirious outburst of triumph at Isolde's arrival is in the same time-signature, and exerts other effects on Britten's treatment; but, also again, the later composer has managed to learn without simply imitating.