Composing Narratives: Reimagining Musical Storytelling in New Vocal and Instrumental Works

Written Commentary

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Audio and Video Files

0 Abstract

This submission, comprising a portfolio of four new musical works with commentary, explores musical narrativity, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DMus in Composition. The research was principally conducted through creative practice, as embodied in the scores and recordings, following established models of Practice as Research (PaR) across the creative arts. However, given that entirely self-evident examples of innovative creative practice are considered rare (Nelson 2013, 19), the purpose and aims of the written element are to illuminate the research process and facilitate an interplay (rather than segregation) of theory and practice. The documentation follows a largely "self-narrative" approach (Spry 2001, 710), with the aim of capturing the "ephemeral aspects of the creative process—which are precisely the kinds of knowledge that only creative practitioners can provide" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 4). As such, the submission as a whole is concerned not only with storytelling through composition, but at the same time, the stories that we, as composers, tell about the act of composing itself.

0.1 Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Richard Baker and Prof. Julian Philips: firstly, for encouraging me to undertake this doctorate altogether, and secondly, for demonstrating that my artistic practice can indeed be considered research, how its findings might be shared, and the benefits that doing so might eventually offer those working in the field more widely. Their ongoing support and friendship, as colleagues and mentors, have underpinned this project and its progress at every stage.

My collaborators on *Hansel and Gretel*: Simon Armitage, Clive Hicks-Jenkins, Caroline Clegg, Lizzie Wort, Di Ford, Anna Durance, Lettie Stott, Bridget Carey, Toby Turton, have all played an enormous role in bringing this research to fruition, thanks to their individual and combined expertise, skill, patience, and generosity as fellow artists and friends. Lastly, I would like to pay special tribute to Kate Romano, whose passion and dedication to my music has had and continues to have an immeasurably positive effect on my artistic development.

I would further like to thank the following for their encouragement, guidance and support at various times in this project: Dr Martin Scheuregger, Dr Michael Zev Gordon, Dr Alex Mermikides and Prof. Matthew King. I also wish to express my sincere gratitude to my final examiners, Dr Christopher Wiley and Prof Richard Causton, for their warm, engaged and insightful responses to the project, and close critical scrutiny of this written commentary.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family members, especially my parents, Jake and Sabine, my partner Laura, and our young son Nye, without whose unwavering support, understanding and dedication none of this would have been possible.

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> Narrative need not involve language. It can operate through modes like mime, still pictures, shadow-puppets, or silent movies. It need not be *restricted* to language, and often gains impact throughout enactment or the emotional focusing that music offers. (Boyd 2010, 159)

1 Introduction and Aims

At its core, this doctoral research is fundamentally about storytelling through composition, and at the same time, the stories that we, as composers, tell about the act of composing itself. This is reflected both in the narrative quality of the music that forms the main mode of this research inquiry, but also in the documentation of the creative process, which is presented to a large extent in "self-narrative" form (Spry 2001, 710), according to autoethnographic models.[i]

Central to the research is a portfolio of interconnected professional commissions. The first of these, is a reworking of the Grimm Brothers' tale *Hänsel and Gretel*, created in collaboration with artist Clive Hicks-Jenkins and poet Simon Armitage, out of which the main area of investigation, music as narrative, first emerged. The remainder of creative projects form a cycle of instrumental works written with the intention of conveying narrative through exclusively musical means, developed directly from the artistic discoveries of *Hansel and Gretel*, but also drawing on related analytical scholarship (including Almén 2008; Almén and Hatten 2013) and elements of adaptation theory (principally, Ryan 2004; Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2012; Boyd 2017).[ii]

Following established models of Practice as Research (PaR) across the creative arts, the fulfilment of these commissions forms a key mode of inquiry of the doctorate. However, while the newly composed scores and recordings may offer new knowledge and insights in themselves, "[s]elf-evident instances of wholly innovative practice are rare" (Nelson 2013, 19). Through documentation of process and critical reflection, the purpose and aims of this accompanying written submission are thus to provide "clue[s] to the intended research inquiry" (29) and facilitate an interplay (rather than segregation) of theory and practice.

Because of the split between two interconnected research strands (musical narrative accompanying sung and spoken text, versus solely instrumental narrative compositions), the commentary is divided into **Part One** (chapters 2–6) and **Part Two** (chapters 7-10), which articulate the subtle distinctions between the research aims for each. However, the close relationships between both are also emphasised to demonstrate the unity of the entire research project, and the commentary concludes with wider reflections on the submission as a single entity, from chapter 11 onwards.

The work presented here represents a single, albeit significant, strand of my creative activities during the last six years.[iii] As such, the discussion of my practice and process focuses principally on the narrative aspects of these works and forgoes broader discussion of my compositional style, which lies outside the scope of this (already burgeoning) commentary.

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[i] As such, this commentary as a whole should, nevertheless, not be considered "an" autoethnography. Rather, I have adopted elements of the autoethnographic approach, principally during the compositional commentaries (chapters 5, 8 and 9), to reveal the "messy, complicated, uncertain and soft" (Bochner 2000, 267) features of my creative process. The details of, and rationale for, this are set out in the Methodology (chapter 3).

[ii] The original plan for this research, to include *Hansel and Gretel* and only one other large scale vocal commission, *Pearl*, had to be revised in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Pearl* is now complete in vocal score; see chapter 12 for further details of the project and its links to the research presented here.

[iii] Several other works, without any intentional narrative design, were also composed during this period, such as a portfolio of ten pieces commissioned for BBC Radio 3 during my ten-week long residency with the network (2016), included in the School's submission to the REF in 2021.

2 **Part One**: *Hansel and Gretel*

2.1 Summary of Research Aims

The specific research context of *Hansel and Gretel* will be discussed in far greater detail in the Literature and Practice Review (chapter 4). However as mentioned, the broad area of inquiry for the entire doctoral submission, musical narrative, emerged directly from the artistic aims and planning for the *Hansel and Gretel* commission.

2.1.1 Commission Detail: *Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes*

Format: A contemporary reworking of the traditional Brothers Grimm fairy-tale *Hänsel und Gretel* (see Grimm and Grimm 2016a; 2016b) for the stage, in collaboration with poet Simon Armitage, artist and artistic director Clive Hicks-Jenkins, dramaturge Caroline Clegg, through Goldfield Productions run by Kate Romano.

Instrumental Forces: Small Ensemble (vla. vc. cl(=b.cl=E♭cl). corA(=ob). hn. additional perc.)
Duration: 60 minutes (with music sounding continuously throughout)
Cast: One Narrator-Singer and Live Puppetry
Additional Elements: Live Projections (stop-motion animation and pre-filmed shadow puppetry)

Commission Timeline

- Development week of material in progress, Milton Court Theatre Barbican, 21 May 2018
- World premiere at Cheltenham Festival (Parabola Theatre), 7 July 2018, followed by performances across the UK later in the year
- London premiere (of revised version) in Milton Court Concert Hall, Barbican, 12 October 2018, recorded for broadcast on BBC Radio 3, *Hear and Now*, 22 December 2018

2.1.2 *Hansel and Gretel* Context

Questions around narrative and storytelling through both text and music revealed themselves from the outset of this commission. At the heart of the work, lay the ethos of its production company, run by Kate Romano (also its clarinettist and artistic director of the Goldfield Ensemble), whose work consistently emphasises the importance of "familiar frameworks" (here a well-known fairy story) to bring contemporary music and art to wider audiences (2017). Romano argues that working with a known text allows the project to explore "universal power of [s]torytelling as a way of bridging communities, removing barriers to communication and realise its rich potential for new collaborative art forms" (2017), implying a need to create powerful narratives of broad appeal for important contemporary social purposes.

Moreover, as one of the other key collaborators, Armitage describes himself (particularly as a translator and re-interpreter of several historical epic poems) as a "contemporary poet… interested in narrative and form" (2007, vii). Concerning his celebrated translation of *Sir Gawain* he writes, "not all poems are stories, but *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* most certainly is", going on to assert that "the poem is a ghost story, a thriller, a romance, an adventure story and a morality tale", drawing our attention to its ongoing relevance: "it is also a myth, and like all great myths of the past its meaning seems to have adapted and evolved, proving itself eerily relevant six hundred years later" (2007, vii). Indeed, in our initial correspondence (prior to his commitment to the project), Armitage was drawn to the elements of "beauty, story, moment" in my work, "noises for the heart, not just for the theoretician" (2017). Thus, the centrality of storytelling for those invested in the project was clear early on in the process of collaboration, and to a large extent, our initial artistic sympathy was therefore founded on a shared desire to be able to communicate and tell stories in our work.

With narrative as the broad arena of research inquiry in place, the questions below (i to iii) arose as detailed areas of investigation in the process of preparing for, and ultimately generating, material for the piece.

i. What makes *Hansel and Gretel* a suitable narrative for this type of artistic research?

The decision to select *Hansel and Gretel* in particular, not just a narrative, but a very well-known fairy tale, as the subject matter for the piece initially evolved out of the meeting of the artistic priorities of Goldfield Productions run by Kate Romano and the artistic director of the project, Clive Hicks-Jenkins, who had recently published a new picture book of *Hansel and Gretel* (Hicks-Jenkins 2016). Both enjoyed a long-standing artistic association with each other, and Romano's musical work on a promotional trailer for Hicks-Jenkins' picture book ultimately led to this much larger undertaking for the stage. For Romano as producer, the project was "conceived within deep considerations of how known frameworks (H&G story) are consumed by audience…" with the intention of enabling "artists to express their singularity and individuality whilst appealing to universal predilections" (2017). Additionally, the emphasis on establishing a universal appeal links also to Armitage's other reworkings of historical texts, partly as he put it, because they often contain echoes that are "oddly redolent of a more contemporary predicament"; for him "such is the power and purpose of myth" (2010, vii).

Such notions of universality also link to psychological theory on the function of fairy stories as a key to healthy societies. Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment* claims that "the fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life" (1991, 25). Indeed, in a sense, one can argue that fairy stories demand updating to allow audiences to recognise parallels within their own lives. Philip Pullman, in his recent re-translations/re-imaginings of the Grimm Fairy Tales, asserts, "The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration. To keep to one version or one translation alone is to put a robin redbreast in a cage… [Y]ou have a positive duty to make the story your own. A fairy tale is not a text" (2013, xix).[i]

Thus, much as with his previous translations and reworkings of mythical and/or ancient texts, Armitage's retelling of *Hansel and Gretel* fits into the mould of narrative poetry. (For discussion of the history of this form, and its close links to classical epic poetry see, for example, Knight, Tilg, and Schaffenrath 2015.) Yet, while following the traditional narrative trajectory of *Hansel and Gretel*, maintaining its universal appeal (Bettelheim points out the use of common German names indicates "any boy or girl" (1991, 40)), it was clearly

Armitage's intention to explicitly highlight its resonance with today's larger societal concerns:

> On a wider philosophical and maybe practical level, and just to explain some of my thinking for the outline, I reckon it's not just useful but essential to find a reason or reasons for staging this story here and now, partly as a theatrical responsibility, but partly because I don't think the original demands complete reverence. [...] A question to everybody: if the original H&G has enduring value or wisdom either morally or as a myth – what is it? In the hands of James Hillman or Carl Jung H&G is electrifying, but from a theatrical and writerly point of view I'm worried about simply taking on the role of the scary uncle giving his nieces and nephews nightmares! (Armitage 2017)

In the finished poem, therefore, while rural poverty is still the backdrop of the story, it is simultaneously linked to the contemporary reality of poverty in warzone; the woodcutter and his wife are forced to send their children away from home because of fears over their safety. (In the post-premiere discussion, Armitage simply described the children as "refugees" (2018)). Later, the woman the children believe to be a witch is presented to the audience, equivocally, as a trafficker.

Yet while the universality of the narrative itself, and the potential for this to be expressed in poetic form are relatively clear, the storytelling potential of music is rather more complex. To a large degree, this research project (in Parts One and Two) is predicated on finding a satisfactory answer to the following:

ii. To what extent can instrumental music convey a sense of narrative, or enhance a given narrative?

The complex musicological debate on the validity on and nature of the links between narrative musical structure are discussed in detail in the Literature and Practice Review (chapter 4). However, as I will argue, it is ultimately Lawrence Kramer's view, in which music functions as a "supplement of narrative", that "adds itself to the closed circle — apparently all self-sufficiency and self-evidence — of an acknowledged story" and "becomes the primary term and the story its mere accompaniment" (1991, 155) that informs my own creative and theoretical stance.

This leads to the main artistic and research query that governs this project:

iii. How can I compose music that enhances, supports and articulates the narrative of this piece?

As Kramer continues, in theatre, song, film and so forth, music "connects us to the spectacle on screen by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen" (1991, 112). From such a position, the "affective" and "supplementary" possibilities of music written in conjunction with a narrative poem to contribute dimensions of meaning ("emotional-focusing", semantic etc.) are clear, and this is where I believe my main contribution as composer is located.

As the following chapters will show, my completed score for *Hansel and Gretel*: *A Nightmare in Eight Scenes* was written through a close interrogation of the narrative qualities of the text, and repeated questioning and re-evaluation of how music can achieve this goal, drawing on a varied mix of theoretical sources and practical examples from the musical repertory.

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[i] It is perhaps worth emphasising that the Grimm brothers were collectors, not authors, of these fairy tales (including Hansel and Gretel), which they captured, in their stylised literary versions (1833; 2016a; 2016b), at one moment in a long line of oral storytelling, through which the tales continually gathered all manner of variants as they passed from each narrator to the next. As such, these tales have probably never existed in a single form; to retell and revisit them, especially in relation to ongoing contemporary concerns, could be considered simply to continue the tradition from which they first sprung.

3 Methodology

This doctoral research project began in the wake of a vigorous (and ongoing) academic debate concerning the fundamental validity of composition-as-research within UK Higher Education, but more specifically of how it is undertaken and documented. Leedham and Scheuregger's conference paper (2018) deals with the context and specific arguments of this discourse in detail. As they put it: "The nature of the relationship between composers' written and practical outputs has prompted fulsome discussion in the last few years. Some, such as John Croft (2015) have responded with a slash-and-burn approach, suggesting that it is the very concept of composition as research that is mistaken" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 1; see also 2020).

To summarise very briefly for the purposes of this commentary, previous models of research in composition frequently link back to the modernist legacy of the "composer as theorist", whose function was supposedly to engage in "methodical investigation and the search for a coherent system", the "indispensable basis for all creation" (Boulez 1971, 142). However, the "objective truth" (Lochhead 2016, 81) sought in musical research of this kind has, in recent years, increasingly been understood as symptomatic of a self-perpetuating positivistic approach, in which theory often leads compositional practice (rather than the other way around) in order to demonstrate a perceived rigour.[i]

In response, numerous critics have argued more recently for the need to harmonise research in composition with the broader project of Practice as Research (PaR), which is gradually growing wider prevalence and acceptance across the academic humanities and creative arts. Adopting PaR methodologies has, among other benefits, the potential to address many of the inadequacies of the modernist legacy described above, particularly its failure to recognise the composer as a "human being, someone who thinks and feels and someone who struggles with the materiality of composition" (Dreyfus 2004, 188), and inability to embrace the "experiential truth" needed as a basis for "inquiry appropriate for the twenty first century and its music" (Lochhead 2016, 81).

Advocates of PaR emphasise the importance of telling stories about practice, which "when placed in historical, social and cultural contexts, form a neonarrative, a new story shaped

through autobiography as a portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates their experience" (Nelson 2013, 126). In adopting these methods in this submission, it is my explicit aim to avoid a pseudo-scientific approach to detailing the creative process, which is known to be "often uneasy at best, and completely arbitrary at worst: mere 'academic butt-covering'" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 3).

In particular, Nelson's emphasis on the use of "neo-narrative" has steered me towards the autoethnographic model, which, in contrast to a scientific or overly theoretical approach, will enable me to document the "subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on [my] research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 274). In doing so, I have actively attempted to avoid assumptions that artistic research can be conducted from a "neutral, impersonal, and objective stance" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 274), and allocated space for the examination of the "ephemeral aspects of the creative process—which are precisely the kinds of knowledge that only creative practitioners can provide" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 4).

Central to this approach was note-taking, writing composition diaries, retaining sketches, and recording collaborative discussions in person and via email,[ii] in order to capture these lived creative moments. The importance of regular documentation was key to this process, given the previous tendency for "composers [to] write their commentaries after their musical output has been created […] a sequence that is specifically warned against in other PaR disciplines, where the disconnect between practice and theorising of practice is considered dislocating" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 12; see also 2020, 79–83).

As such, my compositional commentary adopts the following techniques with the intention of providing "a portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates [my] experience" as a "process for theorising practice" (Nelson 2013, 126):[iii]

- Retroactive writing about past experiences, assembled in hindsight
- Consulting texts (journals, photographs, compositional sketches, recorded planning meetings) to help with recall
- Highlighting moments of "epiphany" in the creative process such as:

    - "Remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life", and/or my creative life/journey
    - "Times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience"
    - "Events after which life does not seem quite the same"
- Analysis and framing of these experiences drawing on the following areas of research literature and their methodological tools:
    - Narrative Theory and specifically theories of Musical Narrativity
    - Musical Topic and Semiotic Theory

In this way, a potentially rich parallel occurs between this self-narrative methodology and the topic of my research itself. Indeed, the richness of the narrative modes encountered in recent literature and music (as enumerated by Almén and Hatten (2013), for example) has, I believe, encouraged me to explore a range of narrative strategies in documenting my practice, and in turn driven me to tease out and explore the narrative features of the poetic texts both set (Armitage) and adapted (Stevenson, Elson and Atwood) in my compositions with greater imagination and rigour.

Building on narrative theorist Michael Klein's claim that "life is messy and we expect the stories our music tells to be messy ones too" (2013, 21), we can arguably expect the creative process (as a facet of life) to be similarly messy, and the stories we tell about it to be messy too.

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[i] The underlying motivation for this was arguably to establish music theory and composition as a serious academic discipline on a par with the sciences. Discussion of this issue has been extensive over the years, but the negative critical standpoint is perhaps best summarised by George Perle's review of well-known instances of set-theory as "musical analyses which are so irrelevant to our common musical experience as to suggest the possibility that they are the work of extraterrestrial musicologists" (1996, 40). For a recent critical appraisal of this modernist approach and its legacy in music theory see also Lochhead (2016), especially chapters 1-3.

[ii] For which ethical approval was granted by the School's Research Ethics Committee, as shown in the appendix (section 14.1).

[iii] This list draws heavily on definitions offered in Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, 275–76), adding a few specificities relevant to the practice-based research at hand. Quotations are taken from that source.

4 Literature and Practice Review

The application of theories of narrative to musical contexts has a significant history going back to the 1980s, during the rise of the so-called "new musicology" where an emphasis on hermeneutic, as opposed to purely analytical, activity came to the fore in the academy, as part of a wider backlash against positivism and formalism, and a desire to locate music more within its social and cultural contexts. The shift in emphasis occurred for various reasons, a significant factor amongst which was Joseph Kerman's famously provocative article, "How We Got into Analysis and How to Get out" (1980), followed by his influential book *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (1985). In the wake of these publications, musicologists reassessed the value of simply verifying the inner workings of the repertory with well-worn analytical techniques, and attempted to engage in what Kerman termed "criticism" by combining it with "analysis to provide a less one-dimensional account of the artistic matters at hand" (1980, 331).

Riding this wave of novel approaches to musical criticism, many writers sought to interpret works of instrumental music as "cultural texts", and began to focus, with varying degrees of conviction, on "examining the kinds of stories told through music at particular moments in history" (McClary 1997, 21–22). At one end of the spectrum, Susan McClary claimed that the European canon of tonal music is reliant on "a teleological model of time organised in terms of beginning, middle, and end", such that "even the most austere, apparently self-contained of the pieces" in the repertory achieve "coherence and effectiveness as cultural artifacts through processes aligned with narrative" (22).

Perhaps inevitably, other academics felt the approach of ascribing narrative structures to purely instrumental works gave rise to questions of validity. Responding to the provocative title of his seminal article "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?", Jean Jacques Nattiez (1990) concluded that the broad answer had to be "no". Even so, he was willing to concede that music and written text "share the linearity of discourse and the use of sound objects", concluding that music is, at least, capable of "*imitating* the intonation contour of a narrative" (251).

Nattiez's article was, in part, prompted by the influential work during this period of Carolyn Abbate, who though renowned for her work on musical narrativity, permitted only a narrow

understanding and application of it. For Abbate, the broader project of reading instrumental music for its narrative suggested that "the composer invents a musical work that acts out or expresses psychological or physical events in a noisy and yet incorporeal sonic *miming*", and that this implied "it is only the composer's silhouetting of a phenomenal object" (1991, 27). This prompted her to consider whether the narrative quality of instrumental music might in fact "reside in what is adjunct or outside the music, the thing that the music traces?" (1991, 27). Abbate thus argued that a broad-ranging narrative interpretation of music is ultimately questionable, and that its principal benefit was as a very specific and narrow hermeneutic metaphor:

> In my own interpretations (and my own narrative behaviour) I will interpret music as *narrating* only rarely. It [music] is not narrative, but it possesses moments of narration, moments that can be identified by their bizarre and disruptive effect. Such moments seem like voices from elsewhere, speaking (singing) in a fashion we recognise precisely because it is idiosyncratic. (29)

The problem was perhaps best summed up by Lawrence Kramer, who stated that "the very premise of musical narratology is the recognition that music cannot tell stories." (1991, 154). For him the issue lay in the fact that musicologists seeking to renovate discourse around tonal music merely drew "prevailingly from literary structuralism, the models of choice have understood narrative preeminently as a source of structure" (142).

Yet for Kramer, music "adds itself to the closed circle—apparently all self-sufficiency and self-evidence of—an acknowledged story," acting, therefore, as a "supplement of narrative" (155). Here, Kramer evokes Derrida's (1976) definition of supplement as an ambiguous item apparently inessential, yet paradoxically, also to be understood as a remedy that implicitly "makes good a fault or lack" (Kramer 1991, 155). Through this process, music "becomes the primary term and the story its mere accompaniment" (Kramer 1991, 112). Thus, in theatre, song, film and so forth, music "connects us to the spectacle on screen by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colors, and changes in dynamics" (112).

At the time of composing *Hansel and Gretel*, my own position was perhaps closest to that expressed by Kramer above; my intention being to provide music to set and accompany Simon Armitage's narrative poetry, and connect audiences with the stories told by adding dimensions of depth, effectively enhancing (rather than supplanting) the textual narrative.

However, as described later in this commentary (from **Part Two**: Instrumental Works with Narrative Design onwards) my views subsequently evolved, partly as prompted by Armitage's own assertion that, in the completed work, it is the music that "holds the piece together" (Armitage et al. 2018). My further research on the narrative analytical techniques developed by Almén (2008) and Tarasti (1992) was another important factor in this shift. Both authors argue compellingly for a redefinition of specifically musical narrative that recognises both its "commonalities (temporality, directedness, psychological and cultural significance, hierarchical organization, conflict, an emphasis on action) and its potential differences with respect to literature and drama" (Almén 2008, 37), which is examined summarily below, but applied more extensively from chapter 7 onwards.

4.1 Narrativity and Post-tonal Music

Regardless of the specific views of different musicologists on its relative usefulness as a means to interpret music and its forms, the prevailing consensus was that narrative readings were best suited to tonal repertory, until a new wave of scholarship began to emerge from the mid-2000s (e.g. Reyland 2005; Almén 2008). Even its staunchest advocate McClary argued that recent music "does not usually resemble narrative" and "assiduously resists narrative structuring, even when its lyrics tell stories" (1997, 21–22). As Nicholas Reyland puts it, "music lost the plot after modernism – or so the story goes" (2013, 30).

However, since the 2010s, a range of publications specifically focusing on narrativity in post-tonal music have claimed that narrative analysis provides a powerful means of unpacking and discussing the forms and trajectories of recent music. Of particular value and insight to my practice here were studies engaging with recent literary scholarship on narrativity in twentieth-century and contemporary literature, connecting these with the novel formal designs and trajectories of later music. As Lawrence Kramer, in a later chapter contributed to *Music and Narrative Since 1900* (Klein (Ed.) and Reyland (Ed.) 2013) argues, "narrative, instead of disappearing, reappears: appears differently" (Kramer 2013, 166), suggesting that, despite the more complex range of formal strategies employed by composers since 1900, narrative still offers a valuable lens through which to view and understand their work, if understood in an updated guise, as it pertains to more recent literary models.

For instance, in the same volume, Nicholas Reyland enumerates strategies such as "disnarration", "bifurcated narrative", and "subjunctive narrative", in which narrative is problematised and/or developed by modernist and postmodern authors along a continuum or "spectrum of negations". He thereby highlights their concern with "consciousness and thus with showing how the mind is less stable and unified than was once thought" (2013, 37).

Such scholarship reveals the broadness and complexity of strategies available to contemporary writers for generating multi-layered narratives, and potentially, undermining the reliability of the events they describe and how they might be interpreted by readers, beyond earlier conventions of plot archetypes. Moreover, the musical works cited in Klein and Reyland's edited volume (2013) offer valuable insights on how such strategies may find musical equivalents in recent repertory. For example, Reyland offers a "disnarrative" reading of Lutosławski's Third Symphony, in which a glimpsed utopian sense of solidarity is repeatedly undercut by the imposition martial law in a way that mirrors contemporary Polish experience at the time of its composition (Reyland 2013, 38).

In the context of my creative work on *Hansel and Gretel*, these sources suggested tools and models to respond to, support, and articulate, in musical form, the richly multi-faceted narrative of Armitage's poem, which often deliberately destabilises readers' and listeners' understanding of the nature of the setting, location, timeframe and characters in this retold fairy-tale, in response to a host of artistic and contemporary concerns. (Several of these are considered in detail in chapter 5.)

With respect to chronology in musical storytelling (Armitage's poem frequently seems to flicker between a legendary fairy-tale setting and a contemporary one), my approach draws extensively on the work of Almén. Almén's ground-breaking analytical publication *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (2008) deals largely, and perhaps most persuasively, with tonal music, with an emphasis on *transvaluation* as the defining feature of all narrative (literary or musical), denoting a perceived change in the hierarchies established at the opening of a work, across a span of time. Yet in their more comprehensive survey of narrative strategies *after* 1900, Almén and Hatten (2013), together, enumerate the multifarious techniques and aesthetic positions with which modernist and contemporary writers subvert, enrich and

recast narrative. They subsequently link these strategies with the forms, materials, and language of the contemporary and modernist musical repertory.

Amongst these, montage effects such as disruption, stratification, and psychological montage are explored, together with strategies for the deliberate dissolution of temporality including “suspended time” and “slow-motion time”. These are presented alongside techniques for disrupting agency such as “ambiguous subject” and “displaced subject”, with tactics for undermining or negating narrativity itself, including “anti-narrative” and “zero-degree narrative” (Almén and Hatten 2013, 64). Other, non-narrative modes of writing are also examined in terms of how they might accompany and enhance, or conversely, disrupt narrativity.

> [T]he narrative mode is often juxtaposed with the *lyrical* (the primary mode of representation for songs and character pieces), which tends toward a spatial rather than a temporal signification: what is aimed at is a mood, reflection, or state of being rather than a significant temporal change. Narrative can also be juxtaposed with a *ritual* mode, in which the performative enactment of an established is foregrounded, or with *trance*, which attempts the transformation of ordinary consciousness onto another level, as if to convert the temporal into the eternal. (Almén and Hatten 2013, 61)
>
> These other modes of representation signify in their own right, yet they are not in themselves essentially narrative. They can become so, as when a lyric song ends with a surprising plot development or features the progressive evolution of a character. (63)

Such techniques of “suspending” time, and parallel continuities, to add dimensions and depth to the story’s main characters, or alternatively, undermine and distance us from the Grimms’ fairy-story, are fundamental to Armitage’s poem. The original tale, as he saw it, did not demand “complete reverence” (2017; see also section 5.1). To cite two examples not covered elsewhere in this commentary, readers might consider firstly, the episode in which Hansel and Gretel fight over who has the top bunkbed in Scene 2 (bb. 17-41), playfully drawn out in the poetry and music to illustrate their relationship (“they loved each / like sister and brother”); or secondly, in a more overt moment of temporal suspension, when the children find themselves inexplicably drawn to return to, and explore, the witch’s house, in which the narrator enters into a quasi-ritualistic chant (Scene 6: “House where the dark broods / House where the dark blooms” etc.).

The analytical and critical musicology listed above thus demonstrates the power of an enriched, more nuanced, understanding of narrativity as metaphor to discuss musical form, continuity (and/or discontinuity) and hierarchy in post-tonal contexts. With regard to Hansel and Gretel, this literature was of obvious benefit when setting and accompanying Armitage's contemporary narrative poem, which deftly undermines and enriches its original source with a range of complex and sophisticated narrative techniques. Moreover, as detailed in **Part Two**, these insights later afforded me a much wider range of strategies for generating purely musical narratives in an instrumental setting than might otherwise have been the case.

4.2 Topic Theory and Semiotics

One prominent (and from my artistic viewpoint, highly valuable) approach in identifying musical character(s) within a musical narrative involves topic theory. "Character(s)" is intended here in the broadest sense, and need not necessarily denote what Almén describes as "agents" (2008, 41), but rather a broadly defined set of musical traits that evoke other music with certain cultural connotations, and may or may not be used to define narrative agents, environments, moods and so forth.

Put simply by Michael Klein, "topics can get us into the musical story" (2013, 24), or with more specificity by Almén and Hatten:

> This phenomenon can be found in Schoenberg's op. 19, no. 4, a short piano piece featuring an atonal pitch language [...] in combination with a clear progression of traditional topics. These topics (dance, recitative) are effective in part because they can be articulated through non-pitch parameters: meter rhythmic motives, the contrast between metric clarity and instability, allusions to orchestral punctuations and the like. [...] Schoenberg can be argued to have employed these musical features in the service of an *ironic narrative*. (Almén and Hatten 2013, 62-63; my emphasis)

Re-introduced to the theoretical armoury of English-language musicology in the twentieth century by Leonard Ratner in his seminal text *Classic Music* (1980), topic theory was used to examine the "thesaurus of *characteristic figures*" (9, italics *sic*) first encountered in the Baroque era. However, Ratner subsequently explores the more rhetorical (or even narrative) role of topics, when combined within a single movement, in the music of the late eighteenth century. Topics encompassed both dance types (Sarabande, Gigue) and styles

(hunting music, the learned style), each with a rich array of associations. As such they included subjects for fully worked out pieces: *types* or styles (which is often the case in Baroque works exhibiting an overall *unity of affect*), but could also denote figures and progressions, to be combined in dramatic fashion (from J.C. Bach onwards; see Ratner 1980, 26–27).

Their narrative potential seems to have been implicit from the beginning; Ratner even extended their use to pictorialism and word-painting that "conveys some idea of an action or scene", citing examples from Haydn's *The Creation* (1980, 25). Indeed, parallels with "the language arts – poetry, drama and oratory" (31) were very much foregrounded by Ratner, who believed "both language and music had their vocabulary, syntax, and arrangement of formal structures, subsumed under the title *Rhetoric*" (xiv).

In response to Ratner, Kofi Agawu's later volume *Playing with Signs* extended this metaphor of communication in connection with topics, offering topical analysis as a means to ask "how does this piece mean?" (1991, 5) proceeding to explain that "for language to provide a useful model for musical analysis[…] it must demonstrate, rather than merely assume that music represents a *bona fide* system of communication, and must then go on to show what is being communicated and how" (9). As such, Agawu defined topics as "musical signs", qualifying that:

> The identity of a topic is least dependent on the name of the topic. What matters, following the structuralist idea of relationality, is the difference between various topics. It is possible to work from the pure acoustical phenomenon, through its representation in notation, to its disposition as sound in motion, and finally, to the meaning that it assumes for the listener. (49)

Thus "as semiotic objects, then, topics provide important clues to the meaning of a Classical work, whether this meaning be structural-syntactical or broadly, expressive." While he did not assign them "fixed significations", he highlighted their connection with the "sociocultural norms" (50) of eighteenth-century audiences. Robert Gjerdingen's later work (2007), similarly offers the view that topics (or in his lexicon, "schemata") can be seen to form an extensive network of musical gestures associated with eighteenth-century gallantry: "tasteful passages of music[…] for courtly chambers, chapels and theaters" (2007, incipit).

Returning to the last hundred years, it has also been argued that the use of topics can be employed to furnish and support a sense of musical narrativity in modern and contemporary instrumental works. For example, Márta Grabócz identifies, in various analytical articles (2002; 2005; 2012), several "characteristic topics" (2012, 120) in her narrative interpretation of the works of Bartók, encompassing both broader and more specific *types* ranging from "the ideal" and "menace" to "the gesticulating despairing hero" and "Nature's Night Music" (2012, 120–21). Such topics are enumerated with the aim of unveiling the underlying "narrative programme" of events in works such as the Four Orchestral Pieces op. 12 (Grabócz 2012, 123); implying that even the mere succession of identifiable topics can, in and of itself, convey changes to settings and characters that occur within a dramatic musical plot.

Similarly, Yayoi Uno Everett argues that in *Doctor Atomic*, John Adams employs musical "motifs [to] constitute topics that represent the ontological 'passing' of time, while other topics and style quotation (referencing music by Stravinsky, Wagner, Orff and Debussy) represent the psychological realm of the subjects who await the countdown" (2012, 264). Eventually this leads her to the generalised claim that "the musical narrative unfolds through the oscillation between the two topical representations of time" (2012, 264), again with rich implications for conveying and manipulating temporality through topics in the service of an unfolding narrative. In *Hansel and Gretel*, this device might be compared to the transforming repetition of the walking (or "marching") topic, as it recurs in both Armitage's poetry and my musical setting, to suggest the children's evolving emotional state, with respect to the passing of time and memory, across the duration of the story. (See and compare Scene 3: bb. 1-10, 55-62; Scene 7: 1-7; Scene 8 bb. 43-47.)

In my submission, therefore, the large body of literature on the issue of topic and its network of significations is also drawn from to support and elucidate my narrative compositional approach. My employment of *musical topics* serves a range of functions, at times offering listeners a sense of the characters, environment, timescale of a plot, and at others simply to generate the overall backdrop and mood to the dramatic action. Building on the theories of Ratner and Agawu, I argue that these musical types intentionally evoke other musical works (or genres) along with their associated "sociocultural norms" (Agawu 1991, 50). At other times, they serve more literal word-painting and onomatopoeic effects,

again in order to support and enhance the narratives of Armitage's poetry in a more concrete way.

4.2.1 Topics in Contemporary Practice

In addition to those discussed in musicology, my own subjective interpretation of George Benjamin's compositional approach in his opera *Written on Skin* (2013) bears some relevance to my practice. The composer recently discussed the broader importance of narrative for him in his three operas written in collaboration with playwright Martin Crimp to date:

> He [Benjamin] felt that narrative was essential to the art, but he couldn't figure out how to tell a seductive story onstage in the postmodern era. […] Living composers had either avoided opera altogether or created work that abandoned traditional storytelling, like Philip Glass's ritualistic, hypnotically churning "Satyagraha." Benjamin was desperate to "find a new angle on narrative, so that it could seem authentic—so that one could be confident, without any irony, or embarrassment, about working within an opera house, telling a story," he explained. "An opera without a story can't move me deeply. That was the problem." (Mead 2018)

In relation to topic theory, Benjamin was in fact criticised by one reviewer for his use of, what could be termed, *types* in *Written on Skin*: "we got a clever score, one that attended to all the superficial needs of the libretto – sultry music here, loud and dramatic music there, pseudo-medieval touches there" (Toronyi-Lalic 2013). Yet, as I see it, Benjamin's use of this device lies at the core of his response to the difficulties of operatic storytelling today. I consider the subtle and refined use of musical topics for carefully chosen dramatic purposes central to his rehabilitation of narrativity within the medium.

The following examples represent key moments from *Written on Skin* when characters are musically finally aware of one another and thus sing the same material together (or nearly, in close canon or heterophony), in the same meter. (In a lecture I attended at Tanglewood in 2012, Benjamin emphasised the exceptionality of this effect within the work as a whole; his interpretation of Crimp's libretto was that elsewhere, the characters were seldom, if at all, really listening to one another.)

My view is that such moments deliberately evoke well established operatic tropes (here the suggestion of the traditional love duet: in this case in the subversive form of an

inappropriate and clandestine affair), and to an extent, certain attendant sociocultural norms (perceptible here, perhaps, as a metaphorical increase in proximity and/or togetherness between two previously distant, even hostilely antagonistic, characters). As a result, they operate in a topical manner entirely in the service of conveying the narrative.

Figure 4.1 Excerpt from Benjamin (2013), *Written on Skin*, *S*cene IV: "Agnès and the Boy". Note the rhythmic alignment and use of conventional consonances (major thirds and perfect fifths, vertically and horizontally) setting the words "too close" at the points highlighted in grey.

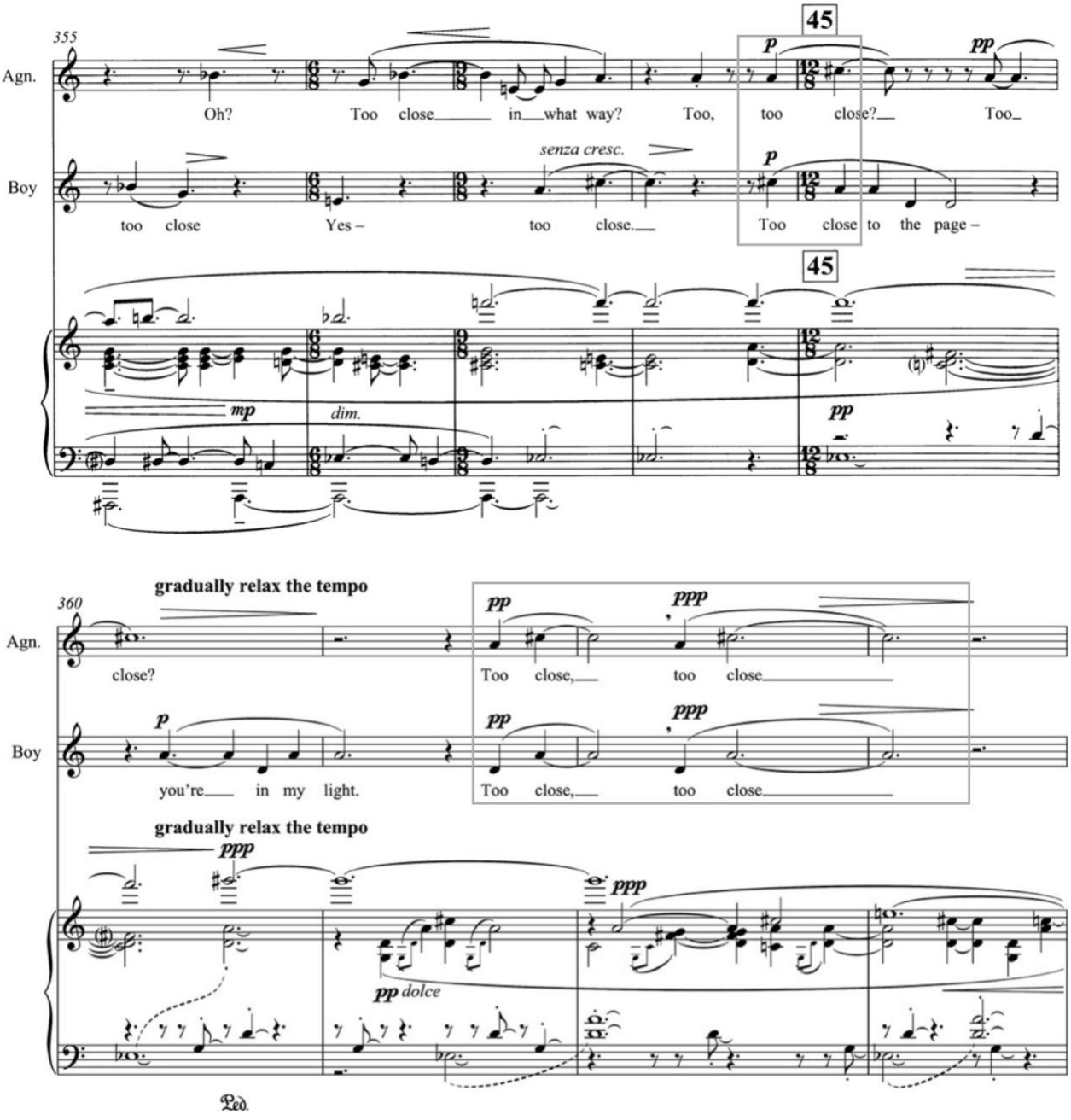
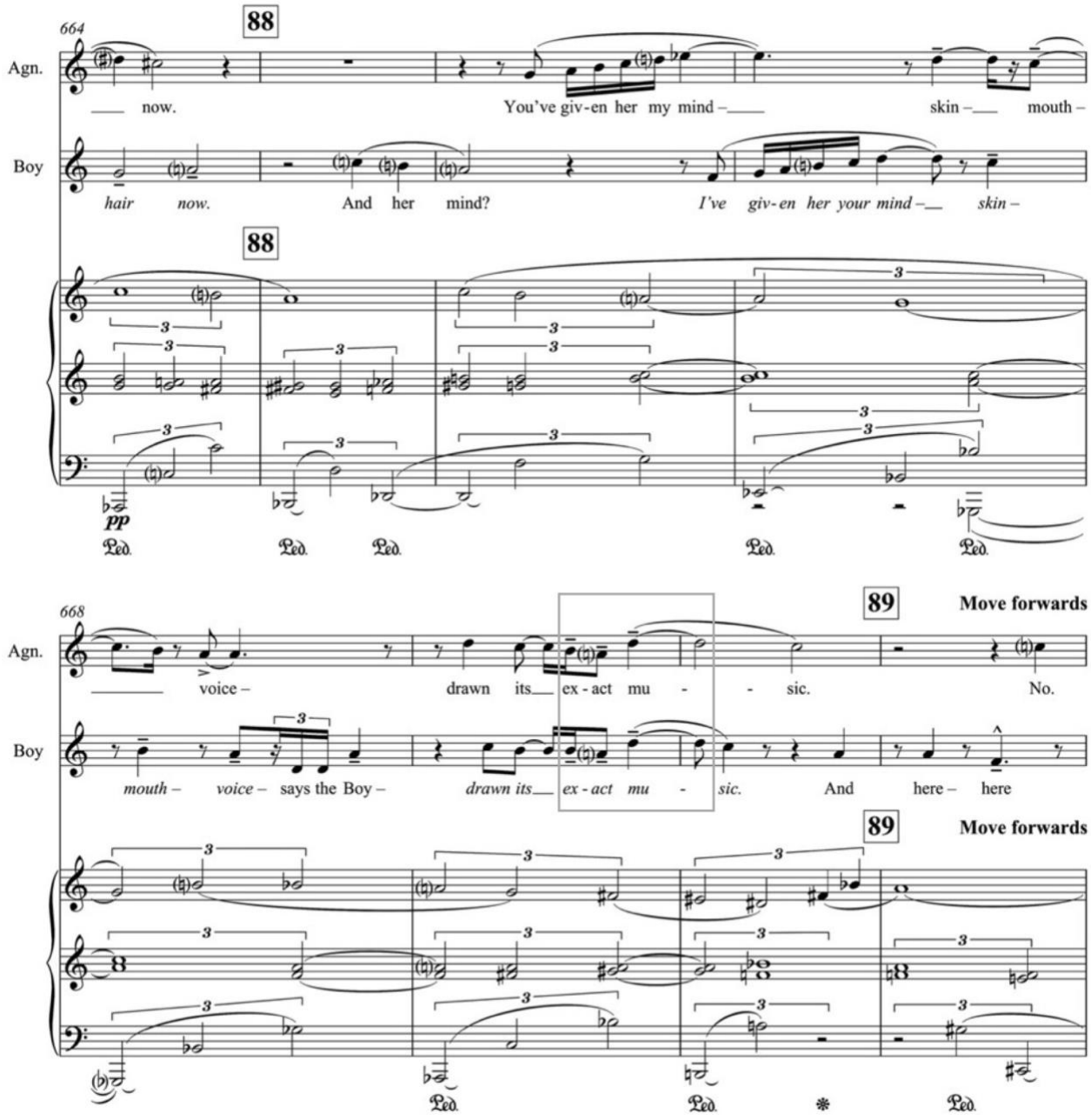


Figure 4.2 Later excerpt from Benjamin (2013), *Written on Skin*, Scene VI: "Agnès and the Boy". Again, note the increasing proximity of the vocal lines (rhythmically and melodically) leading to the unison setting of "exact mu[sic]" (highlighted in grey).



4.3 Interval and Musical Character

From a technical perspective, one core assumption underlies my compositional thinking, grounded, to a large extent in the approaches of Witold Lutosławski and Elliott Carter. In the works of both composers, intervallicism (the selective use of one or a small set of intervals when generating harmonic and melodic materials) is intrinsic to the establishment of distinctively characterised musical material and "defined harmonic strands" (Bodman Rae 1994, 52), according to their specific aural properties. David Schiff states that for Carter, "the eleven intervals of the chromatic scale serve as primary colours. Each one has unique acoustic qualities and expressive characteristics" (1983, 61). To ignore these properties makes it much harder to define musical character. As Lutosławski stated "if, for instance, you use all possible intervals in one chord, the final result is, in a way, faceless, something which has no character, which in colour is grey…" (quoted in Bodman Rae 1994, 50), or according to David Schiff, "unfocused and obscure" (1983, 63).

Moreover, in these composers' works, the handing of "changing interval pairings, whether gradually or by strong contrast provides him [Lutoslawski] with a means of building sections of the form in a way analogous to the structural properties of key change in tonal language" (Bodman Rae 1994, 64), or in other words, permits the distinct characterisation of materials as a means to generate structural contrasts. From a compositional perspective, this technique is similarly fundamental to me in generating the differences of affective character that define and distinguish my musical topics, just as the use of key and long-range dissonance can support this function in tonal works.

Schiff goes on to list some of the expressive associations of certain intervals in Carter's works. (See Figure 4.3 below.) Thus, when combined with other musical parameters (timbre, texture, rhythm) to support this expressive function, intervallicism can be used as a technique to help enforce differences between musical objects, sections and character(s), and thereby help to generate and define a network of topics within my music. In turn, the device may be used to support the narrative qualities of the music and act as a means to generate form, by articulating a sequence of events over time (which, as even Nattiez conceded (1990), is the principal point in common between music and narrative).

Figure 4.3 Interval-character chart in Schiff (1983, 62)

Interval	*Third Quartet*	*Brass Quintet*	*Symphony of 3*
m2	scorrevole	angry	angry
M2		flowing	flowing
m3	giocoso	humorous	accelerando*
M3	tranquillo	extravagant	floating*
P4	leggerissimo	vigorous	leggero
A4, D5	meccanico	menacing	espressivo, cantabile
P5	maestoso	majestic	bell-like
m6	espressivo	lightly	sostenuto*
M6	appassionato	lyric	espressivo
m7	grazioso	dramatic	grazioso
M7	furioso	furious	giocoso

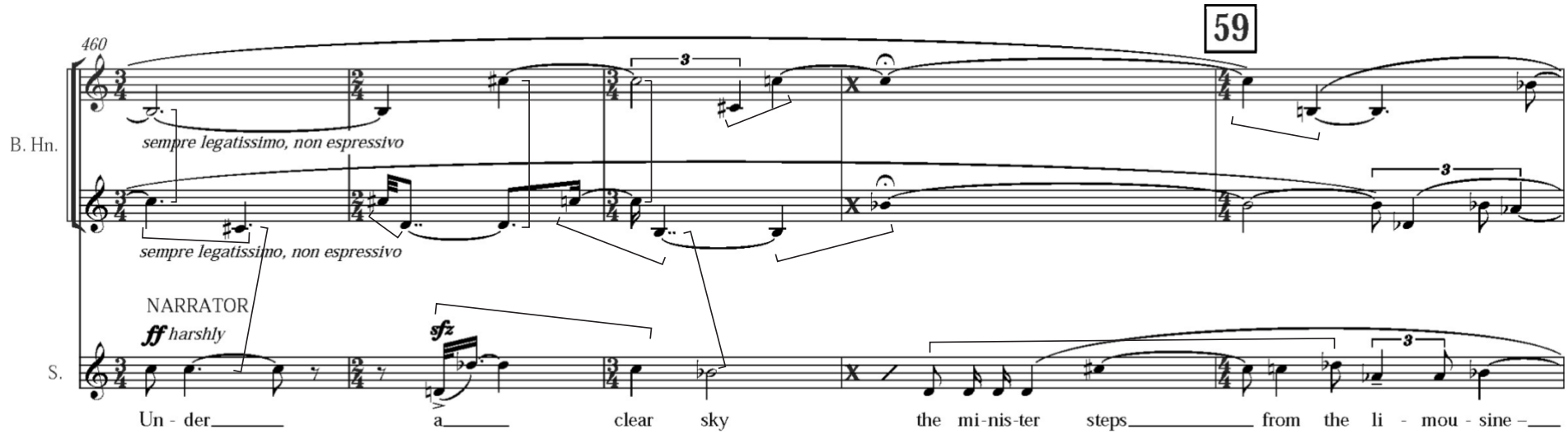
* Descriptive words are Schiff's

Beyond the examples discussed in analytical musicology, George Benjamin's operatic writing served as an important model, as demonstrated, for example, in the dramatico-musical tension generated by the severely restricted interval palette of the music at the opening of Scene 6 of *Into the Little Hill* (2009) shown in Figure 4.4.

Interpreting the concerted use of interval class 1 as emotionally tense is contingent, of course, on a complex network of intersubjective assumptions to do with the broad perception of consonance and dissonance, and its affective connotations in a post-tonal context. However, it is worth noting that Schiff's labels for the intervals m2 and M7 do include "furious" and "angry". Aside from A4/D5 ("menacing") these are the only interval labels suggesting any kind of negative *Affekt*.

In Figure 4.4 below, the articulation and dynamics of the vocal line arguably support such affective connotations. In this case, the vertical and horizontal content of the music is principally restricted to interval class 1, which depicts the extreme internal conflict of the Minister, who has just been re-elected, at the cost of the lives of all the rats in his constituency, and later those of all his constituents' children. (This passage was of specific import to my own writing near the end of Scene 7 in *Hansel and Gretel* (bb. 59-69; see chapter 5).)

Figure 4.4 Annotated extract from opening of Benjamin (2009), *Into the Little Hill*, Scene VI: "Inside the Minister's Head" (four bars after the scene opens at b. 456). Square brackets show instances of interval class 1 in both vertical and horizontal directions.



4.4 Speech and Narration in Musical Repertory

Given the rather unusual nature of Armitage's poem,[i] in which the narrator fluidly assumes different roles throughout, the character speaking at any moment is either implicit or explicit.

At points the speaker is simply identified within the poetry:

> [Scene 2:]
> This from the father:
> My heart bleeds for those kids.
> We can't feed or clothe them,
> can't treat or school them,
> can't give them a future.
>
> [Scene 3:]
> So it's true,
> says Hansel, looking around.
> Lost.
> Rejected.
> Deserted.

Yet elsewhere it is simply implied by the context, and left up to the narrator in performance to enact according to her discretion:

> [Scene 3:]
> I sleep on top.
> No you don't.
> Yes I do.
> No you don't.
> Yes I do.
> No you don't.
>
> [Scene 4:]
> Children, this is your lucky day.
> Children, children, tell me your names.

> I'm Hansel.
> You're most helpful. [The ambiguity of who speaks this final sentence was later clarified by Armitage; it is the witch.]

Armitage was open-minded from the start about who would speak before completing the poem. For him the priority seems to have been to be able to play with and manipulate this poetically:

> I think in relation to voices etc, the thing to do (or the way I think i will approach it) is to write the script, see what it looks like, and then decide who does what (i.e. which lines will be allocated to a narrator and which to the characters, and which lines are sung etc). That might sound odd but because I want to deliverer [sic] something more poetic and less traditional I think it's more likely to look like a long poem than a conventional script or libretto. (Armitage 2017)

Thus in preparation for the project, I also sought out narrator roles in operatic repertory and even operatic characters who "self-narrate". Both are features of the libretti for certain recent operas. These include George Benjamin's collaborations with Martin Crimp *Into The Little Hill* (where two singers play all characters), and to an extent their next opera *Written on Skin*, Roland Schimmelpfennig's libretto (Schimmelpfennig and Tushingham (translator) 2011) for Peter Eötvös's *The Golden Dragon*, and H.K. Grüber's *Gloria – a pigtale*.

Historically, the device is arguably rooted in Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (or Alienation/Distancing Effect), derived in turn from his interpretation of Traditional Chinese Theatre, where the switching of roles, genders and ages in a drama intentionally detaches the audience from the immediacy of its narrative so that it "can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event" (Brecht 2018, 151). Central to this is Brecht's well-documented method of "quotation", whereby an actor "quote[s] the character played, like a traditional Chinese story-teller [sic] who steps in and out of the role at will, sometimes into the part, sometimes making comments in the first person" (Zuolin 2010, 16). The resultant undermining of the "fourth wall", thereby forces the audience to become a conscious and critical observer (Brecht 2018, 151). (See, for example, Schulzová (2012) for a more detailed discussion of this specific Brechtian legacy in Schimmelpfennig's work, and in particular his operatic collaboration with Eötvös.)

Furthermore, George Benjamin's thoughts on the importance of narrative and narration in opera was of particular interest to me artistically, given the relatively small number of works in the operatic repertory (and amongst those above for speech and music) that feature a prominent narrator:

> In this début collaboration, called "Into the Little Hill," Crimp and Benjamin followed Emily Dickinson's dictum to "tell all the truth but tell it slant." The singers didn't enact the drama; they narrated it. "It was that aspect that got me through the side door of the stage," Benjamin said. The work felt unshackled from the conventions of operatic storytelling, but nonetheless built to a powerful dénouement. "The narrator's attitude to the text changes from being completely objective, and cold, and matter of fact, to breaking down with emotion near the end, because the story is so painful." (Mead 2018)

Benjamin's reading of the narrator's changing attitude towards the text was of particular interest and significance to me artistically, and to an extent, informed my own handling of Armitage's poem (and even occasional use of song).

4.5 Lineage of Works for Narrator (Reciter) and Ensemble

My research investigation revealed few models that use *speech* as their main mode of delivery with musical accompaniment. However, a few works (listed below) did stand out as significant examples and informed my approach in *Hansel and Gretel* to varying extents. Some of the examples are described principally in terms of what they *fail* to achieve; that is to say, their examples were essentially ones I actively sought to avoid. (This is no reflection on their success as autonomous works of art, and simply reflects my own creative priorities.) All the examples listed were therefore of importance to me; they helped define and refine my approach both in terms of my aims and what I wished to eschew musically.

In examining these sources, I was principally concerned with the following in terms of speech and music:

- The acoustic balance and intelligibility of the spoken words against the instruments (including whether or not amplification was used)
- The role of silence in the ensemble against spoken word
- The notation of speech (rhythmic, free, or somewhere between the two)

- The degree of word-painting and degree of alignment of onomatopoeic effects with specific words or phrases

4.5.1 List of and Commentary on Works for Narrator and Ensemble

Louis Andriessen, *Anaïs Nin* (2010)

Classed as monodrama for singer/actress, film and ensemble by the publisher Boosey & Hawkes, the format of this work is superficially quite close to *Hansel and Gretel*. Yet the piece does not have a purpose-written text, nor is it structured as a dramatic narrative to any comparable extent. Singing is the norm throughout the work; spoken text is used as special effect, as elsewhere in much of Andriessen's output.

Harrison Birtwistle, *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus* (1970)

While Birtwistle's interest in "operatic storytelling" is well documented (see Adlington 2000, 69), only a few of his works engage with the possibilities of spoken narration and music. *Nenia* combines a speaking narrator doubling as soprano with a small ensemble, in a manner that, at face value might compare with my treatment of Armitage's *Hansel and Gretel*. However, as Adlington notes "[i]n various ways, the Narrator's speech is contaminated with music", given that through the work, "the spoken part finds itself engaged in a complex negotiation with the *musical* context in which it is situated" (2000, 70). At several notable points "sung notes sometimes occur in the middle of words, so endangering the cogency of the Narrator's text" (70), and as such the work served largely as a negative model for me (without any intended comment on its broader artistic merits), making me aware of the dangers to textual perceptibility of certain kinds of setting, and in particular, the need to avoid too much notation of speech rhythms (as is also the case with William Walton's *Façade*).

Mark Bowden, *The Mare's Tale* (2013)

This work was also a collaboration with artist Clive Hicks-Jenkins and as such was discussed quite frequently, particularly in terms of the use of animations against the music, yet no recording of this work existed at the time. However, the notation and integration of speech within the ensemble in the score was something I referred to at several points.

Martin Butler, *Dirty Beasts* (1990)

An important model in various respects, Butler's musical retelling of these verse stories for reciter and ensemble is, noted for "its avoidance of songlike utterance in favour of lightly rhythmicised narration" (Fallas 2016, 4), conjuring moods and dramatic events through word painting. As a relatively brief set of poetic tales, it was however, not really equivalent in scope. Nevertheless, it provided a helpful model in terms of notation and the use of witty word-painting effects (such as when Roy's mother faints in the Tummy Beast.)

Sergei Prokofiev, *Peter and the Wolf* (1940)

Perhaps the best-known canonical work to incorporate speech, Prokofiev's score in many ways provided a valuable model for me. The work has a clear and dramatic narrative, includes specific word painting effects (or perhaps even *topics*). Nevertheless, the text itself is somewhat spartan when compared to the quantity of music, and much of it is spoken during silent pauses. The latter was a device I did not want to become reliant upon over the 60 minutes of the piece, but did use where I felt the meaning of the poetry needed its own space.

Igor Stravinsky, *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1924)

This seminal work served as one of the primary models for me and the creative team during artistic planning meetings, even before the project was confirmed. Hicks-Jenkins' own recent experience (2013) creating visuals and animations to accompany the narrative of the work was frequently discussed as a point of reference. From a musical perspective, the use of discrete dance movements however, struck me as somewhat inappropriate for Hansel & Gretel (particularly in Armitage's retelling of it), which we had agreed would be through-composed to a large degree. The extensive use of silence behind much of the narrated story also seemed inappropriate.

William Walton, *Façade* (1951)

Though striking and musically memorable, the rhythmicised speech used throughout the entire (substantial) length of *Façade* struck me as too mannered as model, and ultimately very difficult to follow as a text. I therefore limited my use of

rhythmicised speech to a very select small number of moments in the work where I felt it necessary to align the music and words with more precision.

Michael Zev Gordon, *A Pebble in the Pond* (2003)

While similarly scored for ensemble with narrator, this work is structured as a set of poetic reminiscences, freely evoking images and memories that are echoed in the music's use of quotation and abruptly changing textures, resulting in a collage-like effect that intentionally embraces discontinuity as a formal strategy. While I found the results alluring, Hoffman's poetry and Zev-Gordon's music struck me as fundamentally different in conception from the overtly teleological and continuous narrative poetry employed by Armitage.

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[i] Extracts from Armitage's poem *Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes* (here and in later chapters) are reproduced with the author's kind permission. © Simon Armitage 2018.

5 Compositional Commentary: *Hansel and Gretel* Scene 7

For the purposes (and confines) of this commentary, I have elected to discuss a brief but representative extract of *Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes*. Scene 7, though a relatively short scene within the work (lasting only 5 minutes), nevertheless presented noteworthy challenges from a narratological perspective and was accompanied by certain "epiphany" moments during its creation. While no one scene could be said to encapsulate my compositional approach across the entire score, I believe it offers the reader a sense of some of my key artistic concerns and process across the work.

5.1 Armitage's Poetry

As with all of the eight scenes in *Hansel and Gretel*, the starting point was Armitage's poetry, written long prior to any compositional activity on my part. (I was completing another commission at the time.) Before the final poem was delivered, Armitage sent the team an initial outline of his ideas for all scenes, including Scene 7, as follows:

> 7. Exterior. The children are now "refugees". They begin making their journey though [sic] the forest, arriving at a stretch of water. I wonder if the duck that carries them across should be more mercenary, and the mode of transport something of a leaky dinghy. We stay with them till we see lights on the far shore.

(In the original tale, this corresponds to the point just after which the children have made their dramatic escape from the witch's house, having thrown her into a hot oven. Hansel and Gretel return home, crossing an expanse of water ferried by a swan.)

The contemporary theme of migration (a feature of many of the other scenes too) precipitated quite lengthy discussions from the creative team members. Hicks-Jenkins noted that:

> The leaky dinghy has become a symbol of refugees, most shockingly of the drowned child washed up on a beach. [A reference to the extensively covered death of Alan Kurdi in 2015.] Potent, but once the thought is there in the minds of the audiences, we have to decide where we go with it. […] I can see that a friendly duck might seem whimsical, though of course a friendly animal of *any* type is balm to a child.

> The metaphors of fairy tales are used to sugar-wrap harsher realities. This is the way we begin to understand the world, and how to negotiate it. (Hicks-Jenkins 2017)

Yet, as Armitage argued (and reflected in his finished poem), allusions to contemporary issues, such as child poverty and migration, for him held the key to retelling this fairy-story today.

> On a wider philosophical and maybe practical level, and just to explain some of my thinking for the outline, I reckon it's not just useful but essential to find a reason or reasons for staging this story here and now, partly as a theatrical responsibility, but partly because I don't think the original demands complete reverence. [...] we're making a show for twenty-first century adults who I think will struggle with the misogyny and witchery and cannibalism whose overpowering ugliness will surely trump any metaphorical value. (Armitage 2017)

I found myself in agreement. During that period, I had frequently felt unsettled as an artist, struggling to continue avoiding engaging with politics and current affairs in my work. Of course, this is a perennial difficulty for creators, raising fundamental questions of the artist's responsibilities in society. Yet it was specific recent events in 2017 (the inauguration of Donald Trump at the start of that year, and the earlier EU membership referendum in the UK), that galvanized my feelings with respect to migrants and refugees, whose predicaments troubled me greatly. (I even began volunteering at my local migrant centre around this time.)

As Armitage continued in his email:

> The image of the leaky dinghy is, as you say, familiar, and potent, and needs dealing with sensitively and carefully so as not to become the central focus - I suppose I couldn't help leaping from duck to rubber duck to rubber dinghy, and had in my mind one of those fairground ducks being used for a far more sinister purpose ie if it floats it will do, no matter how unsuitable or ironic. But I'd also imagined that the references would be glancing rather than all-consuming - nods in the direction of subjects and themes. (2017)

Indeed, as the finished poetry shows, it was the "glancing" nature of this image that enabled Armitage to integrate it convincingly within the framework of the familiar story. At many points in the text, the narrative "splits"; on one level the fairy tale remains more or less

intact, yet on another, slightly obscured level (often implied through irony and dark humour rather than through explicit statement) the audience is made aware of its contemporary overtones. (The specifics of this device in this scene will be examined in more detail below.)

Moreover, from a personal perspective, Armitage's plans recalled a particular experience for me that had remained lodged in my mind. The year before, I had attended a concert in aid of the migrant families trapped in the so-called "jungle" in Calais, and musicians, poets and various speakers offered performances and responses to the terrible conditions in these camps. (Gabriella Swallow and her Urban Family at the Forge, Camden, 12 July 2016.) One particular poem read that evening, on the horrifying decisions faced by refugee parents, had greatly moved me at the time, and was ever-present in my thoughts during these discussions, and while composing the music for the scene: "you have to understand, / that no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land" (from Home by Warsan Shire (2015)).

My email response very much reflected these concerns:

> If one interpretation of the original fairy tale is that it depicts the harsh realities of rural poverty, in which the poor woodchopper is faced with the impossible decision between feeding his wife or his children, then I think it makes sense, in this more contemporary light, to update this to reflect the equally horrendous choices presented to so many unfortunate parents in war-torn cities today. There really are sinister forces out there, but which is worse: sending your children out into the unknown where traffickers, smugglers and all sorts of other predators may be lurking; or trapping them at home, where they face almost certain homelessness, and probable death?
>
> So lots to think about, but from this outline, I'm very much looking forward to seeing where we go next. It already looks as though we are heading towards a very rich and resonant story that faces up to the uneasy truth that these are difficult and dark times for everyone. (Kaner 2017)

Armitage's completed text (shown below) encapsulated these provisional discussions elegantly, I felt. However, this scene posed some daunting (yet ultimately rewarding) challenges for me compositionally:

> A full day's hike.
> A two-day trek.
> A three-day slog.

A four-day trudge.
A five-day yomp.

Still lost.

The woodcutter's son
with his stolen blade
slashing through canes and creepers.

Spoon in her hand
the baker's daughter,
spooning out honey and nectar.

Still lost.

In the ink of the night
they come to a ledge
and stop and stand
where the edge of the land
meets a watery void,
then wait on the brink
of some unknown drink
which might be a ditch
but might be a stream
and might be a river
but might be the sea.

Hop on
said a mute swan!

It wasn't there, then it was.
Like a seat on a carousel.
Like one of those fairground rides.
Like one of those pleasure boats on a boating lake.
Like one of those bedside lights
in the shape of a swan.
And it shone.
Hop on
said the mute swan.
I can take more than one.

For just a sovereign
I'll sail you across.
That's all it will cost.

So Gretel stumped up her chocolate coin and scrambled aboard.

That's a sovereign *each*.
Not a penny less. Up front, in in cash.

So Hansel coughed up his chocolate coin and clambered aboard.

And the world tilted and rocked, wobbled and rolled.

Question: when is swan not a swan?
Answer: when it's a rubber duck.

Question: can a rubber duck carry two on its back?
Answer: it can not.

Question: when is a rubber duck not a rubber duck?
Answer: when it's a leaky boat.

Question: can a leaky boat sail all the way to the far shore?
Answer: not sure.

Question: what was the weather like in the channel that night?
Answer: gale force seven or eight.

But Hansel used his knife as a rudder
and Gretel's spoon made a decent paddle

and they steered and rowed till land
emerged
resolved
declared
appeared
arrived

like new morning on the far side.

Following its more straightforward opening (a slightly truncated refrain of the "walking poetry" that is first heard as the children are led out into the forest in Scene 3), Armitage deliberately introduces an uncertainty about the nature of the body of water the children see in front of them: "some unknown drink / which might be a ditch / but might be a stream / and might be a river / but might be the sea".

As a device, this might at first be seen to represent what has been termed by the literary scholar Martin Fitzpatrick as *subjunctive narration*, in which an audience "cannot precisely determine the facts of the case" and is presented with not "how things looked" but "how they *must* or *might* have looked" (2018, 244–45, italics in original). As he continues:

> Unable to assign definite status to information as certain or uncertain, as fact or something else, the reader cannot read such narratives according to standard procedure. (245)

At the arrival of the swan (which occurs in the original Grimm brothers' fairy tale), Armitage, perhaps prompted by the oddness of this episode in the original, enhances this sense of uncertainty by further undermining the narrative. Thus, the children are invited to "Hop on" by a mute swan, no less. (The mute swan is a specific species of swan whose name is already considered an oxymoron.) The swan appears from nowhere, and again, it is unclear precisely what the audience "sees".

When the children clamber aboard, their entire world seems to be at stake, tilting and rolling, at which point the narrator seems to break away into another dimension of storytelling entirely.

With intentionally jarring "question" and "answer" prefixes, the poet suddenly seems to address the audience more directly, and it becomes clearer where the ambiguity of the earlier lines stemmed from. The children, in what might be seen as a "split" or *bifurcated narrative* (Soldofsky 2003; Reyland 2013, 41–43) appear to exist in a parallel continuity, as endangered refugees perilously crossing a sea in a leaky boat. This "narrative intrudes upon the first, generating a range of relationships between them…" (Soldofsky 2003, 312–13) as "one strand can disappear and then reappear at a certain point, making an initially latent link to other material suddenly manifest" (Reyland 2013, 42).

This jarring change of poetic register might also relate to what Dorrit Cohn labels *discordant narration*, "inducing one to look, behind the story he or she tells, for a different meaning from the one he himself or she herself provides" (Cohn 2000, 307). Whether or not the narrator can be considered aware of this "different meaning" is unclear, and to an extent dependent on the performance. Yet the poetic discord generated by the perfunctory repeated prefixes significantly undermines the integrity of the story and certainly forces us to look "behind it".

As suggested in Armitage's initial plans, such multi-layered techniques of narration were an eventual feature of much of the finished text. Often in the poem, two (or more) versions of Hansel and Gretel are at play; one, in a sense, is the version which the children might see themselves, the other is frequently a parallel narrative which makes clear to the audience how this fairy story connects with contemporary life. (Compare the episode in Scene 5 where the witch (or is she a trafficker?) "was only thinking of scrubbing him up", but Gretel mishears and "For bath she hears broth. / For oil she hears boil. / For heat she hears meat. She hears eat.") In such cases, dark humour plays a central role in the realisation of this narrative splitting.

However, at the end of Scene 7, order appears to be restored as the children manage to steer and row themselves out of the waters "till land / emerged / resolved / declared / appeared / arrived / like new morning on the far side."

5.2 Account of my Creative Process

Occurring towards the end of the text, I came relatively late to this scene in my compositional sketches. As I was forced to admit in the team planning meeting in April, I was unsure of my approach, at which point Hicks-Jenkins volunteered that he had recently acquired an important stage-prop for this scene, which had originally inspired an image in his picture book. This was a toy duck, with its own music box mechanism (pictured below in his illustrated version and as it finally appeared in the show).

Figure 5.1 Excerpt from Hicks-Jenkins (2016, [pages unnumbered])

Figure 5.2 Image of the toy duck used in the production of *Hansel & Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes*

Though perhaps a subtle one, this prompted something of an epiphany for me creatively. While the duck's own musical mechanism played a rather odd repeating diminished triad (see accompanying **video file 2**), I subsequently consulted with some of my own undergraduate students, who I knew had used a piano-roll music box in an Electronic Music project run by my colleague Mike Roberts. As they advised me, I found the music box could be made loud enough for the stage with a sufficiently large resonator attached. (I used an old wooden wine crate.)

I therefore requested that Hicks-Jenkins disconnect the duck's internal mechanism and then created my own music box melody (performed by the oboist) to accompany the

surreal moment in the text when the mute swan (rubber duck / leaky boat) appears and speaks. In doing so it was also my hope that the use of apparently diegetic sound would underline and enhance the unreality, eeriness, and faint absurdity of this moment.

I was unsure as to how and when exactly to incorporate this element into the score at first. The music box mechanism I acquired could play only diatonic material in A♭ major, within a two-octave range. My initial compositional concerns were that, within these constraints, the music box theme should:

- Sound (oddly) familiar and plausible as a music-box melody
- Be able to accompany itself to a degree (to allow it enough sonic presence on stage to be heard, and to function when played solo) yet also be able to integrate with the ensemble
- Structurally integrate somehow as material within the rest of the scene, so as not to feel like an isolated episode

To address these concerns, I began composing a theme during the development week of the project, having already seen and heard three scenes coming together on stage and received especially positive feedback for my appropriation and distortion of nursery rhymes in Scene 4. The following lines of text struck me as being suitable for setting with a simple, deliberately artless, diatonic melody:

> Hop on
> said the mute swan.
> I can take more than one.
>
> For just a sovereign
> I'll sail you across.
> That's all it will cost.

Thus, between rehearsals I began singing to myself (and subsequently notating) a tune in A♭ that began with a falling minor third for the line "Hop on" in the poetry (which perhaps owed something to the opening falling minor third of the nursery rhyme *Hänschen Klein* that I used several times in Scene 4). Shown in Figures 5.3 and 5.4, the crossings out,

erasure marks and discrepancies between the two transpositions demonstrate my hesitation and constant revision of the material.

While it did not prove possible, I had also hoped to have time during the development week to test this theme on the music box (having already made a piano-roll for its mechanism; see Figure 5.7), against accompanying drones in the ensemble, as shown in Figure 5.6. These sketches demonstrate my beginning to think about two harmonisations of this diatonic theme. Both result in pitch sets that expand the A♭ Ionian mode to 9-notes in total, but the spacing of the chord labelled “II” results in more prominent semitone clashes with the notes of the melody, and a less resonant chord spacing, that, in this context, would be perceived as unstable.[i]

Figure 5.3 Composer's early sketch for the music box / vocal melody in Scene 7

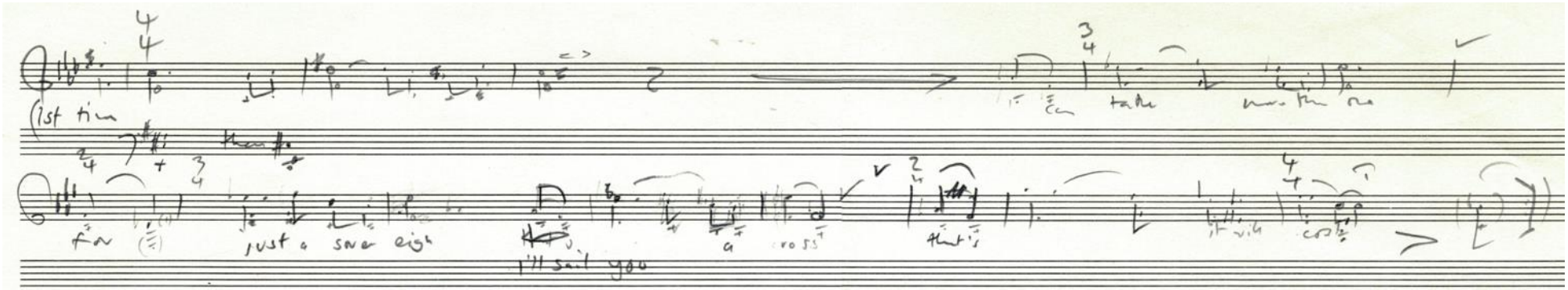


Figure 5.4 Music box theme transposed into C during sketching process (c.f. Figure 5.7 and Figure 5.9 for the completed version)

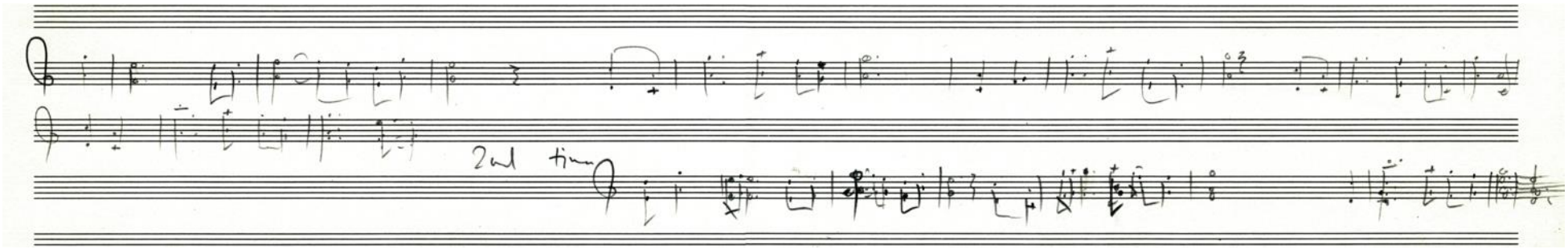


Figure 5.5 Sketched harmonisation of music box theme for development week

(The sketch is in playing transposition; c.f. Figure 5.6.)

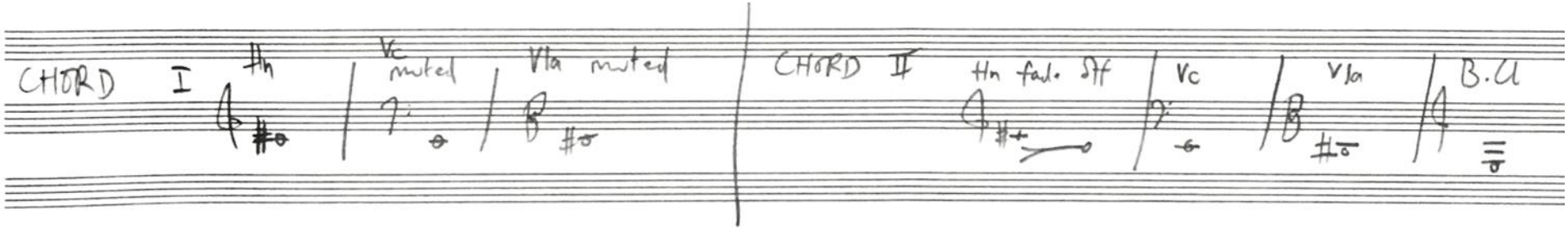
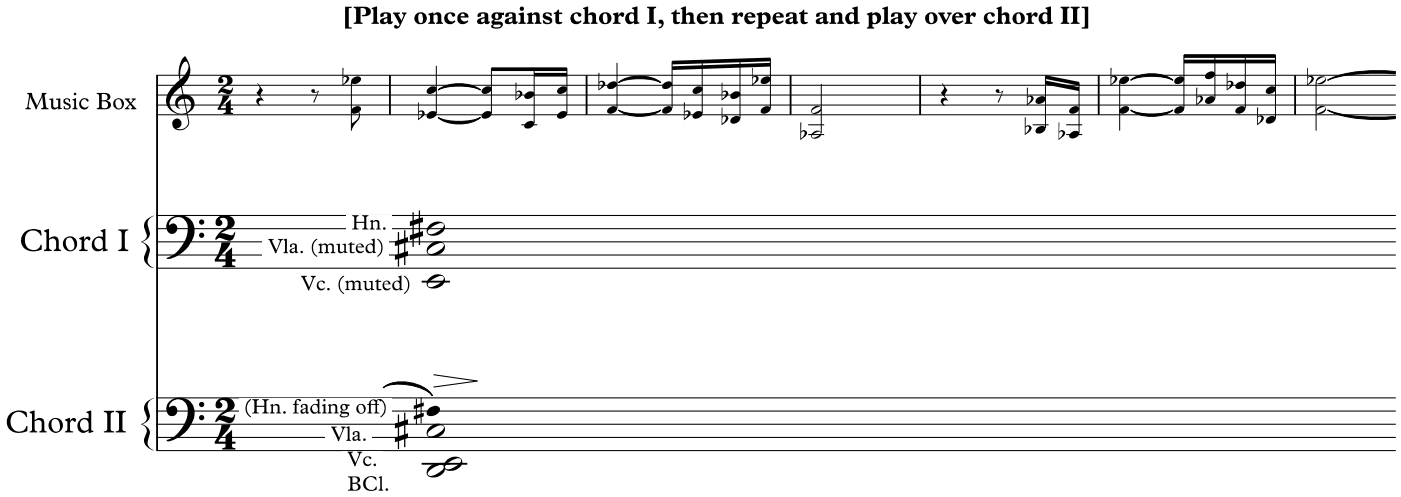


Figure 5.6 Transcription of sketch above at concert pitch, shown against the first few bars of the music box theme



My intention with the more unstable chord II was to address the jarring moment in the poetry with the "question" and "answer" prefixes. By experimenting with increasing dissonance in this way, I was seeking a means to emphasise this moment of split, discordant narrative and enhance its effect through my harmonisation of the music box theme.

As my diary entries from the time reveal:

> When the poetry starts to jar (question: when is a swan not a swan) the harmony becomes much tenser around the tune.
> (Composer's Diary Entry 1 June 2018 [the finished score was sent to copyist on 3 June])

In a later reflection, I stressed that:

> [The music] becomes quite unsteady and scary as the gale force 7/8 winds build up and the tune comes back in a nasty nasal version to accompany Simon's 'question and answer' material that jars and takes us away from fantasy land into the politics of migration…
>
> (Composer's Diary Entry 14 June 2018)

However, in order to integrate the material within the ensemble and give it a structural role, as mentioned above, I needed to develop a more sophisticated means of repeating and harmonising this theme than simply accompanying it with more or less discordant drones.

Thus, ultimately there became four iterations of the melody (A through D), discussed in some detail below:

A. **The finished iteration for the music box** (shown in Figure 5.9)
    - This version retains the stepwise motion and occasional leaps from the sketches that are frequently associated with child-like music box material. (Nursery rhymes, and many other traditional tunes, as I had been reminded when writing Scene 4, rarely span more than a fifth and move largely by small intervals, with only occasional small leaps.)
    - The melody also alludes to materials used elsewhere. It incorporates the opening motive from the song "My Heart Bleeds for those Kids" in Scene 2; its homophonic accompaniment in sixths and sevenths refers partly to the

parallel sevenths used that song; it also links loosely to the homophonic doubling of the melody (often in thirds and sixths) commonly associated with lullaby themes. (Consider Brahms's *Wiegenlied*, op. 49 no. 4, or bb. 7-13 of Chopin's Berceuse op. 57.)

- The initial accompaniment of this by the ensemble did ultimately make use of harmonies similar to those shown in the sketches. However, trills (on the interval of a whole-tone) are frequently employed in the instruments to create a feeling of gentle instability, or rocking motion to depict water (or more serious instability later on – see iteration C).

B. The vocal iteration, setting the lines "Hop on, said a mute swan" (shown in Figure 5.11)

- At this point, the rocking stepwise figuration becomes a more prominent feature of the writing, forming the basis of the 2/4 accompaniment in the strings, suggestive of the toing and froing of water. On reflection, it is relatively straightforward to account for this compositional step. Yet at the time, the accompaniment came to me alarmingly intuitively (perhaps due to the time pressure; the entire score had to be finished a week later). The notes for the passage came in rather a frenzy (hence the lack of rhythmic notation in places –and coffee stain–).
- As I noted at the time:

> I don't really know how I got that accompaniment — I wanted it to bob along in 2/4 I think, but the notes just seem to come out of nowhere. Was quite strange but I didn't fight it as it was helpful! It's quite a different mood from much of the rest of the piece - but the text itself has a deliberately dream like unreal quality.
>
> (Composer's Diary Entry 14th July 2018)

Figure 5.7 Finished music box melody with numbered phrases (piano roll version used with the music box; see Figure 5.9 for transcription)

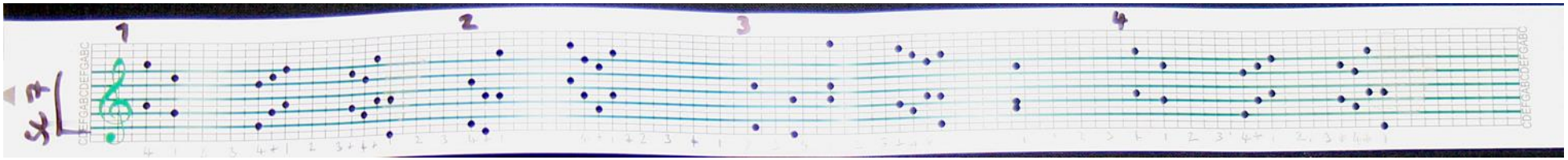


Figure 5.8 Composer's sketch for the completed sung melody with accompaniment

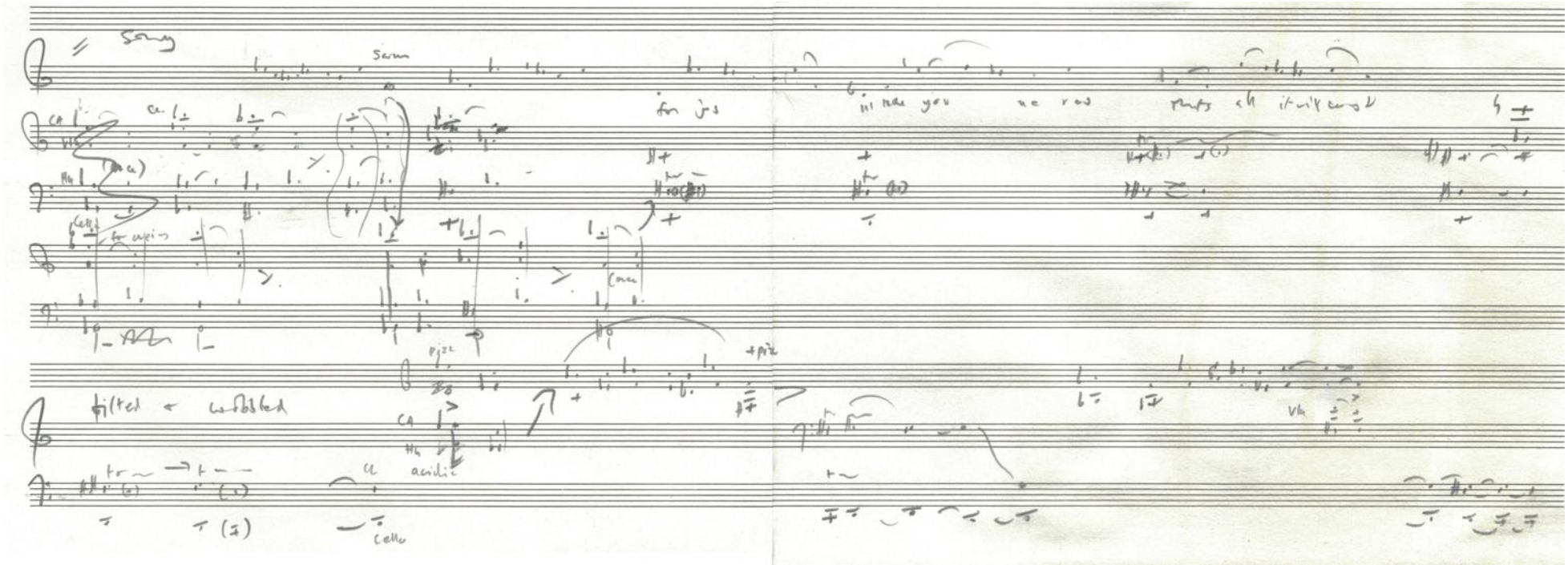


Figure 5.9 Finished music box melody (transcription)

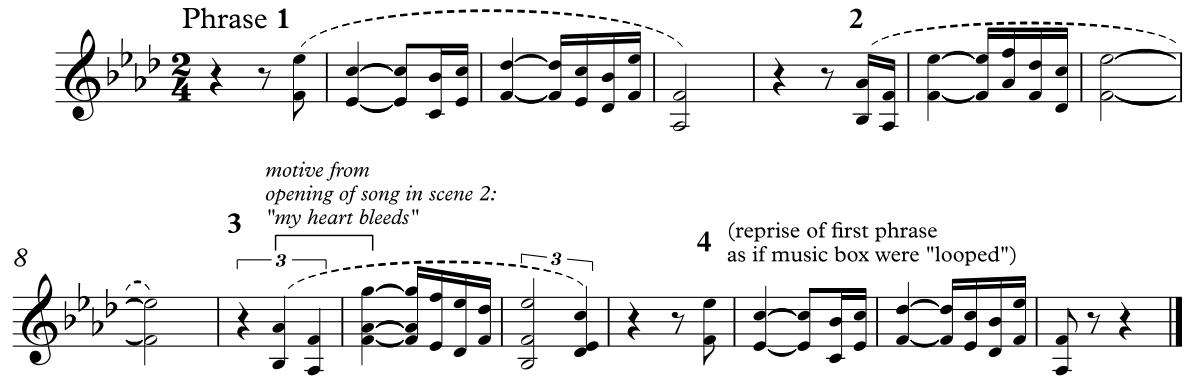


Figure 5.10 First entry of music box in the score

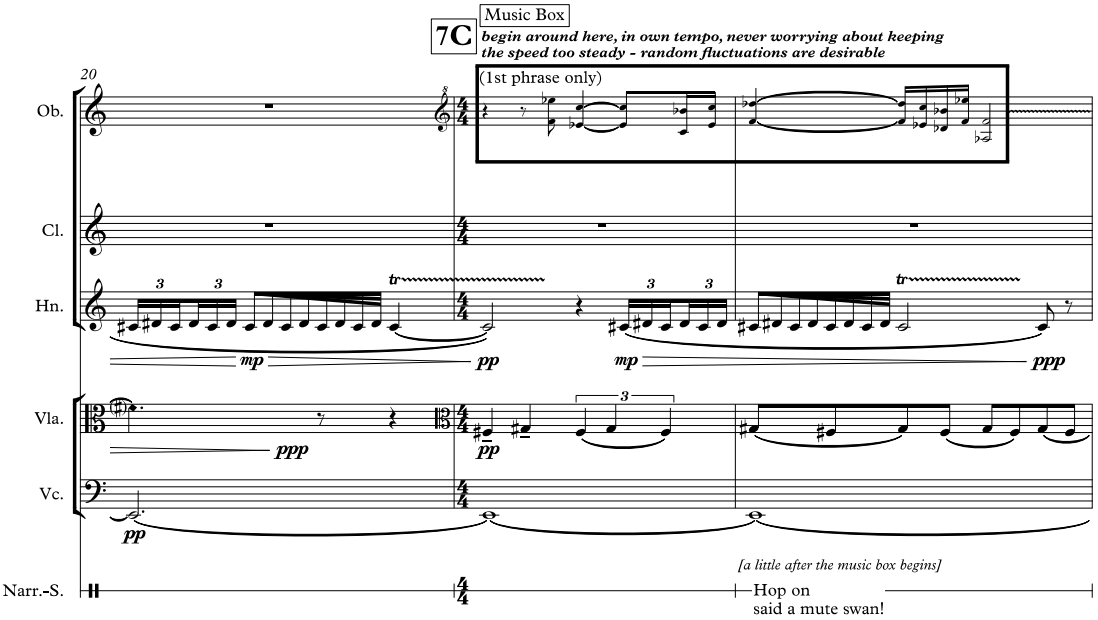


Figure 5.11 Vocal version of the melody (c.f. also the sketched version in Figure 5.3)

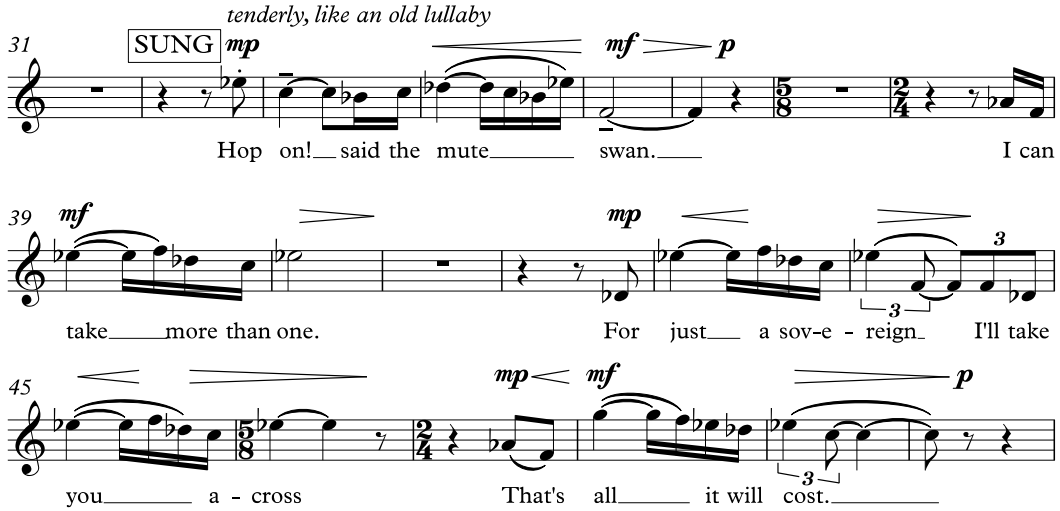
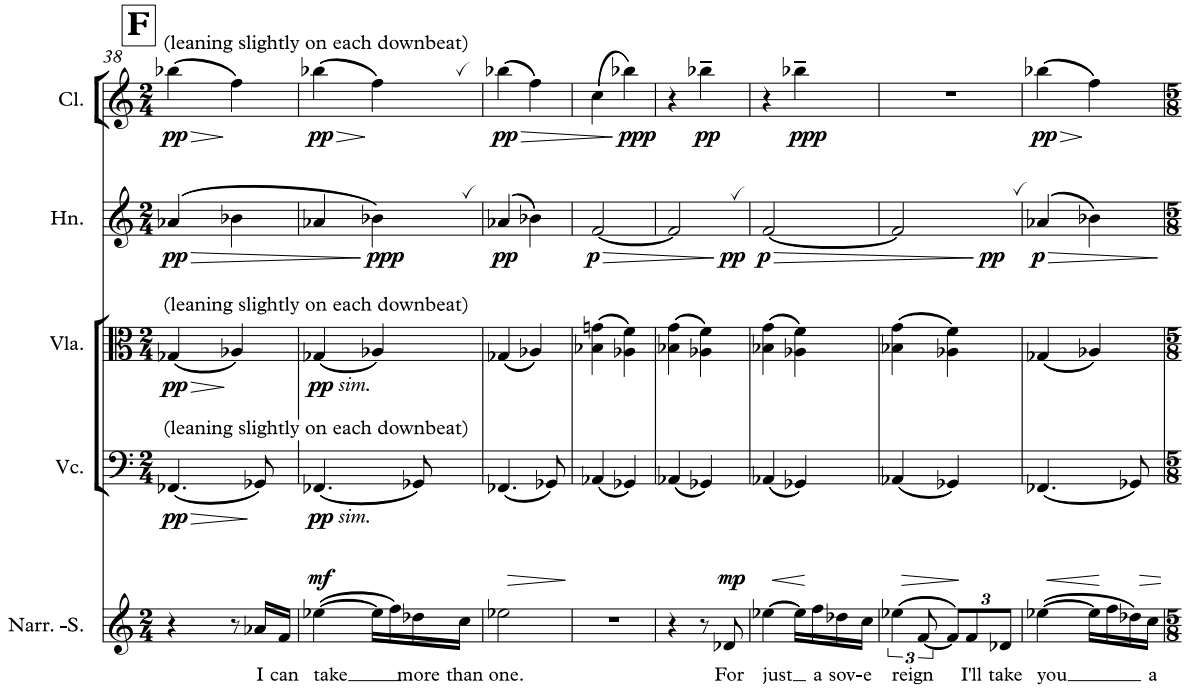


Figure 5.12 Opening of sung melody with accompaniment as transcribed in the final score

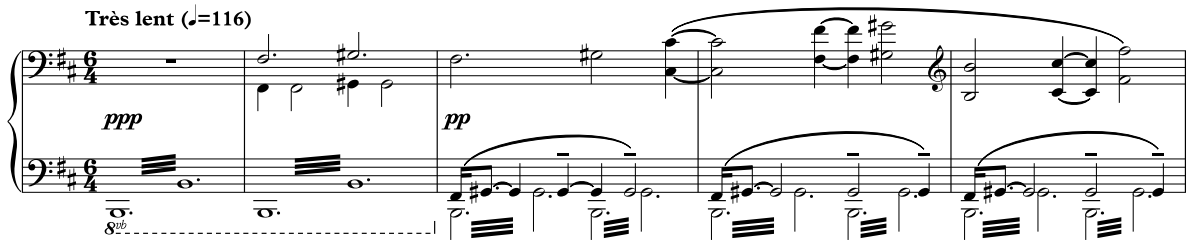


Thinking back to the time of composition, I recall simply feeling grateful that this part of the scene had somehow "written itself". (See the discussion on intuition in my practice more widely in section 11.5.) However, in light of the foregoing discussion in chapter 4, the development of an initial rocking, stepwise figuration (e.g. in the horn and viola at **[C]**) into a fully-blown song accompaniment at **[F]**, with a very specific harmonic and textural character, can be explained in various ways that point to its formal, topical, and ultimately narrative role in the scene.

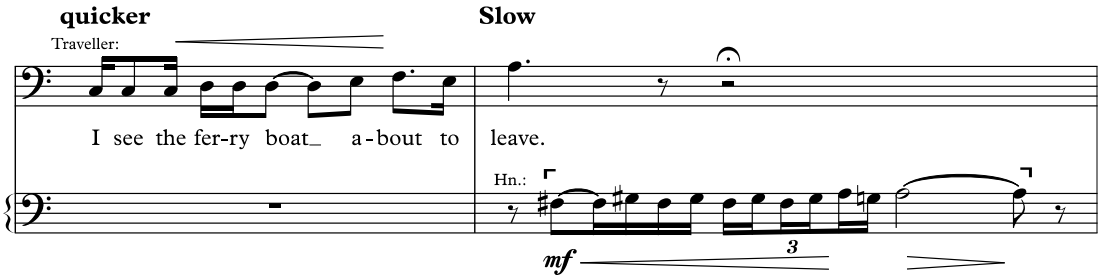
The rocking figure in particular (in the strings at **[F]**) can be connected to other works from the repertory that link whole-tone rocking figures with water flowing, shown in Figure 5.13.

Figure 5.13 Extracts from works by (a) Debussy, (b) Britten, and (c) Ravel employing "rocking" stepwise water figures

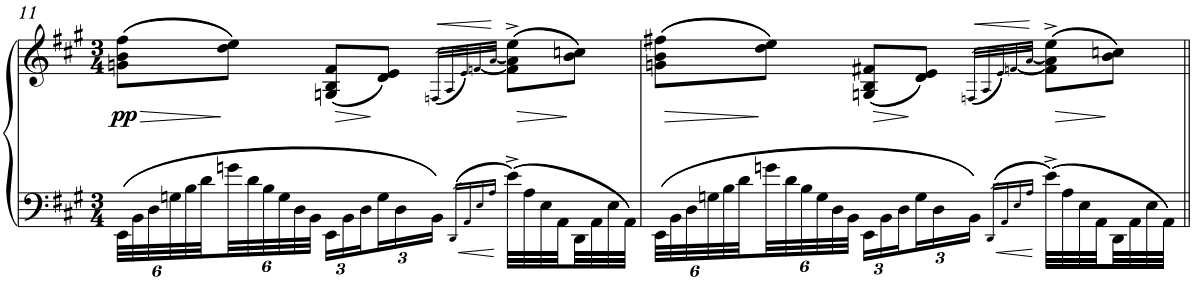
a. Debussy (1910), *La Mer:* I. "De l'aube à midi sur la mer", bb. 1-5



b. Britten (1965), *Curlew River*, fig. [37] + 8



c. Ravel (1906), *Miroirs*, III. "Une Barque Sur l'Océan", bb. 11-12

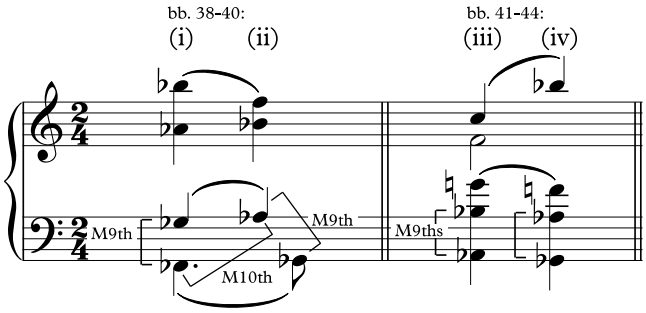


While these examples simply represent those in my mind nearer the time of composition, they arguably constitute a more widely "*recurring musical formula*" (Grabócz 2005, 445) with specific "picturesque associations" (Ratner 1980, 9), and are thus an historical *musical topic*. The figure arguably harks back to the bobbing accompaniments found in many nineteenth-century barcarolles: a "title given to pieces that imitate or suggest the songs (*barcarole*) sung by Venetian gondoliers as they propel their boats through the water" (Brown and Hamilton 2001); c.f. Offenbach's famous Barcarolle "Belle Nuit, ô nuit d'amour" from *Les contes d'Hoffman*, and the left-hand accompaniment of Chopin's *Barcarolle*.

If, as discussed in the literature/practice review, narrative theorists argue that “topics can get us into the musical story” (Klein 2013, 24), by allowing them to “detect with more confidence, the meaning of so-called ‘dramatic form’, traditionally designated as ‘narrative’” (Grabócz 2005, 445), the language of the accompaniment arguably functions here as musical signifier for gently flowing water, supporting the imagery of the poetry.

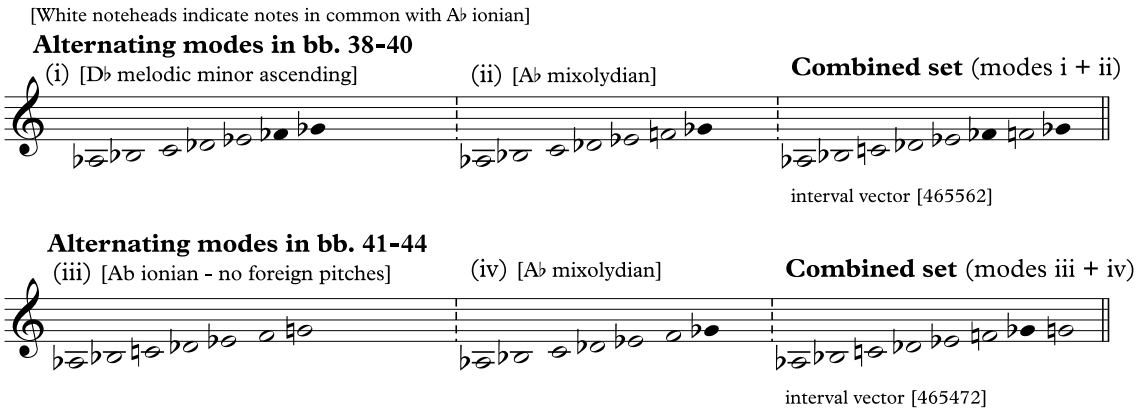
In its first full iteration here, the song melody, along with its topical accompaniment, establishes a sense of *relative* stability (through harmonic and modal means shown in Figure 5.14), suggestive of a relatively safe journey along the water.

Figure 5.14 Harmonic accompaniment of the vocal iteration (B)



As shown above (fig. 3.15), the accompaniment consistently rocks between pairs of chords, (i) + (ii) and (iii) + (iv), each of which is individually derived from a diatonic mode, shown in the square brackets in Figure 5.15.

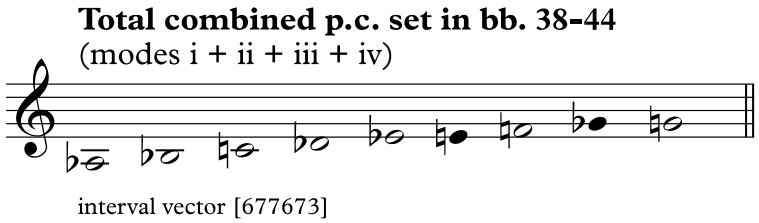
Figure 5.15 Modality/diatony of chords (i) + (ii) and (iii) + (iv)



The technique of creating chords from diatonic collections has the effect of avoiding clusters of chromatically adjacent semitones, which I would argue, in my language, is

central to the handling and perception of dissonance. (See also the Literature and Practice Review, section 4.3.) Moreover, as shown at the end of each stave in Figure 5.15, the combined set generated by each pair (i + ii / iii + iv) results in a collection that only adds a small number of foreign pitches to the A♭ Ionian mode of the music box theme. At any given moment, the music heard both in the vertical harmonies, and horizontally, is therefore relatively restricted in terms of total pitch content, chromatically enriching the A♭ Ionian melody only to a small degree. (Even the combined sets contain only four semitones, which is only true for eight of the 29 eight-note sets in existence.) Furthermore, the resultant total pitch content of the entire passage is limited to a small number of closely linked modes, with several notes in common between them, only two of which are foreign to A♭ Ionian (Figure 5.16).

Figure 5.16 Combined p.c. set of vocal iteration (B) and its accompaniment



Lastly, the spacing of the accompaniment results in a perceived overall resonance, because of its use of wide intervals (major 9ths, and momentarily a major 10th) in the lower register, in accordance with the structure of the natural overtone series. (Both the major ninth and tenth are intervals in the bass that can be interpreted as a fundamental and a relatively close harmonic above: the ninth and fifth partials, respectively.)

Subsequently the theme recurs in another iteration:

C. A "nasal", cloying iteration, on the cor anglais and muted horn (bb. 59-67)

- Here, the homophonic lower voice is also reinstated, played by the muted horn, but is occasionally altered to step outside the A♭ Ionian mode at the ends of phrases. This two-part homophony is also doubled in viola pizzicato notes to

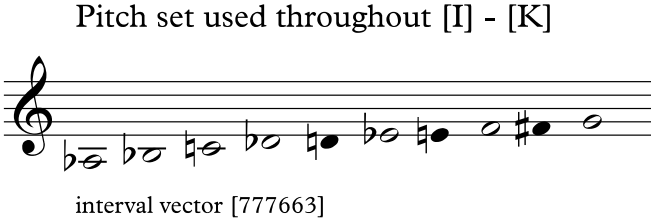
emphasis their dissonance against the harmonic backdrop provided by the cello and clarinet.

- At this point, I was conscious that my approach owed something to certain passages in George Benjamin's *Into the Little Hill* (as mentioned in the Literature and Practice Review; see Figure 4.4).

Further suggestions of instability are generated to support the sense of narrative discord in this passage as follows:

- A magnified harmonic instability is generated in the bass by the cello's C-D trill (developed from the rocking water topical figuration of earlier), the restlessness of which prevents a clear fundamental or root from emerging in this passage.
- Additional interjections of semitone dissonances occur between the phrases of the melody (e.g., in the cor anglais and horn in b. 63 and b. 65), further increasing the number of pitches at play and undermining the previous modal stability of the theme.
- With the inclusion of the F♯ drone in the clarinet (which is deliberately less resonant against the Cello's low C), the resultant pitch collection in use throughout the passage is more chromatically saturated than in iteration 3 (shown in Figure 5.17).

Figure 5.17 Pitch content of accompaniment and melodic voices during cor anglais and muted horn iteration (C)



- The rhythmic pulsation and rocking of the earlier accompaniment disintegrates into unpredictable trilling, thus dissolving the musical topic

into something less familiar, but manipulating its constituent signs to suggest a specific meaning (calm waters beginning to swirl).

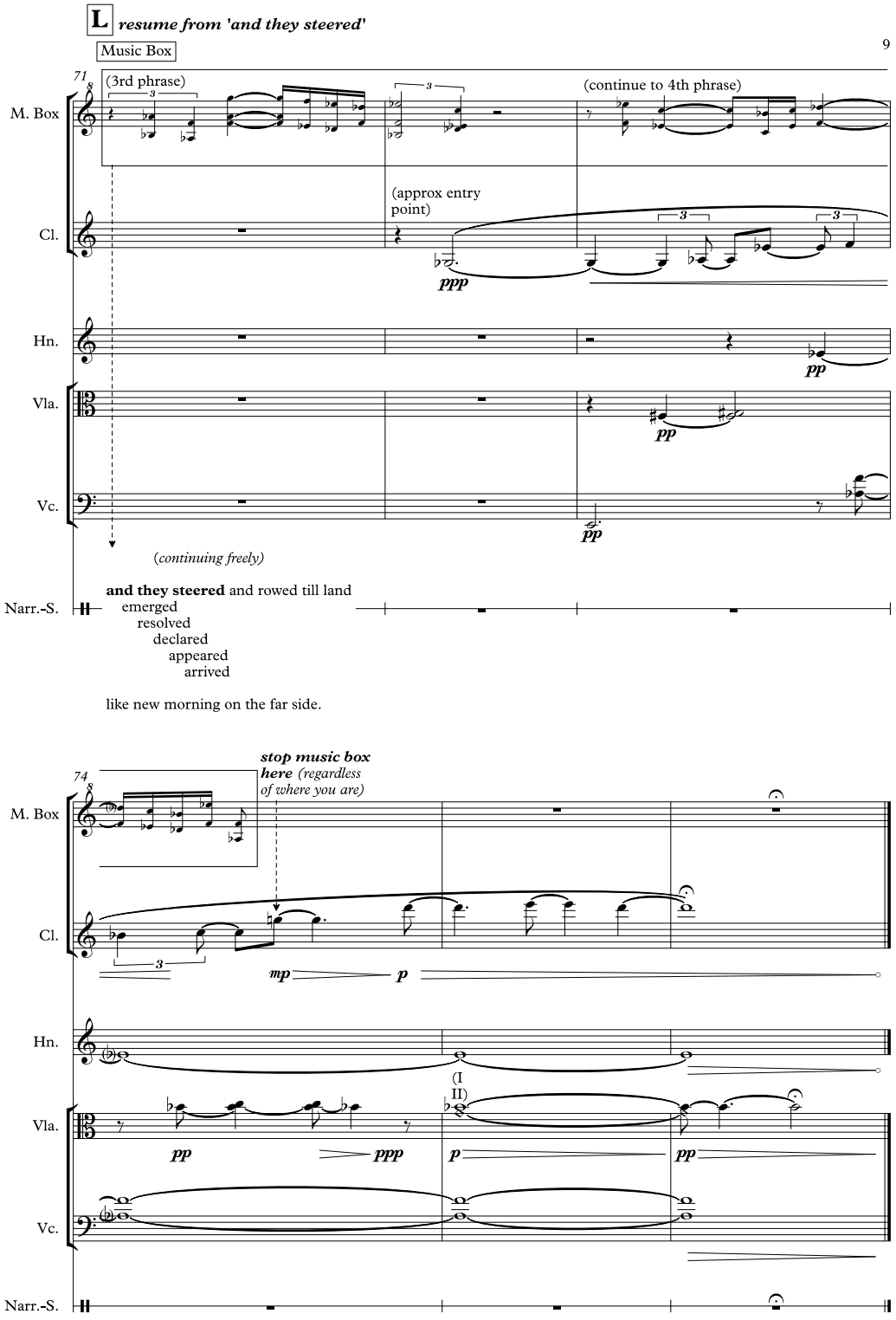
- In terms of word-painting and narrative signification, the inability of the bass to move beyond its two trilled pitches, C and D, suggests the children's inability to move forwards smoothly, perhaps evoking the disturbing image of rowing against the tide or current without success.

Lastly, following a chordal outburst at [K], the theme re-emerges in its:

D. Final iteration, now back on the music box (shown in Figure 5.18, performed as if looped: bb. 73-74 repeat phrase 1 of the theme)

- Here, the theme sounds against a "luminous" clarinet figure to suggest "new morning on the far side". (This clarinet figure also occurs twice earlier; see below.)

Figure 5.18 Final music box statement of the melody (D)



In addition to the music box theme, various other materials were employed in this scene, as listed below. In all cases, they function as topics, and by this point in the drama, carry quite specific associations.

i. A varied repetition of the “walking” topic, composed to accompany the “walking poetry” Armitage introduces in Scene 3 and uses again here.
    - The depiction of weariness in this iteration was something I sought to underline with an abbreviated restatement of this material in a slower tempo than in earlier scenes, with frequent pauses (or stops) in the musical flow.[ii]
    - The stepwise movement embedded in this material, though clearly connected with the “watery” accompanimental figuration in this scene, does have slightly different origins. Moreover, its distinct intervallic character in combination with its instrumentation, texture and rhythmic profile enhance this difference.[iii]

ii. A “sunrise” figure in the clarinet extending upwards that outlines “open”, resonant harmonies combining the whole-tone with a rising fifth (seen above as the accompaniment to the final appearance of the music box). The text this figure accompanies conveys light: “and it shone […] like new morning on the far side”. The intervallic structure of the harmony (using only interval classes 2 and 5) tends to be associated with resolution and repose in Lutosławski’s music (in the final cadence in the Fugue, for example: see Bodman Rae (1994, 52)), and is even described by Steven Stucky as “luminous and otherworldly” (1981, 184). Its use of the upper registers of the ensemble and sustain with soft drones and harmonics was intended to highlight its “floating” quality.

iii. Brief repetition of the “night music” (with imitations of night birds and insects) as heard throughout earlier scenes. This material and the imitation of “night sounds” is of course highly indebted to Bartók.[iv]

Following the earlier discussion in the Literature and Practice Review, the longer-term handling of dissonance, density and rhythm in this scene can be seen to result in *transvaluation:* “significant, temporalized change of state that affects the ranking of values in a given hierarchy” (Almén and Hatten 2013, 59), considered the defining feature of narrative by Liszka (1989) and Almén (2008; 2013). Specifically applied to music, this process “involves reversals that either upset or reaffirm the prevailing

order" (Almén and Hatten 2013, 59) the outcome of which is a multifaceted undermining of the central fairy story that is both darkly humorous and sobering in character. The combination of harmony, form (repeated material as refrain that occurs in differing contexts) and topical allusions, I hope, support and enhance Armitage's rich poetic narrative.

5.3 Reflections and Responses

The ensemble's response to the score was very positive. (They first rehearsed it while I was at home composing the remaining scenes, 3 and 8.)

> 😊x we love scene 7! 😍
> (Text message received from Kate Romano, 6/6/18 at 10:33am)
>
> […] And it goes together like a dream.
> (Received immediately afterwards)

The integration of the music box in the ensemble received an especially enthusiastic response and, as hoped, the performers remarked on the familiarity of its tune, asking if any of it was taken from other well-known melodies. (The last phrase was linked with *Moon River* and the *Star Trek* theme by different performers.) I was also particularly satisfied with the visual handling of this scene from Hicks-Jenkins, possibly because we'd discussed the use of the duck beforehand, and I was able to respond creatively to this physical prop, linking the action on stage directly with the music.

Criticism in the press did not highlight this specific passage. I suspect that untrained ears may not have realised that the music box mechanism was actually played from within the ensemble, or audiences may not have been able to distinguish it from the toy pianos. If the former is true, I would view this as a positive outcome, given my intention to employ an apparently diegetic sound source at this point in the drama. Feedback from other composers and musicians was also very encouraging: "& I want one of those music boxes with piano rolls…" (Email forwarded by Kate Romano from Iain Chambers 6 July 2018, after the private preview).

[i] My approach here can be linked to the discussion of the spacing of Lutosławski's 12-note chords in Bodman Rae: when these sonorities can be divided into groupings of three four-note chords, the "choice of chord for the low strand is of prime importance" (1994, 55). For the sake of resonance "intervals in the low strand are often spaced more widely than those higher in the chord, giving a more open sonority" (55). Where this is not the case (e.g. when Lutosławski places a tritone in the bass), the result is therefore less open. As a practice, this shows Lutosławski's (and my) indebtedness to "the traditional view of harmony which works from the bottom upwards (determined by the phenomenon of the natural overtone series and its acoustic law of decreasing intervallic distances as harmonics ascend)" (Bodman Rae 1994, 53). Several other theoretical reference points might be evoked here in relation to spacing and pitch organization, such as, Magnus Lindberg's output, where his "interest in spectral music, coming from studies with Grisey and analysis of Sibelius's late works (Seventh Symphony and *Tapiola*), is made operational in such a way that 'the music supports its own acoustics', as the composer has put it" (Oramo 2001). (See also Anderson (2010) on Dutilleux's concern with natural resonance and his subsequent influence on his pupil Grisey.)

[ii] Compare bb. 1-10 in Scene 3 with bb. 1-7 in Scene 7. Note that the poetry is also abbreviated in this scene, like a familiar motive wearily recalled.

[iii] The main source for this march was the first of Kurtag's *Kafka Fragments*, "The Good March in Step", which begins as a slow march with the violin and voice moving by step in parallel fifths. However, the bell-like brass sonorities I evoke here perhaps owe more sonically to Stravinsky's march topics found in much of his output (see McKay 2012) and Janáček, for example in the *Sinfonietta* and *Glagolitic Mass*. The parallel fifths that occur throughout between clarinet and muted horn, are intended to suggest a "horn fifths" topic. (See "'Horn' Fifths" 2001.)

[iv] See Grabócz (2005; 2012) on the topic of 'nocturnal nature' and its narratological implications in the Four Orchestral Pieces op. 12, *Music For Strings Percussion and Celeste*, and many other works.

6 Wider Reflections on *Hansel and Gretel* as an Entire Piece

6.1 Reception

Press reviews of the work were mixed. In particular, the Times review of the premiere characterised the music as "unremittingly hardcore" and took issue with the designation of the work as something other than an opera (Morrison 2018).[i]
I engaged with this at the time by commenting on such critics' misunderstanding of the intended audience for the piece (it was marketed for adults and older children), and what I felt was a poor definition of opera on the behalf of the reviews.

> It's tough reading reviews. 6 months of composing (and over a year of planning) just summed up in a few sentences. More frustrating though when you feel you're being criticised for actually doing what you intended and doing it in such a concerted way that it rocks their silly expectations. If the Times and 5:4 had read the marketing they'd know it wasn't intended for kids and is a piece of chamber music with narrator, and puppetry. Doesn't sound like an opera to me! And what is their definition of opera?
>
> I've finally opened Christopher Wintle's new book that he sent me a month ago (now that I have time). He puts it fairly well I think: 'opera is an irreducible field of forces comprising three elements: dramatised music, musicalised drama and the transfiguring power of music and drama working in tandem. All three are governed by song.' [(2018, 3).]
>
> I suppose my piece does in some senses fulfil these criteria, yet what it does lack is the last one. The drama isn't governed by song, on the contrary, it's governed by a relationship between spoken poetry and musically expressed drama. To me that's a fundamentally different paradigm. Song acts as a way of rarefying the expansive moments of lyricism in the text; it separates those moments from the ones surrounding them. It's instrumental music that carries the majority of the dramatic force. And the text is NOT a libretto. It has far too much life of its own. The music is in dialogue with it and is there to create a parallel narrative that looks forward and backward structurally to bring the whole thing together. It points up details in the poetry, it finds equivalents in musical terms to moments of play and darkness in the poetry. The words are not a vehicle for the music,

> they're an equal partner in the storytelling arc. Or at least that's the intention. (Composer's Diary Entry Tuesday 10th July 2018)

Moreover, all reviewers (including those that were more positive) recognised the collaborative emphasis of the piece in which poetry, puppetry, visual media and music played equally significant roles in the piece, which is again, very distant from operatic conventions.

Yet, of course, many of the reviews were positive, and I felt the Guardian offered a balanced perspective on the work and its collaborative nature (Evans 2018).

> Lovely review in the Guardian (4*) last night. Really pleased – seemed to understand the whole project and relation between the art forms. No mention of opera or misconstrual as a children's work. Phew!
>
> Weirdly getting this review feels like a big hurdle overcome and I feel much more able to move on with things. There's nothing worse than feeling your work has been misunderstood. Speaking to Kate (and Anna Durance) yesterday the problem with the Times review was that he essentially described exactly what we wanted to make in the review, and saw that as a criticism, which is of course very irritating. (Composer's Diary Entry 11th July 2018)

6.2 My Reflections

My own initial response, after the premiere in Cheltenham was generally positive:

> Think the premiere went really well. Simon seemed delighted - he said he finds it difficult to articulate how he feels about music but he said he found really beautiful and that it really brought the text to life. Very pleased about this. Edward Blakeman came and really seemed to enjoy it. He's keen to broadcast the MC performance. (Composer's Diary Entry 11th July 2018)

However, I subsequently felt (and still feel) some dissatisfaction with the finished piece. Some of these were addressed (the shortening of Scene 2, some additions to Scene 8) in the revision of the piece that was performed at Milton Court. However, there are passages that I feel could be more inventive musically. As my first dramatic

work, I feel perhaps I erred too much on the side of caution in terms of overloading the audience with material and rhythmic complexity.

Ultimately, I suspect the end results are perhaps too reliant on some of the same core materials and ideas, which become overfamiliar towards the final scene of the piece. In part, I believe this is due to the short turnaround time for the work. Our work-in-progress development week was just two months before the premiere, and from a collaborative viewpoint, most of the creative team's main energy after that point was allotted to addressing perceived issues with the visual elements and puppetry of the piece.

However, with some distance, I also now recognise that, despite my reverence for Armitage, his relative unfamiliarity with the medium meant that he perhaps provided too much text to be included, and my own inexperience meant that I did not attempt to cut it. (For example, in Scene 6, Armitage wrote a note in the poem suggesting that music and visuals should occupy the foreground in that scene, after the London premiere he noted in discussion that because of the quantity of lines, the poetry had still dominated that scene, which he hadn't really expected.)

In our roundtable discussion for BBC Radio 3, Armitage stated that he felt it was ultimately the music that held piece together (Armitage et al. 2018). Yet as I stated on air, for me, it was the poetry that generated the piece's underlying sense of continuity and structure, which enabled me to anticipate musical ideas very early on that would subsequently play a more focal role in the piece. (For example, in the "darkened" chord pairings at the end of Scene 3 (figures **[Z]** – **[BB]**) that ultimately become the main musical material in Scene 6.) This was perhaps the most significant epiphany of working with text in this way for me, as the subsequent pieces demonstrate; complex musical structures can successfully be determined by an external narrative (whether the work is instrumental or vocal).

Of course, music to accompany spoken texts presents unique difficulties in terms of balance and intelligibility. I spent a lot of effort trying to address this but still found it

problematic. As I noted after the dress rehearsals and premiere, this was an ongoing concern during the performance run:

> The private preview went well two nights ago. Few moments where Adey couldn't be heard - think she's a bit exhausted. Hope she's able to give everything tonight. Cello also naughtily came in early in scene 8 and covered 'but no mum'... hope we can sort all those issues in the dress[.] (Composer's Diary entry 7 July 2018 [written on the bus to dress rehearsal])

> I feel pretty happy - think we managed to deal with all the corners in which you couldn't quite hear the text. Adey did whisper some of it, and I don't think that works. We may well mic her going forward. It's an ongoing discussion with pros and cons on either side. But she gave such an exciting and committed performance - it was really special. (Composer's Diary Entry 1 July 2018 [shortly after the world premiere])

Ultimately, a microphone was used in the later Milton Court performance. Part of this problem was the resistance of the producer to spend additional money on this given the project's already very high budget, but after repeated feedback she agreed to address this. In future performances (or other similar projects) I would now insist that a microphone be included in the budget. Requiring the music to remain quiet enough for speech to be heard over it for the duration of an hour-long piece, is I believe, fundamentally impractical and creatively limiting.

---

[i] While it is possibly unwise to interrogate such reactions too deeply, I discuss them here to provide insight into my artistic reflections on the work around the time of the premiere, with the aim of documenting and revealing "times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 275). These reflections prompted an assessment of many of the assumptions I had made at this point concerning the intelligibility and pacing of the work's narrative, with implications for my further practice and compositional approach in the works composed in the aftermath, including those discussed in Part Two.

7 **Part Two**: Instrumental Works with Narrative Design

Immediately after the completion of *Hansel and Gretel* I began a series of short instrumental works. Not initially intended for inclusion in this portfolio, I nevertheless chose to draw upon my experience of working with narrative compositional designs on an artistic basis, to test its potential in untexted instrumental works. As discussed earlier, I had originally hoped to include a setting of Simon Armitage's modern translation of the medieval poem *Pearl* for Baritone Chorus and Orchestra, commissioned for the BBC Proms. The original premiere in 2020 was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In retrospect, I made a series of artistic discoveries through these works that revealed the power of narrative to generate novel solutions to compositional problems, and have therefore included these works here as "preliminary case studies" that prepared me for the explicitly text-based narrative approach of my clarinet quintet, *At Night*. (See chapter 9.)

As a set, the narrative strategies explored in the works presented here include instances of overt programmaticism, "autobiographic" writing, and the adaptation of other published stories and poetry, which resulted in the discovery of novel approaches to form, time, texture, topic and rhetoric, as detailed in the case study analyses that follow.

7.1 Research Aims

Having grown out of the artistic and research discoveries made during *Hansel and Gretel*, the instrumental works presented here further explore the same research questions presented in Part One, but slightly refined, as follows:

i. To what extent can an instrumental work successfully convey a narrative, without a spoken, or sung, text?

The extent to which music can tell stories at all is explored earlier in the Literature and Practice Review (chapter 4), but is perhaps even more pertinent here. To sum up

a complex (and sometimes partisan) debate, to accept the storytelling potential of music (especially after the end of tonal common practice) is essentially a choice on the part of the creator or theorist. As Michael Klein notes when setting out his own stance:

> We have a choice. We can fall into the music, shut out the chaotic world, click our heels three times, ignore the story around us, and live in a universe of sound away from the problem of history. Or we can find a way to give the music a voice, listen as it tells us the story of the world that it too heard as a jumble, wonder at secret histories to which the music bore witness, and find strength to tell the stories of the music. (2013, 25)

As I will show, I actively employed narrative strategies in creating these works. Moreover, for readers and listeners willing to accept Klein's "choice", the musical stories they tell can be discerned, described, and examined in some detail using the critical methods and tools enlisted later in section 7.2.

In the third work discussed here, *At Night*, this line of research inquiry is further developed by addressing the question:

ii. How can instrumental music articulate (the essence of) a literary narrative by another author?

Here it is the adaptation, or transmediation, of an existing textual narrative into musical form that governs the research inquiry. While of course music lacks the specificity to convey the precise details of a literary plot, Almén argues that it nevertheless can exhibit musical narrativity through transvaluation of a hierarchical arrangement of music materials or agents: "if one can articulate the prevailing oppositions within a work, and if one can observe how they are transvalued within that work, then one is articulating its narrative trajectory" (2008, 66).

7.2 Methodology

The broad autoethnographic approach to the documentation of process remains the same here as in Part One. (Unfortunately, I have no diary entries for one of the works, *Flight Studies*: ii. "The Kestrel", as it was not initially intended for inclusion, but as I will show, its composition is directly pertinent to the development of my narrative approach, and other material surrounding its creation and premiere: a live video interview, correspondence with the performer, compositional sketches and lecture materials I used for an Open Session at the Guildhall shortly after the premiere – have been used to fill this gap.)

However, as stated above, the critical tools used in the analytical discussion of this music and its creation draws on a wider range of sources, specifically concerned with the narrative interpretation of instrumental works (Abbate 1991; Tarasti 1992; Almén 2008), historical ideas of musical rhetoric and topic (Ratner 1980), and theories of adaptation when an existing text has been adapted to generate such a musical narrative (principally, Ryan 2004; Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2012; Boyd 2017). These are discussed in more detail as they pertain to each work.

7.3 Lineage

The lineage of narrative instrumental works throughout musical history is vast and extends across eras, genres, and styles. (The nineteenth-century movement of Wagnerian programmaticism is perhaps just one, admittedly significant, strand of this.) As such, a broad selection of works is discussed in detailed relation to the individual works below, ranging from Telemann to Abrahamsen, as creative and critical reference points that informed my approach on a case-by-case basis.

8 Initial Narrative Instrumental Compositions (with no Explicit Textual Source)

8.1 *Five Highland Scenes* for Violin and Piano

This set of five miniatures was written directly in the months following the final performance of *Hansel and Gretel*, and was initially intended as an opportunity to regain my creative fluency in order to prepare for what was then intended to be my next major project, *Pearl*. I also hoped it would act as something of an antidote to *Hansel and Gretel*, being for smaller forces, consisting of much shorter movements and without a text, or collaborators, to contend with. Two of the movements had already been written as part of an earlier project (i. Out on the Hills and iii. Snowbells were composed during a residency in 2016 with BBC Radio 3), and needed only light revision and adaptation for this new work.

However, during early planning, I noted that both existing movements were inspired by the outdoors and nature, and I chose to expand this theme to give the set a programmatic design on this theme, as detailed in the original programme note:

> Returning to these two short pieces at various points throughout 2017 and 2018, I began to think about reworking and combining them as part of a cycle of five miniatures for violin and piano.
>
> Both of the original works deliberately conjured images of nature and the outdoors. Following a solo cycling and walking trip I made in 2017 I began to contemplate further exploring this theme in the remaining movements. (Mostly) fond recollections of the tendency for Scottish mountain weather to cycle between extremes of sun, gentle snow and heavy downpours all within a single day inspired the broad range of characters and evolving textures found throughout the piece.
>
> (Extract from programme note to (original version of) *Five Highland Scenes*, March 2019)

At the time I was thoroughly aware of the programmatic design of the set as a whole (summarised in Table 8.1) and the particularly narrative qualities of the final movement (which as I argue below, could be heard to depict a narrator in the act of storytelling).

> Just typing up the final version (hopefully) of new violin piece. It's the first uncommissioned piece I've completed for years (perhaps ever) but it's been something I've wanted to do for a long time since the BBC residency and some of the fragments that became the final 5 movements were first jotted down just before I started H&G when our funding hadn't yet arrived. Two of the movement[s] were already written (snowbells and out on the hills – with some minor changes/additions) during the Beeb residency itself.
>
> I've done this because I wanted something to ease me back into some fluent writing - I've also been tinkering with the proms commission for quite some time now, trying to find the sound etc, but wanted something that was ready to go in a sense and this has offered that.
>
> […]
>
> Interestingly the piece does have a narrative of sorts - each movement depicts a different scene from outdoors. All the walking / cycling I've done over the last few years has kind of fed into it. I might include it as part of my folio (or in the appendix) in order to look at untexted narratives in my music. Some sections (e.g. the 'thaw' that leads to heavy rain) are quite programmatic - others just follow a general (static) image and develop that material musically (e.g. Snowbells). The last one has a particularly 'story-telling' quality but trying to explain why (or what the hell the story is) will be more of a challenge, but perhaps no doubt possible to an extent with some hindsight. (Composer's Diary Entry 19 March 2019)

As noted in these entries, I was consciously drawing on the experience of writing a large-scale texted narrative work and the research that underpinned it. In particular, the range of narrative strategies enumerated by Almén and Hatten (2013) were in my thoughts with respect to the handling of musical time, musical imagery through topic, and the characterisation of musical subjects that undergo transvaluation within a musical hierarchy, outlined in Table 8.1. (See also Almén 2008.)

However, certain aspects of the piece remained something of an enigma to me at the time of composition: “the last one has a particularly ‘storytelling’ quality but trying to explain why (or what the hell the story is) will be more of a challenge” (Composer’s Diary Entry 19 March 2019).

As described below, it was upon further reflection, particularly when preparing to give a lecture about this work, I grew increasingly aware of the influence of Abbate’s chapter “What the Sorcerer Said” in *Unsung Voices* (1991) on my compositional thinking during this time with respect to the last movement, some of which was written with great rapidity. (See section 8.1.1.)

Table 8.1 Narrative outline of Five Highland Scenes

Movement	*Musical Topic(s)*	*Narrative Implications*
i. Out on the Hills	Pastoral, birdsong (Messiaen)	• Spacious (largely) solo violin writing, suggesting a single protagonist in an open landscape (lingering resonances from harmonics and open strings and frequent rest suggest "air", e.g. bb. 2, 8, 38 etc.) • Slow harmonic rhythm and near-diatonicism of opening isotopy (bb. 1-11) suggestive of pastoral topic; cf. Almén's analysis of Schubert, Piano Sonata in B♭ D. 960, first movt. (2008, 141–42) • Piano used sparingly to enrich violin lines/resonance (e.g. bb. 2, 5, 13) and makes fleeting allusions to Messiaen's "birdsong" piano writing (cf. *Petites esquisses d'oiseaux:* i. "Le rouge-gorge") with upper register figures in parallel sevenths (bb. 6 and 11), and rich colouristic harmonies (e.g. b. 21) in middle register
ii. A Light Dusting	Light-footed dance with "tumbling" figures	• Shift of perspective from observer to observed • *Leggero* staccato piano chords in high register with pizzicato violin to suggest "lightness" snowflakes • Playful rhythmic style on syncopated dance rhythms (e.g. bb. 54-61) • Tumbling figures to suggest falling snow (bb. 51-52, 57-58 etc.)

iii. Snowbells	Snow (Abrahamsen), gentle bell effects	• Allusions to Hans Abrahamsen's *Schnee* used to suggest "snow topic" as below:
		  ○ Repeated notes incorporated within slowly falling figures in the piano (cf. *Schnee*, Canon 1a and 1b)
		  ○ Emphasis on twelfths in the high register of the piano (e.g. b. 118 – c.f. Canon 1b)
		  ○ Metric effects (compare the interplay of 5s and 4s with the 9s and 8s in *Schnee* Canon 2b)
		• "Bell" sonorities were generated largely as a by-product of the repetition in the piano

iv. Thawing	Water, rainfall figures (light to heavy)	• More imagistic textures depicting quietly falling droplets (e.g. bb. 141 & 145), eventually leading to longer continuous "rainfall" (bb.175-187, with "thunderous" bass notes in pno) • Materials linked to earlier movements (e.g. bells in pno at 148) and developed freely to generate large-scale continuity, as earlier snow "thaws" to rain
v. Fireside Tale	Aria melody, warmth, speech / rhetoric, "quasi-parlando" (Tarasti 1992; see 8.1.1 below).	• Marked contrast with preceding movement (which was largely pictorial) to focus on single "speaker" or narrator (cf Abbate 1991, 60) • Melodic line very rhetorical in character (see 8.1.1), with emphasis on "warm" register in the piano accompaniment to suggest change of environment (from the outside to "indoors") • Central section (bb. 220-230) has a more reflective quality, recalling chiming bells in the piano leading to extended solo cadenza confirming the individuality of the narrator • When the piano accompaniment returns, the solo line weaves in quotations and allusion from the first movement

8.1.1 Movement V: “Fireside Tale”

Abbate argues that in Dukas’ *L’Apprenti Sorcier* it is only during the epilogue (specifically, the appearance of the viola solo) that a narrator is perceptible as an agent in the work:

> If the epilogue is the sound of music's narrating voice, then it is a trace of what is constituted by the quotation marks in Goethe's poem—and, in this, a doubly mediated echo of Eucrates the narrator. The last ten measures pass over to the other world, speaking in the past tense of what has happened, in an orchestral *“he said”* that is the voice of this third man. The third man is, of course, mute during the drama, and known by the mysterious marks that appear only in the final stanza. (Abbate 1991, 60)

In a lecture on my recent work to Guildhall composition students in May 2021, I discussed the influence of this deliberate foregrounding of the musical storyteller as the last gesture in a larger programmatic work. (Incidentally, this does not indicate my agreement with Abbate’s interpretation of the Dukas; it simply interested me as a device to explore creatively.) In my preparatory notes I remarked on this: “as a set it’s intended to be autobiographic to an extent; capturing the scenes and experiences of my cycling holiday, but ‘I’m’ only really present as a character in the first and last movements, (I think anyway)” (13 May 2021).

In my lecture slides (Figure 8.1), I attempted to share, with students, my motivation and strategy for achieving this change of voice at the end of the set.

Figure 8.1 Slides from Open Session (Kaner 2021)

'Fireside Tale'

- Final movement of *Five Highland Scenes*, for violin and piano
- The movement functions as an epilogue to the set, and as such takes on a different register, or is uttered in a different voice. (Cf. Abbate on the coda of Dukas' *L'apprenti sorcier*)

  > If the epilogue is the sound of music's narrating voice, then it is a trace of what is consti- tuted by the quotation marks in Goethe's poem-and, in this, a dou- bly mediated echo of Eucrates the narrator. The last ten measures pass over to the other world, speaking in the past tense of what has happened, in an orchestral "*he said*" that is the voice of this third man. The third man is, of course, mute during the drama, and known by the mysterious marks that appear only in the final stanza. (1991, 60)

- Written for Ben Baker, who is giving the premiere in July 3, 2021, at East Neuk Festival, which will be recorded for broadcast on R3

Musical 'scenery' and characterisation

- Warmth (fire / whisky?), through rich harmonic language, "breathing" chords, "restorative" quality after the downpour
- Conventional melody with accompaniment texture
  - Aim was to convey a single voice speaking against a background
- Rhetorical flourishes / embellishment of the line, with slightly whimsical quality
- Results in 'arioso' style, somewhere between recitative (speech rhythms) and aria (lyrical reflective song)
- Gently contrasting central section – "trance time"?
  - "a potentially emergent effect created by non-teological repetitive or continuous structures that exceed a typical S[…] In this music our sense of temporality is lost". (Klein and Reyland 2013, 68)
  - Perhaps links to 'bells' in earlier movements (especially iii and iv), but distantly remembered, or portrayed in a different light in the context of the story-telling
- Leading to cadenza which combines opening materials of this movement with motives from the first, bringing the entire set to a close

Narrative context

- Follows a huge "downpour" in the previous movement ("Thawing")
- Fascinated by the idea of the narrator appearing in the music in Abbate's analysis
- Autobiographic/ethnographic dimension:
  - I wanted the movement to suggest the character of a narrator telling a story, having spent several evenings with strangers in Scottish mountain pubs (sometimes chatting away with them, sometimes just overhearing)
  - While the other movements capture the scenes and experience of my trip, I'm only really present in the first and last (I think…)
  - In effect, it's a narrative about narrativity, or a story about story-telling
  - My agency as storyteller-composer is foregrounded

Moreover, since then, I have become far more familiar with the earlier work of Almén *in A Theory of Musical Narrative* (2008), which I am now teaching the text as part of an undergraduate course. Armed with this more detailed knowledge of his approach and having had the opportunity to hear the set performed live and broadcast, I now recognise several further features of the work are relevant to such an interpretation, as follows:

1. The final movement stands in stark relief texturally and in terms of topic to the pictorialism of the downpour of the movement that precedes it, generating a structural effect Almén describes as "markedness", in which the listener is aware of the narrative-structural significance of a passage of music through the use of contrast or opposition: "marked entities have a greater (relative) specificity of meaning" (Hatten 1994, p. 291-92, quoted in Almén 2008, 230).

2. The rhetorical (spoken) character of the melodic line is achieved principally through the cantabile topic of the passage, which Ratner argues, has been linked to rhetoric since the eighteenth century, and seen as a form of "musical discourse" in texts such as Mattheson's *Capellmeister* (1739, 237; quoted in Ratner 1980, 91–94).

Mattheson's melodic analyses employ terms taken directly from classical rhetoric such as *exordium* (introduction) *narratio* (statement) *confirmatio* (reinforcement of an idea) *apostrophe* (digression to another topic) *peroratio* (conclusion), which can effectively be applied here too (see Figure 8.2).

Moreover, the ornate rubato writing, and its juxtaposition with a more metered accompaniment might more specifically be compared to Tarasti's label "quasi-parlando" (1992, 410), used in his famous narrative analysis of Chopin's Ballade no. 1 in G minor (op. 23) in relation to the long-breathed, and ornamented melody of the second subject, which is lightly syncopated against its regular 6/4 accompaniment, suggesting a more spoken or narrator-like delivery.

As already noted, the central section of “Fireside Tale” (bb. 220-230) has a more introspective quality. While not (yet) directly quoting material from earlier movements, the repeated chords in the piano hark back to the bell effects of “Snowbells” (movement iii) and the scalic melodic writing in both this and the fourth movement, as if its narrator were lost in a moment of personal reflection, looking back on the journey undertaken across the piece.

Indeed, as I more consciously sensed at the time, this moment’s dramatically slowed harmonic rhythm might be perceived as a temporary “dissolution of temporality” and the melodic repetition specifically suggestive of a brief “trance state”: strategies listed under “twentieth century techniques and aesthetics with implications for narrative interpretation” by Almén and Hatten (2013, 64). As a story-telling device, this moment of interiority might be understood to give the narrator a greater sense of agency, as they look back on the preceding events for themselves, as much as for any audience.

The subsequent dissolution of the accompaniment into extended cadenza might be seen to further assert the individuality of the narrating character, while also preparing a new harmonic context, in which the merging of a musical figure from the opening movement is integrated into the melodic line as a closural “summing up” device (or in rhetorical terms, *peroratio*) at the end of the work. Arguably, the effect is comparable to Almén’s discussion of a similar device in Schubert D960 (movt. 1 b. 212): “as though to assert its individuality, the melodic line soars free of its accompanimental frame with a recitative-like passage” (2008, 156).

Yet, despite these narrative techniques, narrative analysis of a work, as Almén argues, is a fundamentally hermeneutic undertaking: cues such as the title and programme note may suggest a narrative interpretation to a listener; it is down to their listening experience and cultural background whether they perceive musical meaning in the manner I have described. Nonetheless, from a creative standpoint, this work and particularly this movement, engendered important compositional epiphanies (some apparent at the time, others after subsequent reflection) that contributed to my

artistic mindset in the works that followed, especially with regard to topic and setting, melodic rhetoric, and the possibilities inherent in Abbate's concept of "music's narrating voice" (1991, 60).

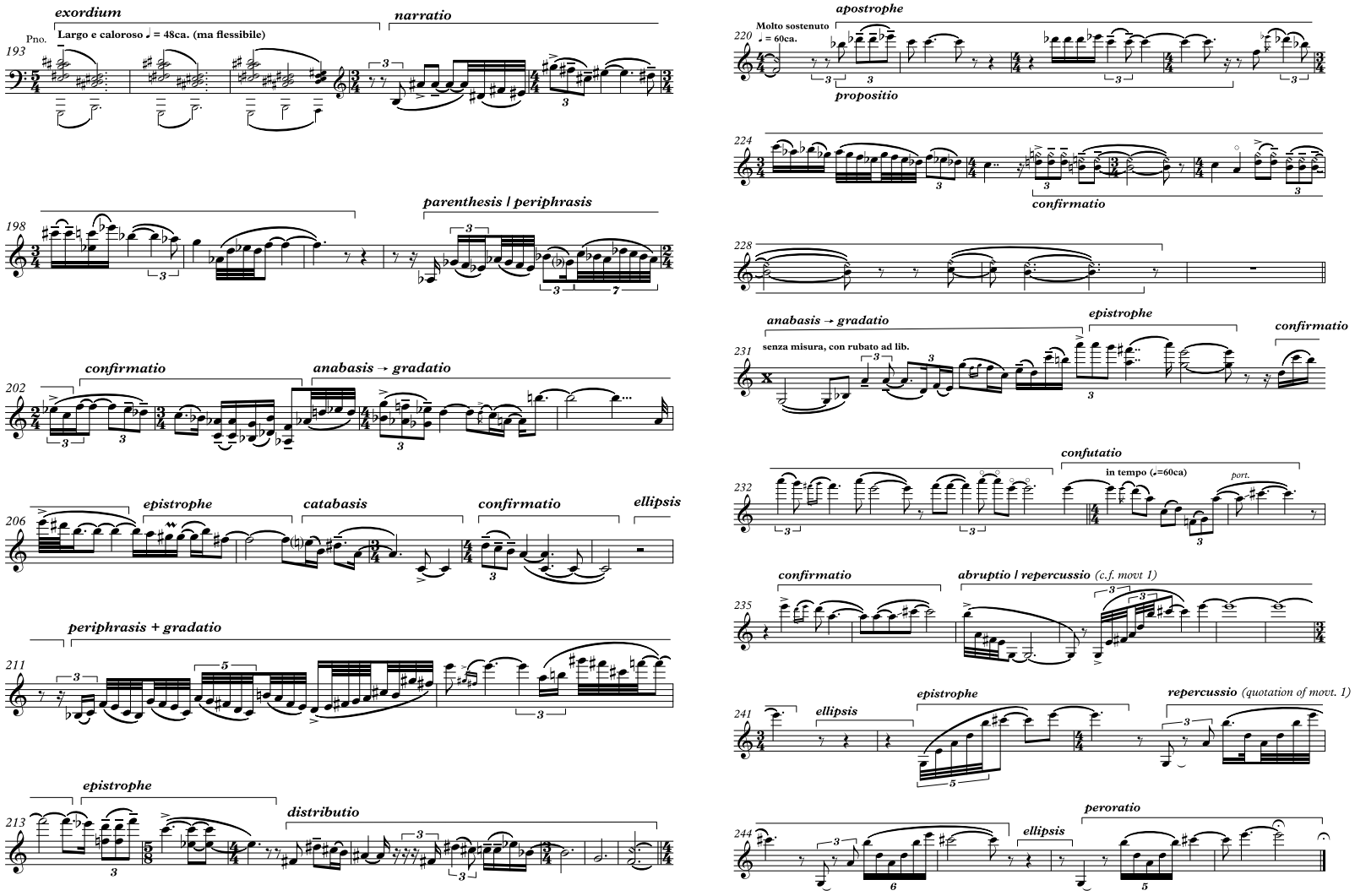
Unlike the preceding passage (bb. 193-216), for which I sketched the harmonic progression several times over and redrafted the melody to fit both together successfully), this section (bb. 220-end) was through-composed in one sitting, near enough in its final form. As noted previously in the commentary on Scene 7 of *Hansel and Gretel* (chapter 5) the significance of passages composed in this way often eludes me at the time; my creative musical impulses seem simply guided by what I can hear in my head. Yet as disconcerting as this can be, these passages often seem to be best received by performers, and yield artistic insights I come to better understand later. When choosing a single movement to perform as part of a BBC Radio broadcast (I had suggested the second), violinist Benjamin Baker strongly favoured the final movement:

> Hey Matt! Daniel and I just had our first full rehearsal on Highland Scenes. We absolutely love it!! I wanted to cheekily ask though, even though it has a flashback to the first movement in it, we love the last movement so much that it feels like it could be perfect as a standalone movement for 13th Jan. Could you stomach that at all?
>
> (WhatsApp message to the author, 10 December 2020)

Emerging research in cognition during compositional activities supports the notion of "intuitive expertise" (Pohjannoro 2016, 227); this is explored in greater detail in section 11.5.

Moreover, as Nelson might argue, the process of critical reflection here serves to make tacit knowledge explicit: "we are often unaware of having learned to do these things; we simply find ourselves doing them[…]" (Nelson 2013, 42), and subsequently prepared me for the works that followed (see section 8.2 and chapter 9).

Figure 8.2 Rhetorical analysis of violin melody in “Fireside Tale” after Ratner and Mattheson



Translation of Terms	***abruptio*** breaking off	***anabasis*** ascent	***apostrophe*** digression to another topic	***catabasis*** descent
confirmatio reinforcement of an idea	***confutatio*** resolution of an idea	***distributio*** breaking up of an idea	***ellipsis*** rest instead of note	***epistrophe*** repetition of an idea
exordium introduction	***gradatio*** climax	***narratio*** statement	***parenthesis*** insertion, interpolation	***periphrasis*** circumlocution
peroratio conclusion	***propositio*** statement or restatement	***repercussio*** restatement, not repetition		(Sources: Ratner 1980; Lanham 1991)

8.2 *Flight Studies* for Basset Clarinet

Composed as a commission for the London Sinfonietta *Shorts* series, these works ("The Kestrel" and "The Swift") for solo basset clarinet were written as additions to an existing work, *The Red Crowned Crane* (2016), to include in an ongoing cycle of compositions for this medium.[i] While my initial intention had been to present the works as a set of "portraits" of these birds in flight, the second movement, "The Kestrel", turned unexpectedly into a much more elaborate work (lasting roughly 8 minutes), for which a narrative design proved the solution to compositional structural difficulties I encountered during the creative process.

8.2.1 Movement II: "The Kestrel"

Written as musical depiction of the kestrel: its flight patterns, large territory, and feeding behaviour, I eventually (at the point of a creative epiphany) realised that the work was best structured as a narrative in which the bird observes, tracks and subsequently captures and kills its prey.

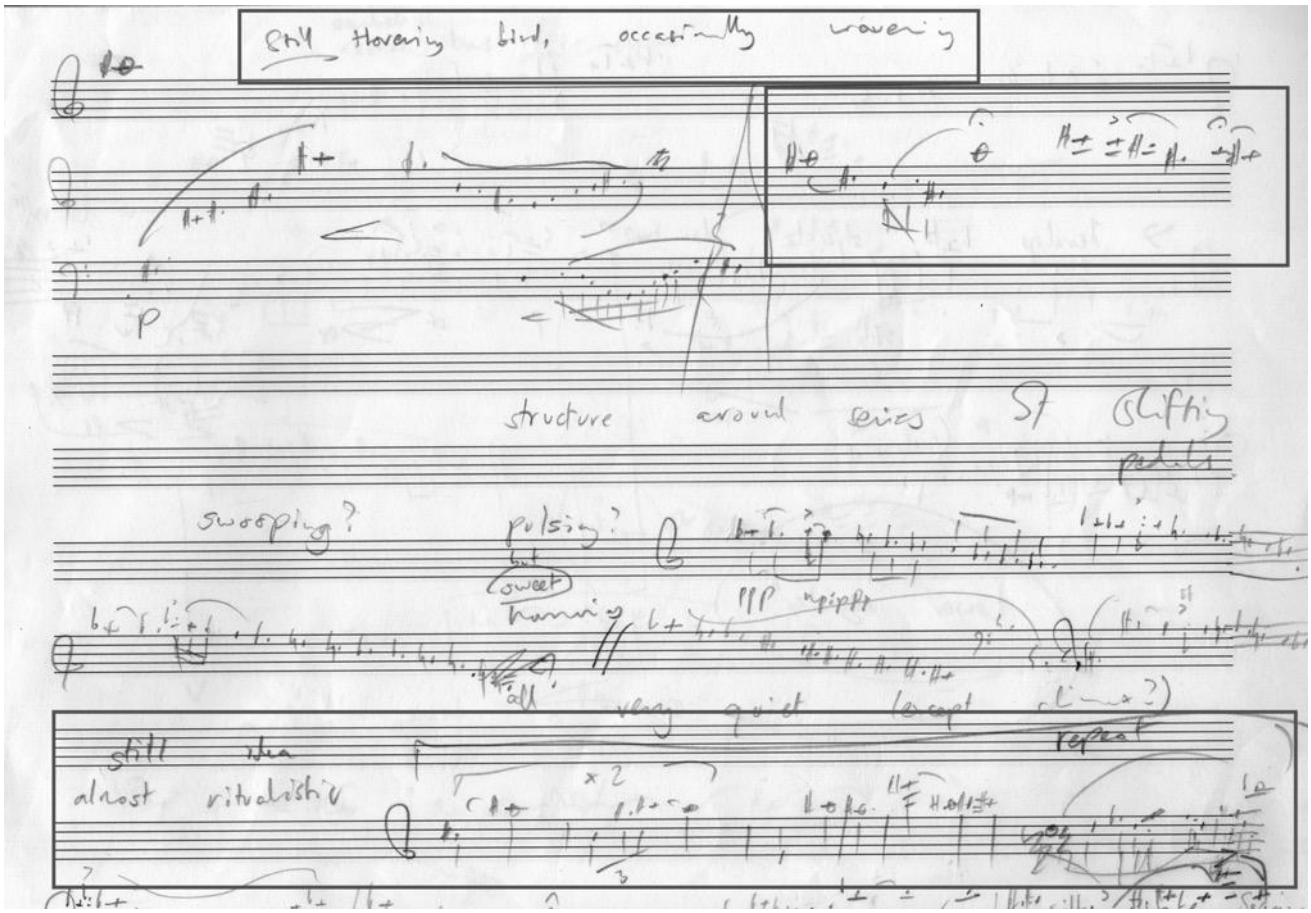
As I subsequently discussed in the interview with Zoë Martlew preceding the performance, this was partly in response to the government requirement to stay at home due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of composition, and my main access to nature being the nearby Hackney Marshes, where I became far more aware of birds than previously.

One of the very first starting points for the work was a clip from an episode of the BBC documentary, Spring Watch, ("BBC Spring Watch: Kestrels [Extract]" 2013), with a particularly suggestive opening shot (in slow motion) of a kestrel hovering as it tracks its prey on the ground below.

Figure 8.3 Still of a kestrel hovering in BBC Spring Watch documentary

As Chris Packham explains in the accompanying voice-over: “you see, they hover effortlessly, even in high winds. By constantly making small adjustments to their wings and tail feathers, these kestrels can keep their head and their large eyes completely steady” (“BBC Spring Watch: Kestrels [Extract]” 2013).

Figure 8.4 First page of sketches for “The Kestrel” showing "hovering" pedal motive



As shown in Figure 8.4, I immediately translated this into a spacious pedal note motive intended to suggest the motionless bird with rapid decorative figures to suggest gusts of wind rushing against this.

During subsequent creative planning, I quickly amassed a large amount of musical material, but felt it was disordered and was unsure why and how to put it together. My early sketches focused principally on the on the playful dance-like motive (introduced in b. 30), and on the rising sixth “hovering” theme functioning as a kind of a refrain.

Yet it came as a significant creative epiphany when I realised the movement should be structured as a narrative rather than a static “portrait”; as the initial structural sketch (Figure 8.5) shows I was unsure of this at first (marked “Narrative?”), and subsequently revised the musical plot several times. The numbering of the sections in Figure 8.5 shows the idea of capture came at a later date; the importance of a second character (the prey) came later still.

Having reached this realisation, I re-watched the documentary extract several times over, noting the importance of “their acute eyesight”, which is used “to spot their prey, and hunt a wide range of animals including lizards, beetles, worms.” At this point, it occurred to me that the extended lower register of the instrument might be suited to this portrayal of a second “prey” character, which I had yet to find a significant role for. (This was quite crucial, as there seemed little point in calling for the Basset Clarinet without using its extended lower range.)

I subsequently revised my structural plans for the work as below, with a growing awareness of the importance of distinct topics for each of the musical agents, and began inventing the material for the prey character, and its eventual capture.

Figure 8.5 Initial sketch of narrative shape for “The Kestrel” (c.f. Figure 8.8 for narrative graph of finished work)

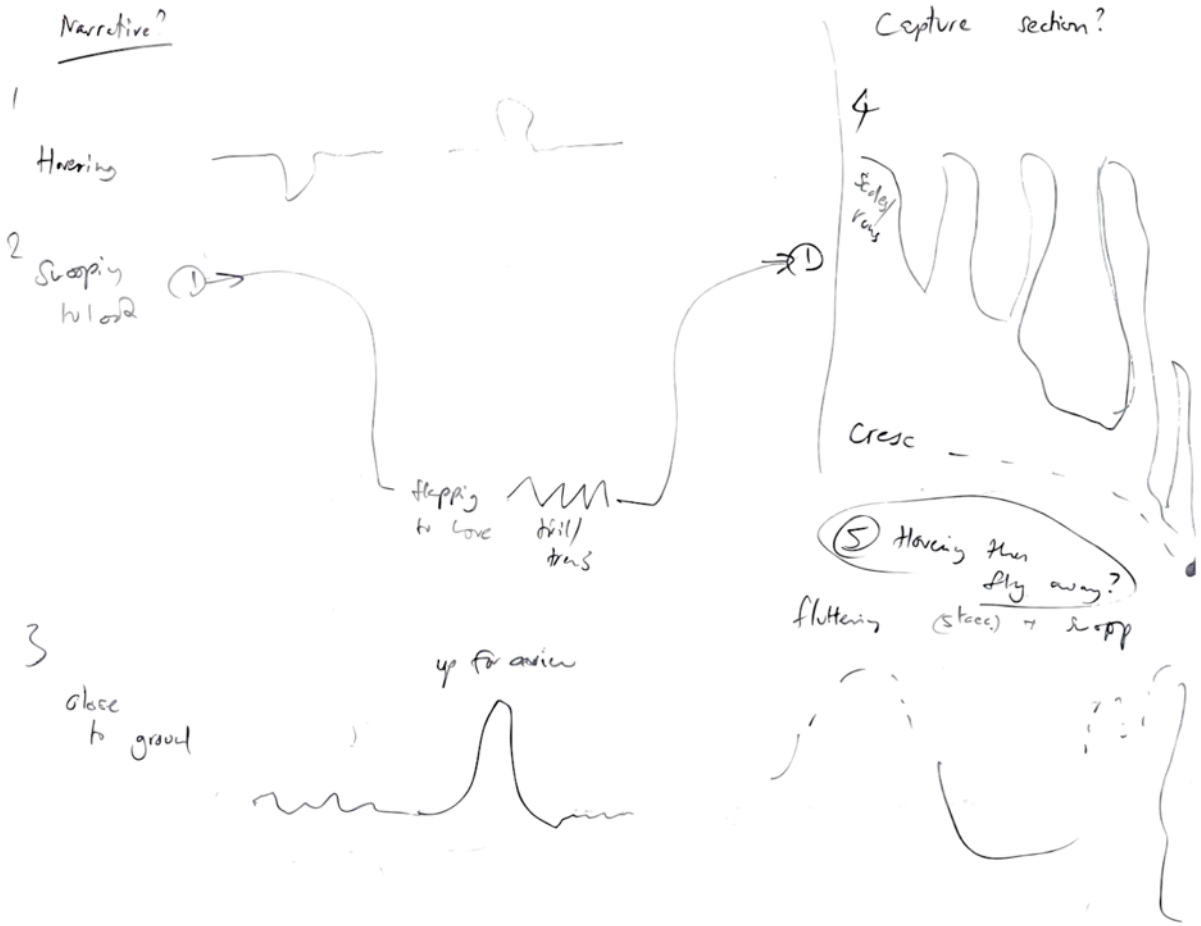
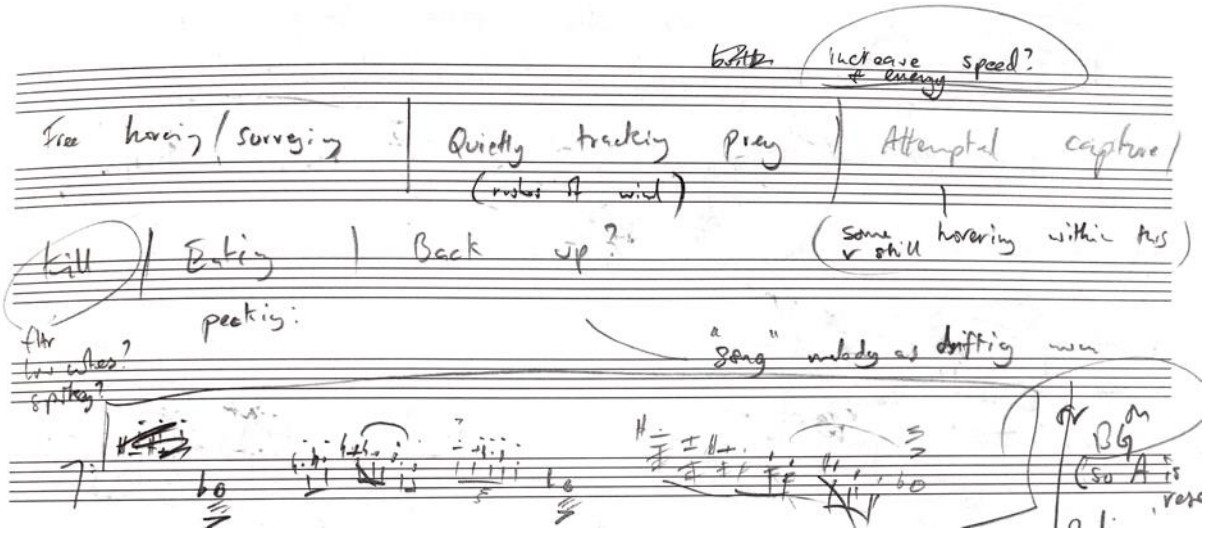
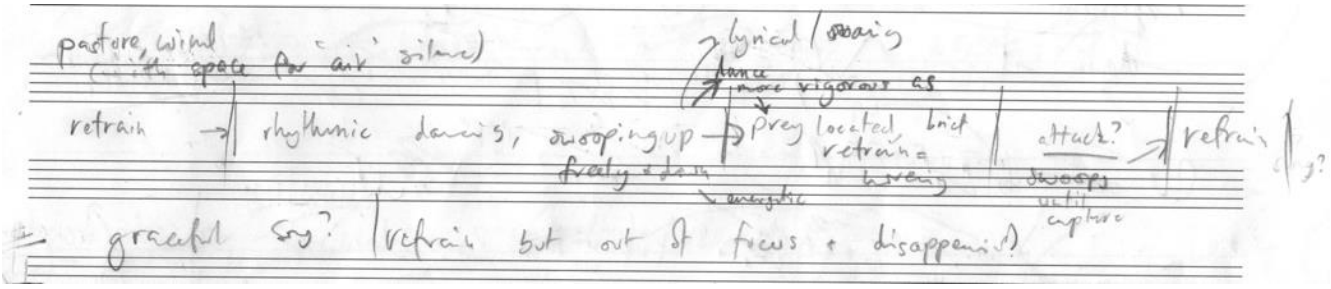


Figure 8.6 Later sketches for “The Kestrel”

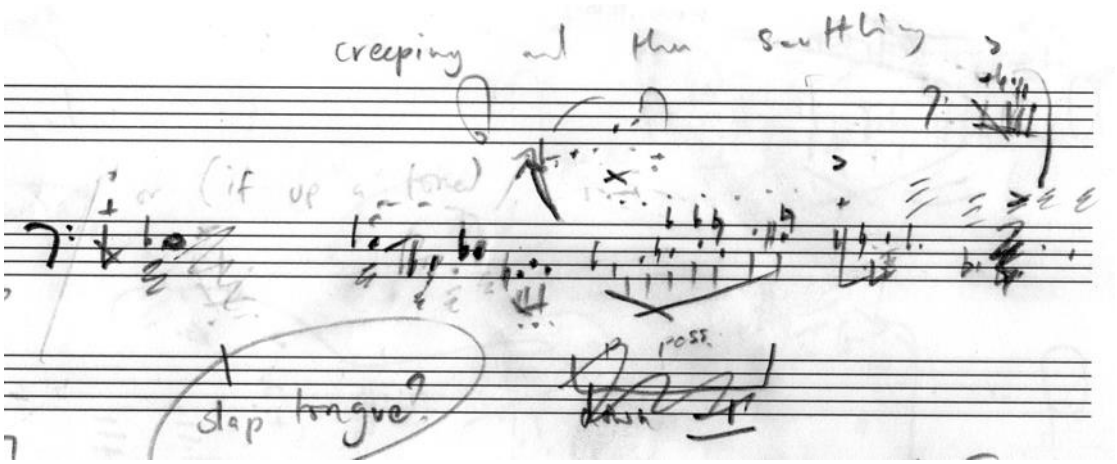
a. Subsequent structural sketch (and initial attempt at “kill” section)



b. Subsequent structural sketch with more descriptive labels

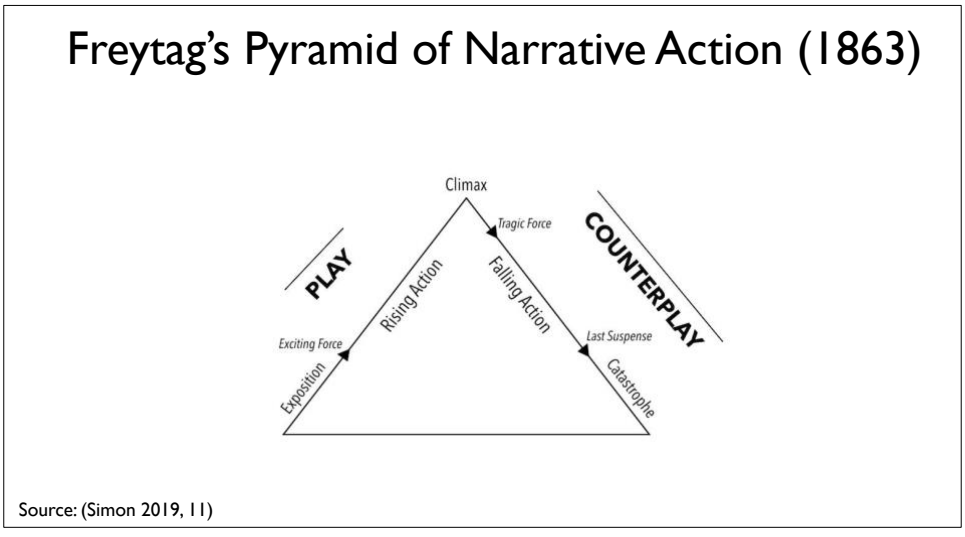


c. Early sketches for "prey" motive, incorporating held flutter-tongue notes in a low tessitura alongside staccato grace note figures



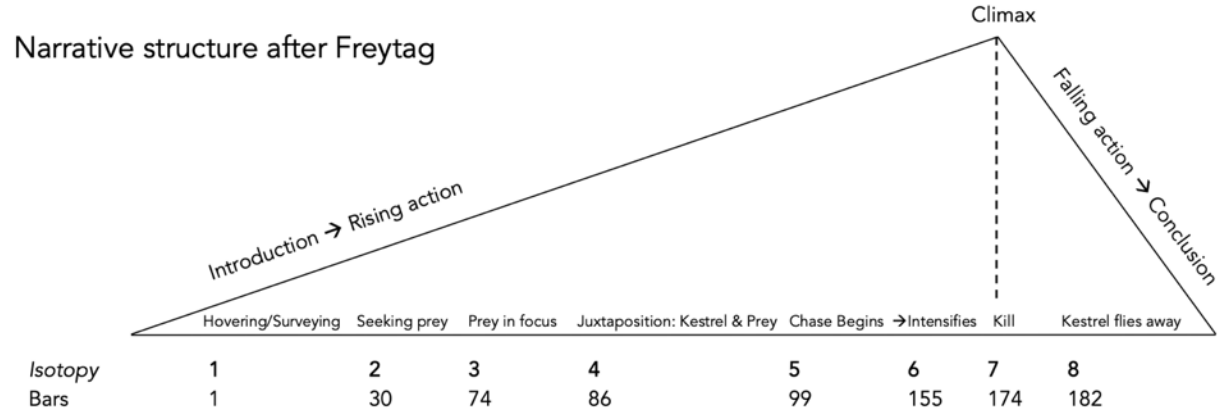
In the subsequent Open Session lecture on my work (2021), I compared the narrative design of the work to Freytag's pyramid of narrative action shown below:

Figure 8.7 Lecture Slide from Open Session (Kaner 2021)



At the time, I suggested that this generic formulation (in which some terms, such as "catastrophe" seem less relevant – unless told from the point of view of the prey character) should perhaps be adapted. The following asymmetrical structure (informed also by Hoffman 2002, 116) gives a better sense of the narrative design of the work:

Figure 8.8 Adapted narrative pyramid for "The Kestrel"



However, Almén's analytical approach (heavily modelled on Tarasti (1992)) can perhaps enrich this interpretation; indeed, it is arguably well suited to this particular work, given its adherence to a relatively traditional "heroic" narrative model. Table 8.2, with the supporting annotated score extracts in Figure 8.9, divides the piece into Almén's *isotopies* (essentially large syntactic units, not necessarily corresponding to musical phrase structures), across which the hierarchical arrangement (or "ranking") of the piece's main materials undergoes gradual transformation across its duration. Topic plays a key role in the characterisation of the *agents* in the work, and the interplay of these materials, underpinned by its harmonic teleology can be shown to strongly support a *musical narrative interpretation* of the work regardless of whether a listener is aware of its specific programmatic content.

8.2.2 Reflections on "The Kestrel"

The narrative element of this piece was quickly sensed both by the performer, and Martlew who emphasised this in the pre-performance discussion. The clarinettist described the prey character, not perhaps as I would have preferred, as a "pantomime villain" but more insightfully, detected the specific moment in b. 180 "where the prey finally gets it" (Kaner, van de Wiel, and Martlew 2021). When presenting this work

to Guildhall students in the Open Session, they also remarked on its adherence to a relatively traditional narrative model, and suggested that even without prior knowledge of my creative intentions, a listener might sense its musical *emplotment* (the assembly of events into an archetypal narrative, rather than a mere *chronicle*; see Ricoeur (1990)) unprompted.

8.3 Conclusions on Initial Narrative Instrumental Compositions

As the first narratively conceived instrumental works of my career, composed directly in the aftermath of *Hansel and Gretel* (and in the case of *Highland Scenes* designed deliberately as both an antidote to, or "palette cleanser" after such an intricate large-scale project), both the works above provided opportunities to reflect on and further investigate and explore the discoveries I had made in the arena of musical narrativity and to pursue them in untexted works.

However, the narratives in both cases were largely of my own devising and emerged (in some cases quite intuitively) from within the compositions themselves. In the following example (and the final work of the portfolio), the narrative musical structures were part of the conception of the work from the beginning, and were devised in response to existing texts by other authors, involving a more active understanding of musical narrative strategies, and an elaborate process of artistic adaptation, as detailed in the following chapter.

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[i] For reference, the score contains all three movements, but only the second movement, "The Kestrel", is included in this narrative research project.

Table 8.2 Narrative synopsis of "The Kestrel" after Almén

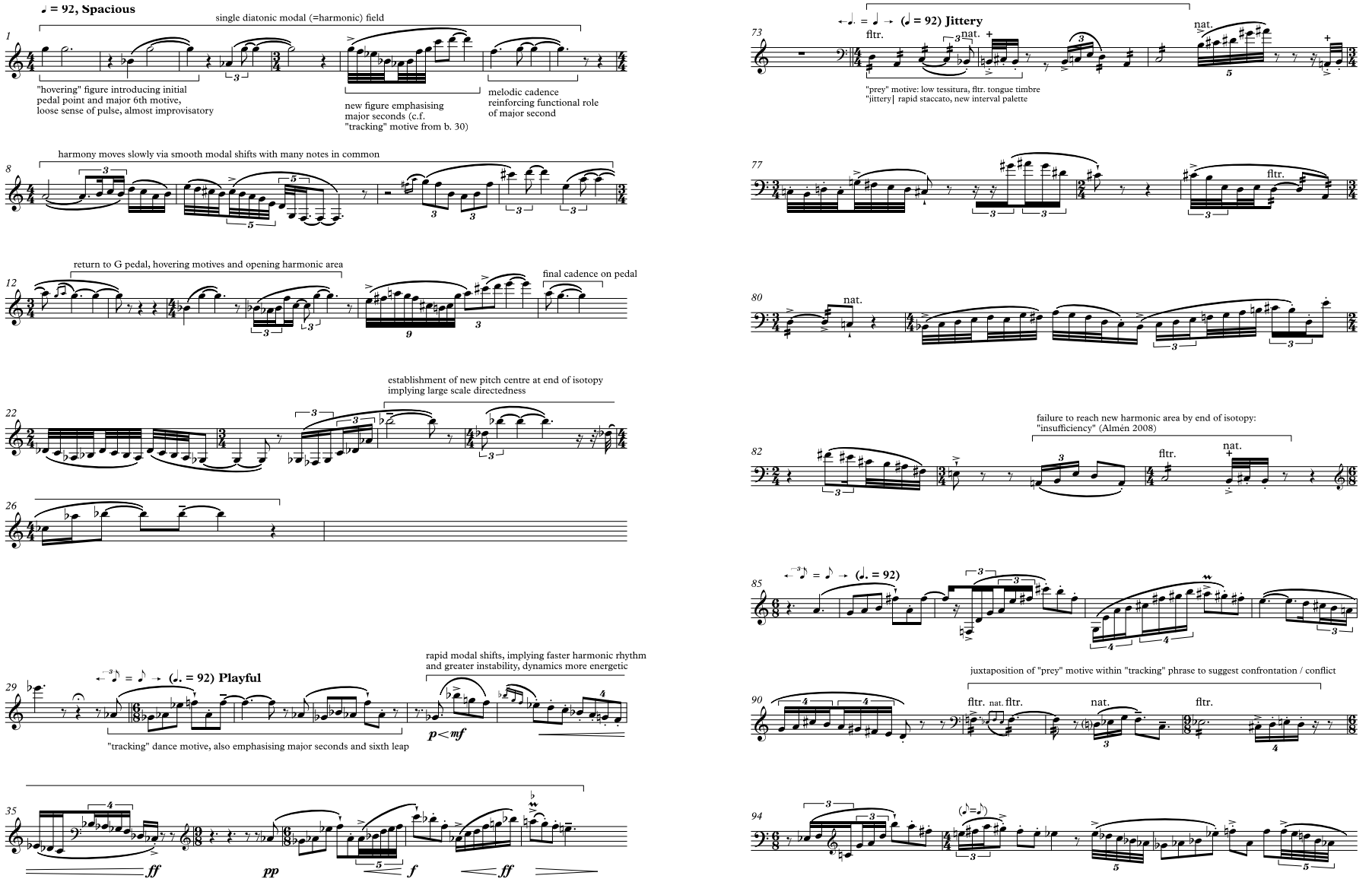
Isotopy	*Bars*	*Description*	*Narrative Interpretation*
1	1-29	*Hovering and gently surveying landscape*	Establishment of kestrel as agent within its outdoor environment: • Pastoral topic evoked through slow harmonic rhythm/smooth modal shifts, rubato, "distant" dynamics with slow swells • Pictorialism of stillness/hovering: B♭ melodic pitch centre/pedal, later followed by C♯ (b. 24) • Inherent musical stability of "hovering" motive (see Figure 8.9), affirmed through repetition determines its high rank: harmonically stable and musically self-sufficient, successfully moving to new pitch centre at end of phrase (b. 24)
2	30-73	*Quietly tracking/seeking prey*	Increased motion suggested through use of 6/8 dance rhythms: • Playful rhythmic writing / tempo marking / new sense of pulse • Harmonically / intervallically related to isotopy 1 but faster harmonic shifts and more frequent changes of pitch centre suggest increased motion and covering new ground

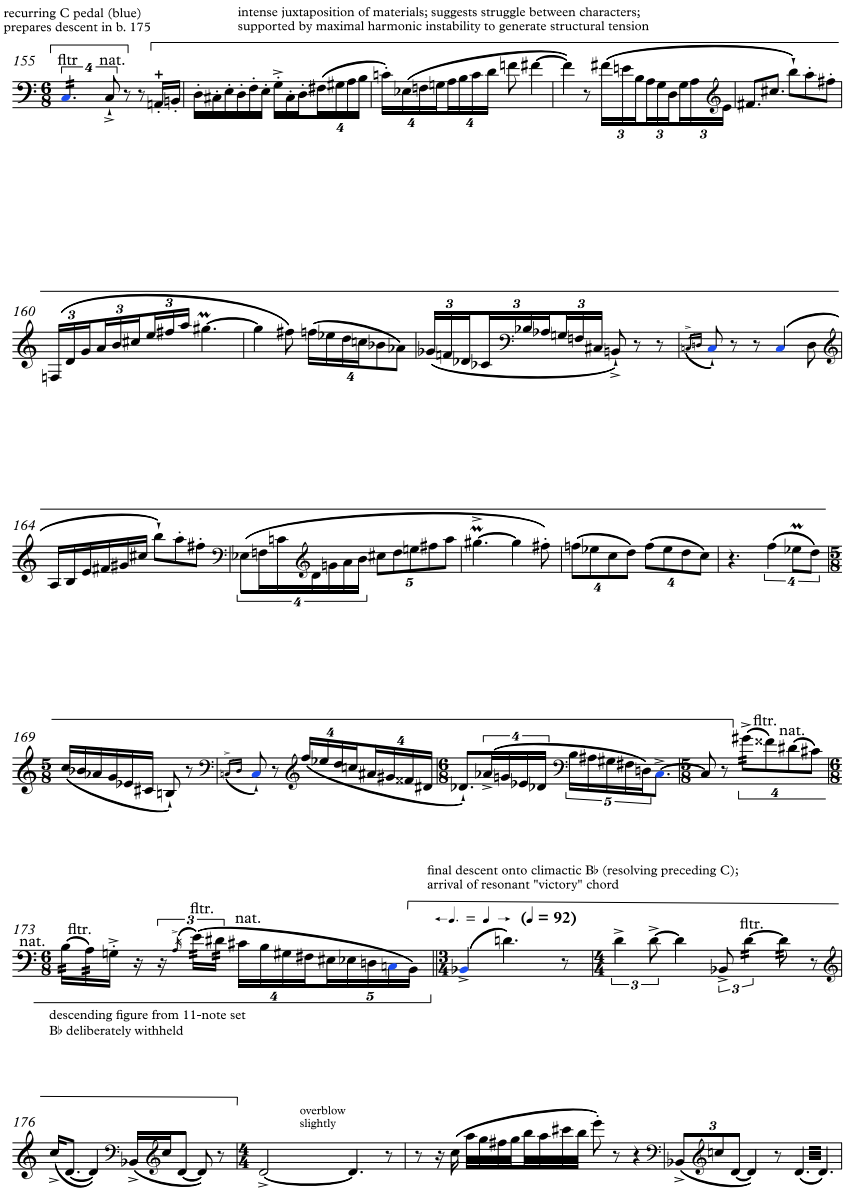
3	74-84	*Prey comes into focus*	Introduction of new musical character after caesura; destabilises previous hierarchy
			• Sketches describe new motive as "creeping and scuttling", shown in marked change of musical topic:
			  ○ registral and timbral contrasts
			  ○ new rhythmic style, articulation, melodic syntax
			  ○ new harmonic style with richer chromatic (rather than diatonic) palette
			  ○ rival pitch centres (B♮, C♮ and C♯) emphasise inherent restlessness of material but motive has no clear trajectory as it keeps retuning to these notes, indicating "insufficiency" (Almén 2008, 149) and lower rank within the narrative hierarchy

4	86-98	*Initial juxtaposition of characters*	Reprise of opening hovering theme: • Elaboration of prey's character (93-98) • Material attempts to move further away (breaking out of its bass tessitura), but ultimately fails, returning to B♮ after immense effort, as if unable to escape the kestrel's gaze

5	99-154	*Chase gets underway*	Closer juxtaposition of prey, tracking and hovering motives: • Described in sketches as passage in which "both voices active" with dance motive harmonically "less stable", suggesting increased conflict and interaction between agents
6	155-173	*Intensification of chase*	• Rapid cycling between registers and characters; harmonically most active passage of the piece, with rapid changes of implied pitch centre • Kestrel motives (hovering, tracking) still dominate, maintaining their higher rank • Ends with resolution of 11-note chord (bb. 172-173) onto 12th pitch in the bass (B♭, b. 174), also resulting in larger structural descent in the bass from the C pedal point preceding it (from b. 155 – shown in blue in Figure 8.9)
7	174-181	*Climax: final attack and kill*	• Harmonic goal achieved (resonant chord on B♭ bass) and emphatically reiterated for several bars • "Final peck" suggested with staccato D in b. 180 (informed by BBC documentary: "they would normally kill their prey with a little nip to the back of the neck once they've grabbed hold of it")
8	182-199	*Coda: kestrel flies away*	• Change of perspective: newfound melodic lyricism developed from "hovering motives" with increased harmonic motion and large-scale diminuendo to suggest the kestrel gracefully flying away • Described in sketches as "graceful song", that grows "out of focus as [the kestrel] disappears"

Figure 8.9 Narrative characterisation of material in “The Kestrel” (at concert pitch)




recurring C pedal (blue)
prepares descent in b. 175
intense juxtaposition of materials; suggests struggle between characters;
supported by maximal harmonic instability to generate structural tension
155
fltr.
nat.
160
164
169
fltr.
nat.
final descent onto climactic B♭ (resolving preceding C);
arrival of resonant "victory" chord
173
fltr.
nat.
fltr.
nat.
(♩ = 92)
fltr.
descending figure from 11-note set
B♭ deliberately withheld
176
overblow
slightly
Coda: newfound melodic lyricism; linked to "hovering" idea
but with more harmonic motion, implying "flying away"
180
final "peck"
poco ad lib.
Spacious (♩=♩)
184
189
f
pp
pp
p
193
pp
mp
f
mp
mf

9 Musical Narratives adapted from Poetry in *At Night*

> Every adapter is both an interpreter of a previous work and a creator of a new one from it. (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2012, 8)

> Crucially, we need to imitate in order to innovate. Building on what came before underlies all creativity, in biology and culture. Starting again from scratch wastes too much accumulated effort: far better to recombine existing design successes. (Boyd 2010, 122)

At Night is a cycle of three musical "stories" for clarinet quintet, each inspired by and adapted from three poems that I identified as suggestive of musical narrative, which is to say, music in which "semantically meaningful units and the pattern of relationships between them" (Almén 2008, 38) undergo transvaluation as part of a temporal unfolding process (see also Almén 2008, 230).

The individual movements are linked by a common theme of night. In part, this was because of my wakeful state during the early hours on most days after the birth of my son in 2020, which had led me to contemplate several different aspects of night such as sleep, dreams, nightmares, night terrors, and even ghostly apparitions, and their role in existing "night" repertory, including nineteenth-century Nocturnes, and "night" pieces by Debussy, Bartók, Mussorgsky, and Britten, as well as *Berceuses* and *Wiegenlieder*.

While the three poems may not easily be described as fully fledged stories in themselves, each seemed to me to have the necessary ingredients for adaptation into a more elaborate musical narrative. Devising my own musical narratives in response to the implicit, rather than explicit, narrative qualities of these poems allowed me greater creative freedom to generate musically convincing plots than a more literal programmatic approach might have entailed. The process of adaptation was therefore a relatively loose and personal one; in the case of movements I and III, personal, or perhaps even autobiographical, details are incorporated into the storytelling in order to reflect how the poetry specifically resonated with me and my life experiences. As

such, the process might be compared to the creation of a feature-length film from a very short story. As Linda Hutcheon eloquently puts it: “like classical imitation, adaptation also is not slavish copying; it is a process of making the adapted material one’s own. In both, the novelty is in what one *does with* the other text” (2012, 20).

To account for and analyse the creative process in these movements, I will therefore add elements of Adaptation Theory to the critical toolbox used in preceding sections. It lies outside the scope of this research to provide a detailed literature review of this scholarship, given the size of the field and the range of work it encompasses. (Compositional research drawing on elements of adaptation theory is beginning to emerge elsewhere; see the bibliography for details of forthcoming research by Carol Jones (n.d.) and Patrick Jones (n.d.).)

As seen below, scholarship in the field of adapting stories across media, particularly those that describe the ways in which material is incorporated, added to, elaborated and simply rejected (Abbott 2002; Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2012; Boyd 2017) are drawn from at various points in the following account. Moreover, Marie-Laure Ryan’s research on “storyworlds” (Ryan 2004), and the means with which these are created, across various media, provides an important analytical framework, which I combine with narrative analytical tools (again, principally Almén 2008) in section 10.1.2.

In summary, Adaptation Theory will thus offer an analytical framework within which to describe the creation of narratives from the original stimulus poems and their transmediation into musical forms.

9.1 Adaptive Methodology in the Three Movements of *At Night*

Given the use of three different source poems for the purposes of adaptation there were several artistic questions that arose in the early planning of these works, the answers to which emerged and evolved gradually through the creative process.

Foremost among these was the following:

- How can I adapt these poems in a musically meaningful or suggestive way that is clearly identifiable as an adaption of the original?

In the abstract, this question suggests an extremely diverse set of responses; a late nineteenth-century programmatic approach struck me as the most obvious historical model for such an adaptation, yet these of course range hugely in terms of specificity and approach. (Even near-contemporaneous examples, such as the *L'Apprenti sorcier* (1897) and *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* (1894), differ wildly in terms of their specificity and reverence to the original source of adaptation.)

Ultimately, the approach I took remains enigmatic to me on some level; tacit knowledge, or put more simply, compositional instinct, certainly played a large role in my final decisions. Yet I did consciously strive to capture what I considered "the essence" of each poem in my compositions as far as possible; indeed, the kind of story-telling approach I took was in response to the style, mood and literary character of each source. In this sense, the three movements differ very significantly: the first creates an expanded musical narrative out of the content of Stevenson's poem, the second more directly follows the evolving mental state and mood of the poetry, which in turn gives rise to an evolving musical narrative; the third is perhaps a hybrid of both approaches.

As acknowledged previously, one additional, but key concern was that the poems themselves might not really be construed as "stories" in and of themselves. The Stevenson describes a regular occurrence, not a specific one; the Elson really has no explicit narrative at all, and the Atwood only subtly describes an ambiguous sequence of events in which it is unclear whether anything "happens" at all. In this light, the choice of the three poems may seem somewhat perverse; if none of them are truly stories, why did I adapt them as part of this research project? Yet as I hope the ensuing discussion reveals, they were suggestive enough to me to guide my compositional approach and generate *musical narratives* in the sense Almén describes,

which possesses its "own syntactic potentialities, its own devices for negotiating conflict and interaction" (Almén 2008, 13). The overriding focus of the adaptive process was therefore on determining what I considered the key characteristics of the poem, and amplifying what I felt to be their narrative tendencies in order to generate musical narratives in response to them.

However, the process of adaptation itself also gave rise to questions of fidelity. Here I found it most helpful to engage with Boyd, who defines artistic adaptation, in its quest for "independent viability" as lying across a spectrum, with *fidelity* versus *fertility* at either end (2017, 11), as follows:

> Adapters who aim closer to fertility will take advantage of the lower invention costs possible by borrowing rich existing design and need have no sense of responsibility to their source, except on their own terms. They are closer to the long-term course of evolution, thoroughly transforming options to explore new possibilities (Boyd 2017, 11).

My own position was perhaps closer to *fertility*; recognisable links to the sources are important, but conserving the integrity of the original poetry was of a lower priority. Indeed, the transmediation from poetry to music would probably render such close fidelity almost impossible without setting the text for voice.

In the following section (9.2), I quote the poetry that prompted each movement and outline the musical plot from my creative perspective. As Almén acknowledges, it is highly unlikely (or impossible) that my own narrative interpretation presented here will necessarily convince or satisfy every different listener: "there can be no *one* narrative that fits appropriately with a musical work. There may be more or less convincing narratives, but [...] there can be no preferred narrative" (2008, 32). Indeed, he goes on to state, in radical opposition to the modernist ideal of the explanatory power of musical analysis, that it is ultimately wrong "to criticize particular [narrative] analyses for being arbitrary, since is impossible *not* to be arbitrary" (Almén 2008, 32).

However, as demonstrated in both *Hansel and Gretel* and the untexted narrative musical works presented above, there are very concrete and well-established

compositional devices that may be used to suggest narrativity in music and aid with their interpretation (even if these are culturally specific and not universal to all listeners). Such techniques included topics, rhetorical techniques, manipulation of perspective (location, time), and as detailed below, played an important role in the musical emplotment of the three movements of *At Night*.

> Adapters, in other words, if they are at all good, are raiders; they don't copy, they steal what they want and leave the rest. (Abbott 2002, 105)

9.2 Poems and Synopses of Musical Plots in At Night

9.2.1 I. “The Land of Nod”

This movement is discussed in expanded detail in chapter 10 as a case study, with an emphasis on the adaptive and creative thought process. Table 9.1 presents a simplified outline of its plotline written in response to the following Robert Louis Stevenson poem.

> *The Land of Nod* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1895)
>
> From breakfast on through all the day
> At home among my friends I stay,
> But every night I go abroad
> Afar into the land of Nod.
>
> All by myself I have to go,
> With none to tell me what to do —
> All alone beside the streams
> And up the mountain-sides of dreams.
>
> The strangest things are there for me,
> Both things to eat and things to see,
> And many frightening sights abroad
> Till morning in the land of Nod.
>
> Try as I like to find the way,
> I never can get back by day,
> Nor can remember plain and clear
> The curious music that I hear.

As shown below, the music composed in response to this stimulus poem greatly expands the narrative to include “before” and “after” in the form of a child playing before bedtime, falling asleep, dreaming, and eventually waking up, leading to a final burst of energetic play.

Table 9.1 Summary of musical emplotment in “The Land of Nod”

Isotopies	*Bars*	*Narrative Imagery*
1	1-34; 40-52	*Child playing before bedtime*
2	35-39	*Chiming grandfather clock, to suggest passing time*
3	53-60	*Parental intervention: calming with glimpse of lullaby to follow*
1/2/3	61-161	*Further continuation of child play, intervening parent and chiming clock, with increasing intensity as bedtime approaches*
2	162-169	*Clock chiming the hour: seven strikes*
4	170-202	*Segue from striking clock to lullabies, accompanied by “breathing / sunset chords”. From b. 183, multiple lullabies heard (including quotations), mingling together as child falls asleep, eventually dissipating into silence.*
5(a-b)	203-250	*Dream sequence: “the curious music that I hear” leading to climax (b. 237), followed by distant clock chimes within dreamworld*
5(c)	251-258	*Striking clock becoming clearer, dreamworld dissipates*
6	259-266	*Clock strike harmony segues into “sunrise” chord pairings, growing in intensity*
7	267-273	*Child awakes and resumes play*
8	274-281	*Climax of final section and coda*

9.2.2 II. “Searching for the Dimmest Stars”

Let There Always Be Light (Searching for Dark Matter) by Rebecca Elson (2018)

For this we go out dark nights, searching
For the dimmest stars,
For signs of unseen things:

To weigh us down.
To stop the universe
From rushing on and on
Into its own beyond
Till it exhausts itself and lies down cold,
Its last star going out.

> Whatever they turn out to be,
> Let there be swarms of them,
> Enough for immortality,
> Always a star where we can warm ourselves.
>
> Let there even be enough to bring it back
> From its own edges,
> To bring us all so close that we ignite
> The bright spark of resurrection.

As acknowledged, this poem offers little by way of obvious narrative, yet, in light of Almén's musical definition of narrative, suggested to me "the transvaluation of changing hierarchical relationships" (2008, 41) needed for successful musical emplotment.

The enigmatic, contemplative character of the poem, in which the author ponders the nature of dark matter that (in theory) holds the universe together, suggested to me a stillness and suspension of time that I had not previously attempted in any other work.

In conversation with Romano in advance of the premiere, I discussed the nature of musical stillness:

> MK "it was big leap really for me to find a way to write music that conveys the sort of stillness and contemplation that observing the stars can inspire"
>
> KR "Stillness vs stasis … it's hard isn't it.. do you have to have something moving to show that it's 'still'?"
>
> MK "I suppose stasis for me is more like pressing pause, or something that's inanimate, but stillness is something I experience when I'm alone, thinking quietly etc"
>
> (WhatsApp conversation with Kate Romano, 26 November 2021)

Whittall's observation that composers "often use successions of slow-moving chords ranging widely across the tonal spectrum to represent the sublime" and as a "way of

expressing interiority" (1990, 157) might also account for the musical topic of the movement, in which melody plays a largely secondary role and the focus of the work is largely harmonic and timbral.

Within this topical framework however, the initial sense of awe and uncertainty expressed in the poem gives way to a more optimistic tone, whereby Elson recharacterises the dimmest stars as agents of warmth and brightness. Like much of Elson's poetry, the ending is concerned whether sufficient dark matter exists to prevent the universe from expanding endlessly to a "cold death".

As set out in Table 9.2, the musical narrative trajectory is thus one in which an initial state of stillness and contemplation leads to a depiction of "cold death" leading to an actual silence in the music, before a larger scale harmonic resolution (achieved through the manipulation of resonance and intervals, as seen elsewhere in this portfolio) brings the music "back from its own edges". Underpinning this narrative design is a structural succession of ascending chromatic pitch centres from G to A. As shown, the tension generated by the overlapping of G♯ and A (bb. 36-41) indicates a key moment of changing musical relationships, after which all music achieves a state of repose in terms of its harmonic, textural and melodic materials.

Table 9.2 Narrative structural outline of "Searching for the Dimmest Star"

Isotopy	*Bars*	*Poetic images*	*Narrative musical state*	*Pitch centre*
1	1-25	"searching for the dimmest stars"	• Uncertain, contemplative state Fragmented harmonies across the pedal points, not yet progressions • High repeated notes depicting stars	G
	26-36	"signs of unseen things"	• Dark matter "visibly" holding the music together: repeated notes coalesce into melodic line (b. 30), underpinned by "warm" progressions that generate a new sense of continuity	G♯

	37-48	“lies down cold, its last star going out”	• Progressions and melodic lines begin to break up into fragments • Internal G♯ pedal point becomes exposed and starts shifting/colliding with A, resulting in greater tension through harmony and close intervals, timbres (43), loudest dynamic (b. 38) before dissipating into silence: “cold” and “going out” (b. 49)	G♯ → A
	49-64	“a star where we can warm ourselves” ”to bring it back from its own edges”	• Resolution / equilibrium attained as music resumes after tense silence in b. 49 • Harmonic arrival/resolution on resonant chord with cello open G, again suggesting harmonic and timbral warmth (see also b. 56)	A

9.2.3 III. “There is Nothing to be Afraid of”

“Night Poem” by Margaret Atwood (2010)

There is nothing to be afraid of,
it is only the wind
changing to the east, it is only
your father the thunder
your mother the rain

In this country of water
with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,
its drowned stumps and long birds
that swim, where the moss grows
on all sides of the trees
and your shadow is not your shadow
but your reflection,

your true parents disappear
when the curtain covers your door.
We are the others,

the ones from under the lake
who stand silently beside your bed
with our heads of darkness.
We have come to cover you
with red wool,
with our tears and distant whimpers.

You rock in the rain's arms
the chilly ark of your sleep,
while we wait, your night
father and mother
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,
knowing we are only
the wavering shadows thrown
by one candle, in this echo
you will hear twenty years later.

My very first ideas for the piece as a whole (before any music was written and I had yet to confirm the project) featured the notion of a "ghost" movement, as shown below:

Clarinet Quintet Ideas

- Nightscapes?
- One about Ghosts?!
- Stars?
- Ghost dance:
- cl. Close interval multiphonics
- Perhaps more like a skeleton dance
- Other movement? Song?! Find a text!
- Lullaby?
- Atwood Poem

(Composer's notes, 25 February 2021)

The Atwood poem (which I discovered largely thanks to its title) linked well with this idea in its atmosphere projecting an unknown presence: "We are the others, / the ones from under the lake / who stand silently beside your bed / with our heads of

darkness". As shown in my notes, this suggested the use of clarinet multiphonic dyads, an effect I had not previously used, but had serendipitously discovered on clarinettist Heather Roche's website (2014) while teaching an undergraduate student.

The dyads include lots of unpitched air escaping from the instrument, in a "ghost-like" manner, in which it is not always entirely clear what is heard; sometimes the second pitch only just speaks. They also often generate subtly uncomfortable (mis-)tunings.

In this sense, the music does evoke various specific images from Atwood's poetry, as listed below in Table 9.3.

Table 9.3 Poetic images and musical equivalents in "There is Nothing to be Afraid of"

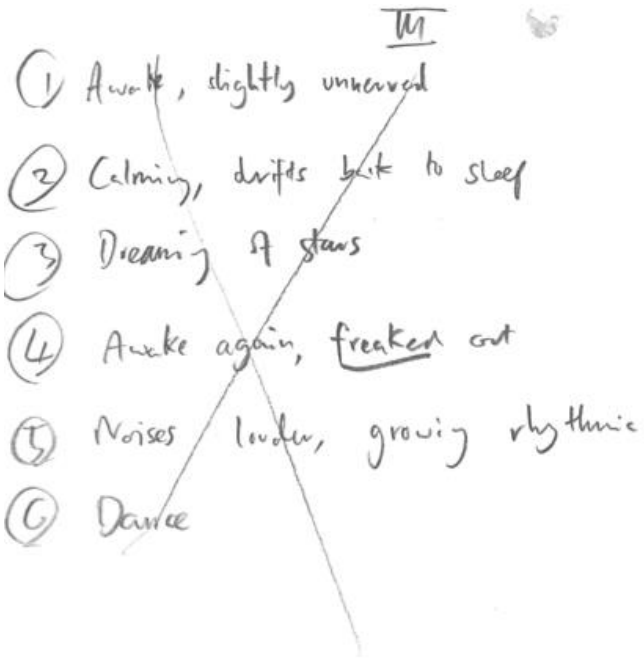
Poetic image	*Musical equivalent*
"who stand silently beside your bed with our heads of darkness"	Clarinet multiphonic dyads
wind	"Bow-drop" and white noise effects (intended to suggest rattling windows and hissing wind (bb.5, 11 etc.))
rain	Violin "droplets" (falling col legno battuto glissando, b. 9)
thunder	Rumbling low tessitura chords (bb. 18, 37-38)
tears and distant whimpers	Lamentoso violin lines featuring fall semitone-motive (e.g. with glissandi in b. 43 vln 1, 44 vln 2, and more obsessively from b. 51)
shadows and reflections	Close canon vlns (bb. 45-49)

However, I soon felt that was important to allow myself room to explore ideas in relation to the poem and the musical narrative I wanted it to generate. The original idea for a "ghost movement" in fact preceded my discovery of the poem, and was in part inspired by my personal experience of being woken up by my baby son creating thumping sounds in his cot in the early hours, having fallen asleep earlier listening to a podcast about the famous haunting known as the "Battersea Poltergeist".

> I think I was feeling a bit constrained by the poetry - should let my musical ideas fly away and generate a narrative of their own accord, especially in the ghost movement. I really want a ghost dance - inspired by some of the things I've heard about the Battersea poltergeist - walls rattling, objects appearing from nowhere and then disappearing. (Composer's Diary Entry 21 April)

Having permitted myself to adopt a freer approach (in Boyd's model of adaptation I simply took "what I wanted" from the poem and "left the rest"), I felt more able to generate a more specific narrative for the work as shown in my sketches below.

Figure 9.1 Early structural / narrative outline for "There is Nothing to be Afraid of"



In this way, the ghostly apparition created by the clarinet dyads at the opening slowly grows more overtly sinister, eventually leading to a "poltergeist dance" (from b. 65) that develops from the sound effects (e.g. the "rattling wind" effects) of the first half of the movement. The effect of waking up to detect what I first perceived as an uncanny presence in my room at night (it often took me some time to realise what I was hearing) also informed my decision to link the second and third movements: the clarinet emerges from within the resonance of the second movement's final chord, like a barely visible (audible) presence at the foot of the bed.

10 Detailed Commentary and Analysis: i. “The Land of Nod”

10.1 Adaptative Approach

As outlined in section 9.2.1, the process of adaptation for this movement was one of considerable expansion; nevertheless, what I considered to be the essence of Stevenson’s poem guided me in generating this expanded musical plotline.

> The separate units of the story (or the *fabula)* can also be transmediated—just as they can be summarized in digest versions or translated into another language (Hamon 1977: 264). But they may well change—often radically—in the process of adaptation, and not only (but most obviously) in terms of their plot ordering. Pacing can be transformed, time compressed or expanded. Shifts in the focalization or point of view of the adapted story may lead to major differences.
>
> (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2012, 11)

10.1.1 Rationale for Expanding “the Story”

As discussed in subsections 9.1 and 9.2, the narrative changes of state implied by Stevenson’s poem are necessarily brief and act more as a framing device for the description of a dreamworld told from a child’s perspective. Yet for me, part of the power of the poem is its ability, within very few lines to convey the journey to and from and the “land of Nod”, with the lines “At home[…] I stay, but every night I go abroad / Afar into the land of Nod” rendering the fantastical dreamworld more vivid in contrast to the presumed realities of everyday life.

Because of music’s lack of semantic specificity, the waking life of a child is rather harder to convey in a composition with such economy, and I chose therefore to greatly extend this “waking” aspect of the musical narrative in order that the journey to “land of Nod” (or the process of falling asleep), was the normative backdrop against which the “strange music that I hear” during the “dreamscape” would stand in relief (from **[O]** in the score).

In doing so, it felt fitting to draw on my own experience of parenting of my recently born son: a significant feature of my own daily life at the time.

> I think there's a really autobiographic element to this first movement; one of the biggest parts of being a parent is trying to manage your child's sleep, singing lullabies to them, trying to wind their energy down after play etc. (Composer's Diary Entry 11 May 2021)

As early sketches developed, I focused on several features of my son's waking and sleeping cycle, and mine and my partner's efforts to calm him before bed as follows:

1. His highly energetic, and quite chaotic play in the final hour before bed;

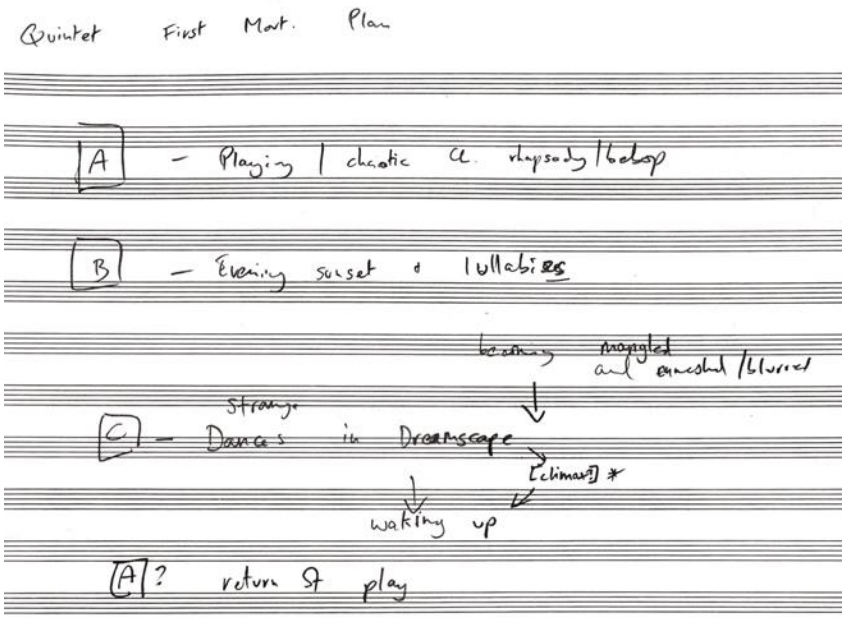
> Something about the opening that I'm working on - almost like a Charlie Parker solo[,] but a bit off the rails[,] conjures the chaos of the way Nye plays - moving around very fast, across the whole space of the room, interested in one thing for a while sometimes, but then getting distracted briefly by another that happens to be in his path… (Composer's Diary Entry 11 May 2021)

2. My own awareness of the passing of time while supervising him before bed, which at that time seemed oddly irregular (perhaps partly through lack of sleep);
3. The effectiveness of singing a child to sleep, and the particular qualities of lullabies which began to interest me much more at that time.

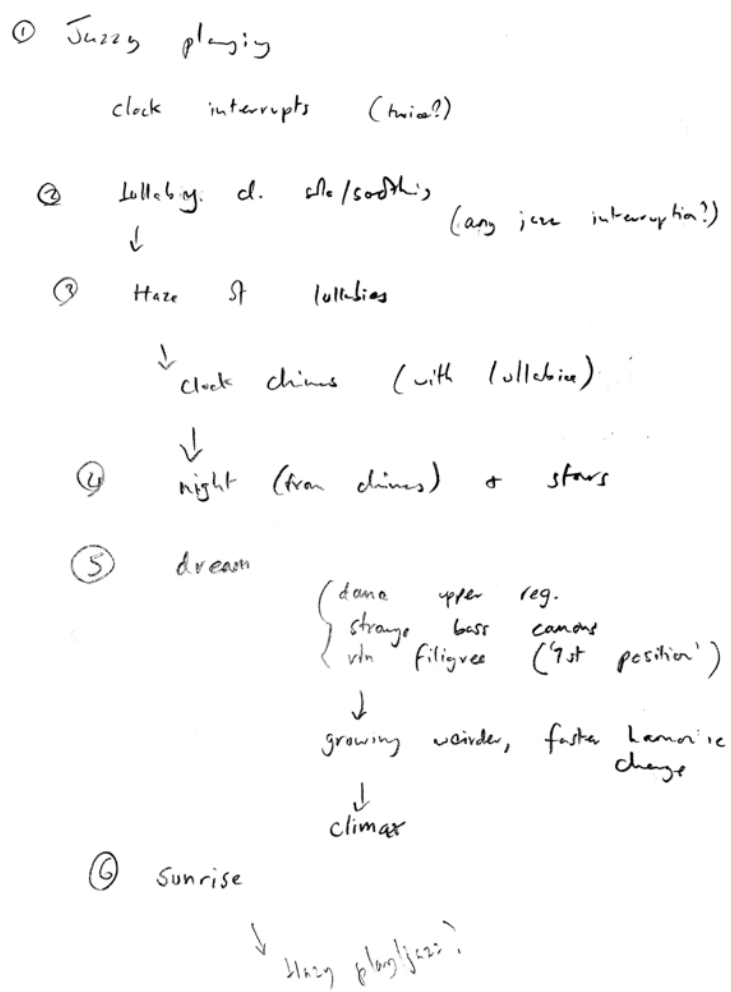
As my early formal plans show (Figure 10.1), this reflection on my own lived experiences resulted in a structural design with several phases, requiring a number of different musical materials.

Figure 10.1 (a) Early and (b) later formal sketches for "The Land of Nod"

a.



b.



Using topics to "help get us into the musical story" (Klein 2013, 23) along with quotations, was a technique I had already explored quite extensively in *Hansel and Gretel*. This approach similarly informed my approach in this movement, particularly given the importance of clearly defined contrasts between materials in order to convey the different states expressed in the poem (and my expanded musical narrative structure derived from it).

This approach led me to create what Almén and Tarasti might view, again, as different *isotopies* (musical semantic units or groupings), all of which allude to other musical styles and real world "musical artefacts" as outlined in Table 9.1 and shown in detail in Table 10.2. Put very briefly they can be summarised as follows:

1. Child at play (rhapsodic clarinet solo with heavily syncopated accompaniment, loosely inspired by certain types of bebop)
2. Chiming grandfather clock (playing Westminster chimes) to indicate the passage of time until seven o'clock (i.e. bedtime)
3. Initial parental interventions to try to calm the child (segments of lullaby material with a slow harmonic accompaniment)
4. Lullaby proper, leading to the child falling asleep; different lullaby melodies "mingle" as the child gradually drifts off
5. Dreamscape featuring unconventional tunings and melodic material linked to other works depicting "small" figures (imps, fairies etc.)
6. Distant clock chiming at dawn, musical "sunrise", leading to:
7. Child waking up and gradually returning to play

As such, each of these *isotopies* might be seen, like many narrative texts, to "project many different storyworlds" (Ryan 2004, 41). Marie-Laure Ryan's article "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology" (2004) offers a productive model for examining the internal features of such worlds in detail with the framework of analytical categories shown below:

- Existents: the characters of the story and the objects that have special significance for the plot
- Setting: a space within which the existents are located

- Physical Laws: principles that determine what kind of events can and cannot happen in a given story
- Events: the causes of the changes of state that happen in the time span framed by the narrative

(Ryan 2004, 34–36)

My list deliberately omits two further categories identified by Ryan: "mental events" and "social rules and values". These categories are arguably much harder (though perhaps not impossible) to define in a musical narrative, and more importantly, are fundamentally less pertinent to this account of my creative process.

The following discussion thus uses Ryan's narrative analytical framework, adapted for the musical narrative medium, to unpack the "Storyworlds" of the movement and their functions, presented as a series of creative discoveries and epiphanies.

10.1.2 Storyworld Analysis of "The Land of Nod"

10.1.2.1 Existents: Melodic Materials Used to Depict Character and Objects in the Story

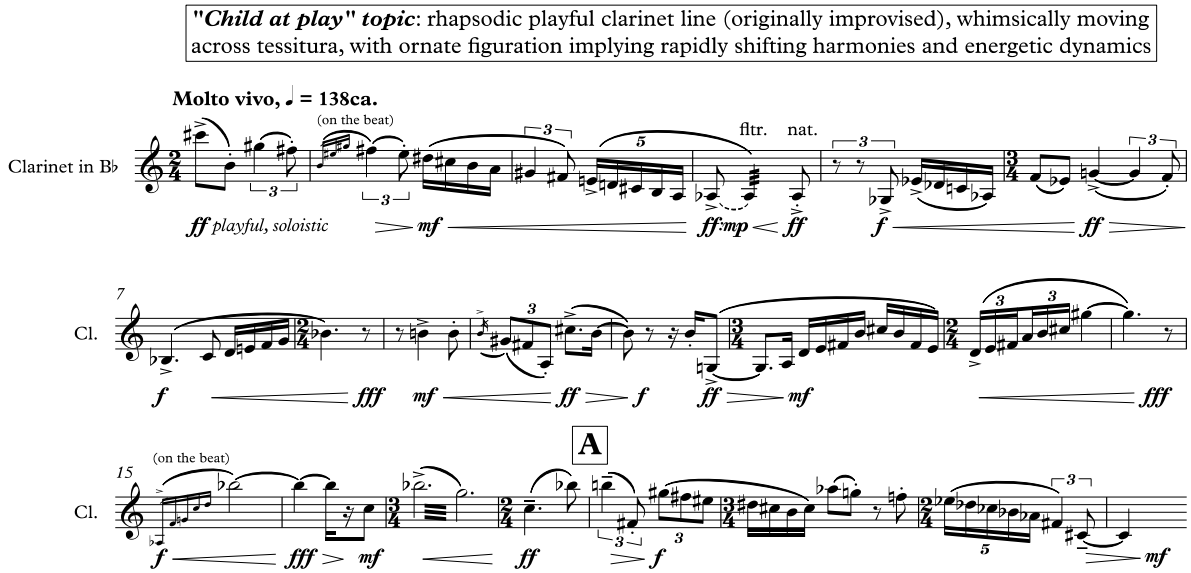
1. Clarinet Solo – Child at Play before Bedtime

As noted in my diary entries, the "chaos" of my young son's play immediately before bed – "moving around very fast, across the whole space of the room, interested in one thing for a while sometimes, but then getting distracted briefly by another that happens to be in his path" (11 May 2021) – suggested a kind of soloistic writing for the clarinet that reminded me of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker's improvisations, particularly in their rhythmic fluidity, extensive use of the full tessitura of the instrument, and elaborate ornamentation with auxiliary notes, often in apparently very loosely structured phrases (but underpinned by a tightly structured harmonic foundation).

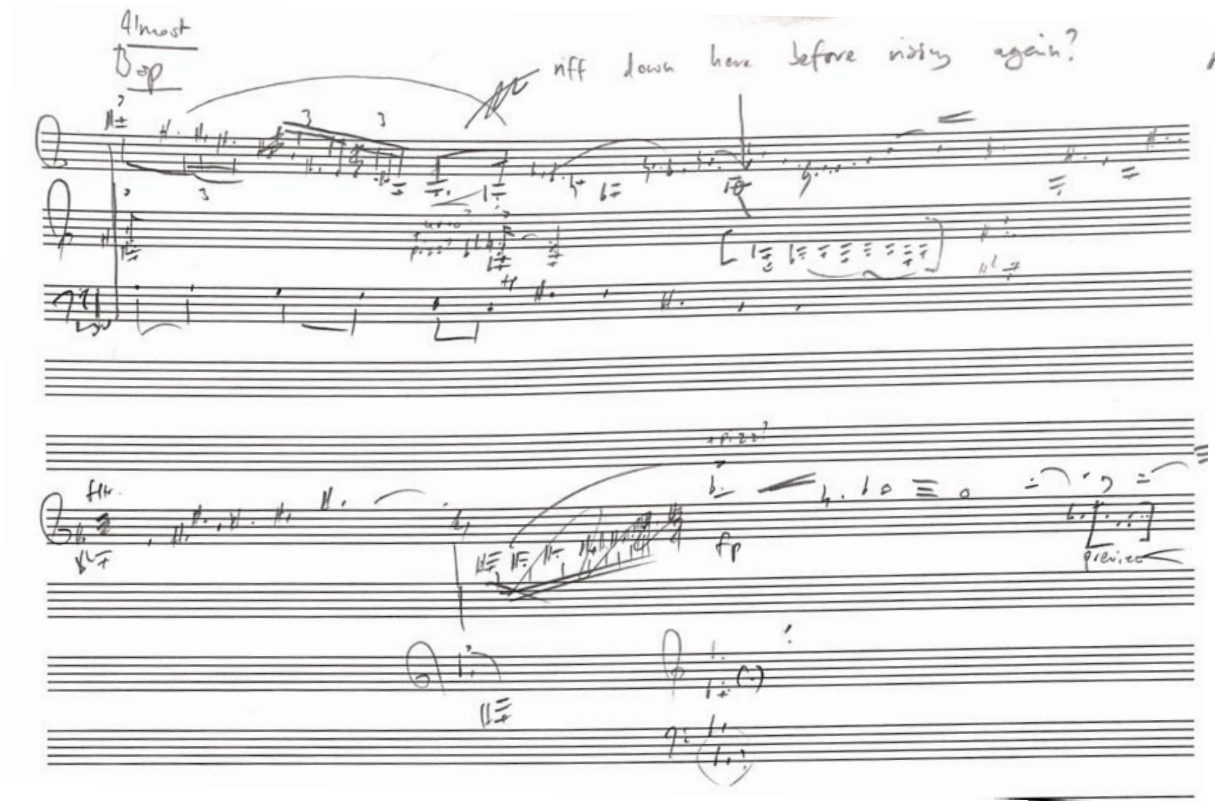
The following opening phrase (Figure 10.2) was therefore improvised in my very first sketches, before being lightly adapted to fit the harmonic accompaniment I eventually devised for it.

Figure 10.2 “Child at play” clarinet line (written in C) at opening of (a) "The Land of Nod" and (b)early sketch

a.



b.



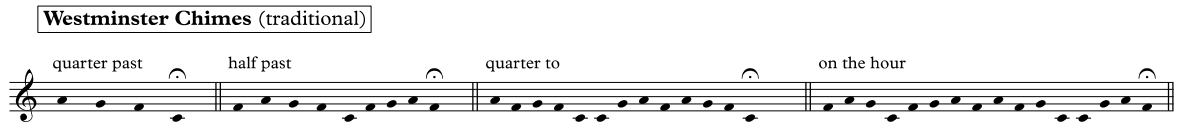
2. Chiming Grandfather Clock (playing Westminster Chimes)

While there is no grandfather clock in my home, the era of Stevenson's poetry (the poem comes from a cycle published in 1895) prompted me to think about the importance of manually wound mechanical clocks and their musical chimes. Partly for the sake of its familiarity to listeners, the traditional Westminster Chimes melodic pattern (played famously by Big Ben, but also many mechanical clocks) presented itself as a ready-made musical object that would easily evoke this, and in doing so suggest the passing of time, even allowing me to be quite specific about when the first part of the story takes place (in the hour leading to 7p.m.).

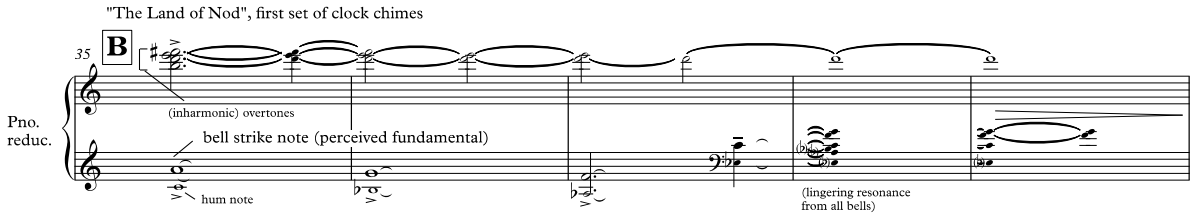
Harmonically and texturally, this presented certain difficulties, given the instrumentation and the lack of any real percussive sounds beyond pizzicato and in terms of integrating the complex spectra generated by the striking of bells in a clock within the language of the piece. Harmonic analysis of these effects is presented in more detail in the following section (10.1.2.2).

Figure 10.3 Westminster Chimes melody (a. original; b. in "The Land of Nod")

a.



b.



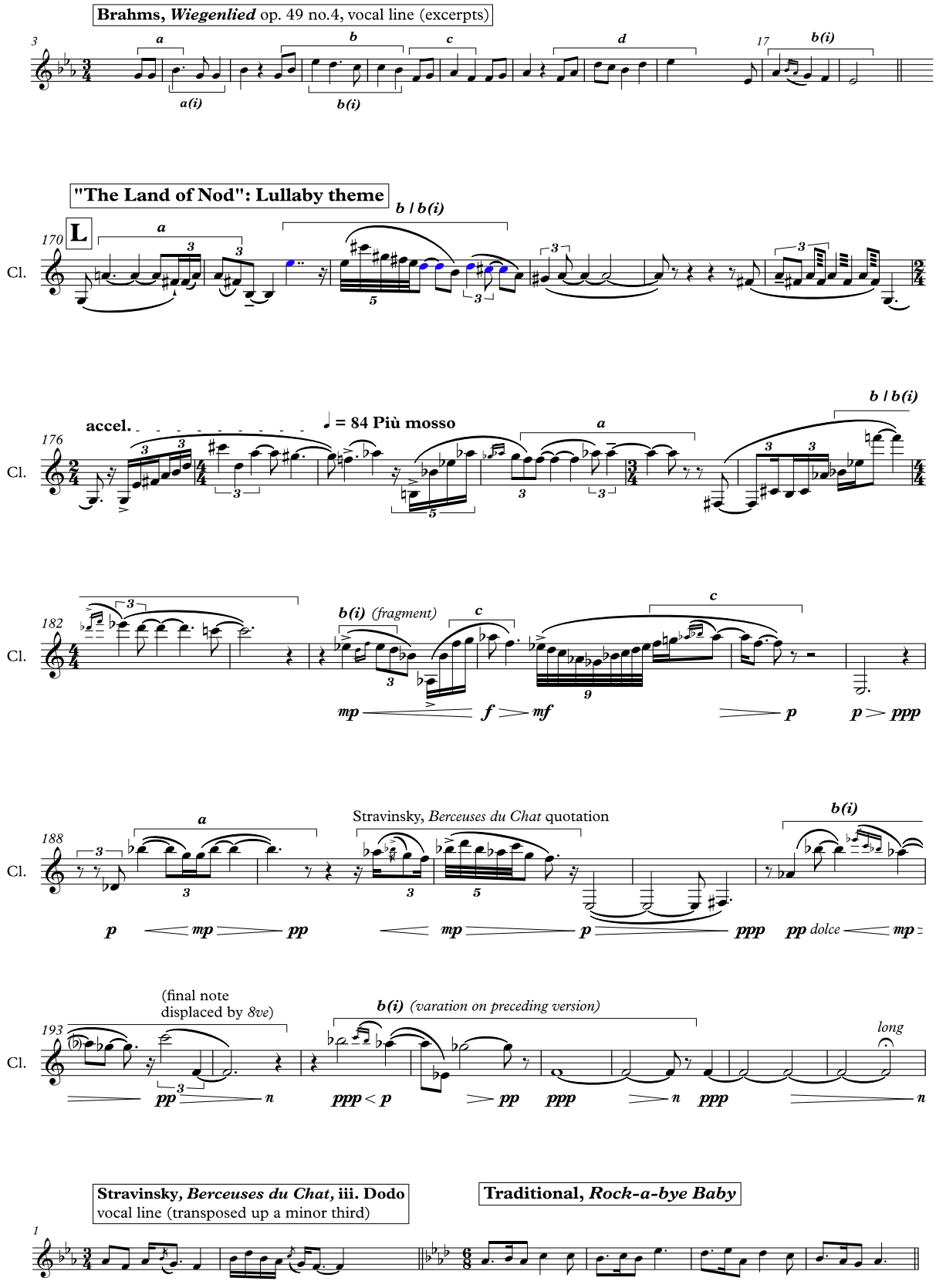
The slightly uneven rhythmic and dynamic presentation (the fourth chime is early and quieter than the others) was intended to convey an aged clock mechanism. Later iterations of the material depart even further from the original melody, yet its topical and narrative function (depicting the passing of time) is, I hope, clear at these points in the piece.

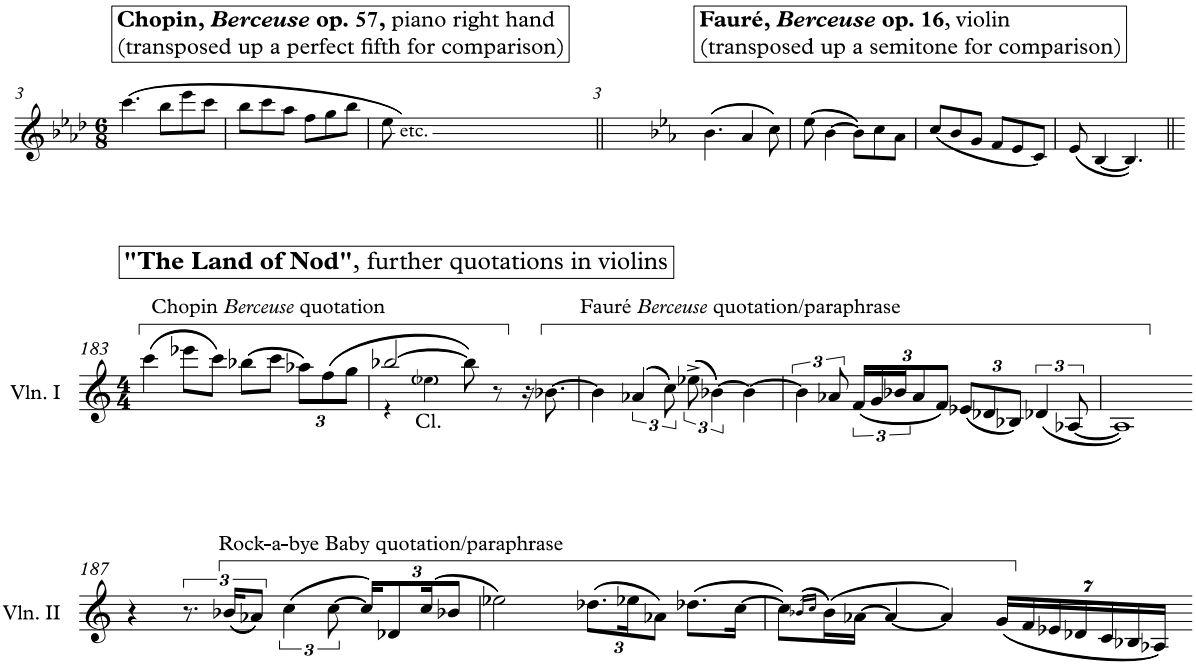
3 and 4. Lullaby Segments leading to an Extended "Lullaby Theme"

Drawing on my very recent (and ongoing) first-hand experience of lulling a child to sleep at bedtime, this material attempts to portray the calming qualities of a range of lullabies (*Berceuses*, *Wiegenlieder* etc.) familiar to me from the Western canon, especially Brahms's well-known *Wiegenlied* op. 49 no. 4, with its characteristic rocking minor third motive.

The final theme I composed (heard at first in brief previews) interweaves impressions, quotations and elaborations of both this and, as it develops, many other lullaby melodies (embedded into the clarinet line and played in counterpoint with it). The effect of this was one I imagined that hearing such lullabies might have on someone on the verge of sleep, in which state the melodies might slowly seem to merge and intermingle.

Figure 10.4 Lullaby materials, quotations and sources in "The Land of Nod"





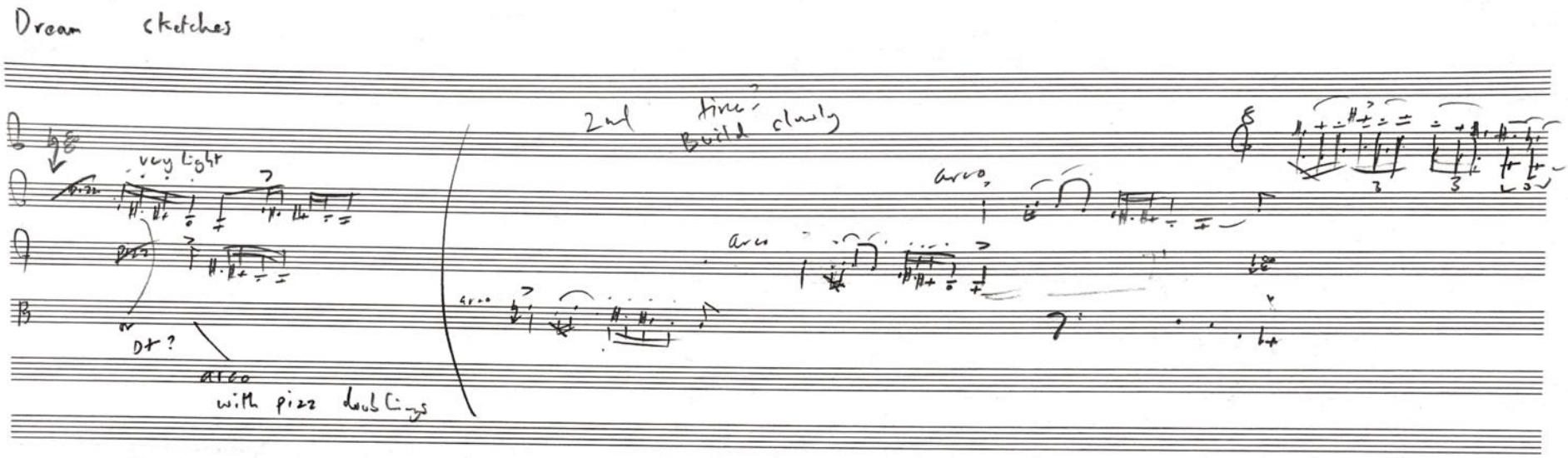
5. Dreamscape motives

As noted in my diary entries written around the development of this material (which, crucially, I intended to stand in relief to the preceding sections of the work in order to convey "the curious music" described in the Stevenson poem), I looked to various external sources in which imaginary creatures featured, both musical and literary.

> For the melodic material have been looking at Telemann's Gulliver suite. Want it to feel impish or like Dr Seuss or something. Curiously stylised…
>
> Also Puck by Debussy… And Les Fees sont d'esquisses danseuses, and even Mendelssohn midsummer night's dream overture… Love the idea of light-footed little creatures (Composer's Diary Entry 2 August 2021)

After research and sketching I arrived at three different types of material: i. an "Imp" dance suggesting a compound metre (notated in triplets); ii. pizzicato string and staccatissimo clarinet descending lines depicting "tiny footsteps"; and iii. neo-baroque violin lines, all of which were composed in parallel, as shown in Figure 10.5. The topical associations and characters of these materials are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Figure 10.5 Original sketch for dreamscape materials, showing earlier ideas (from left to right) for “tiny footsteps”, neo-baroque strings lines and an “imp dance” in triplets

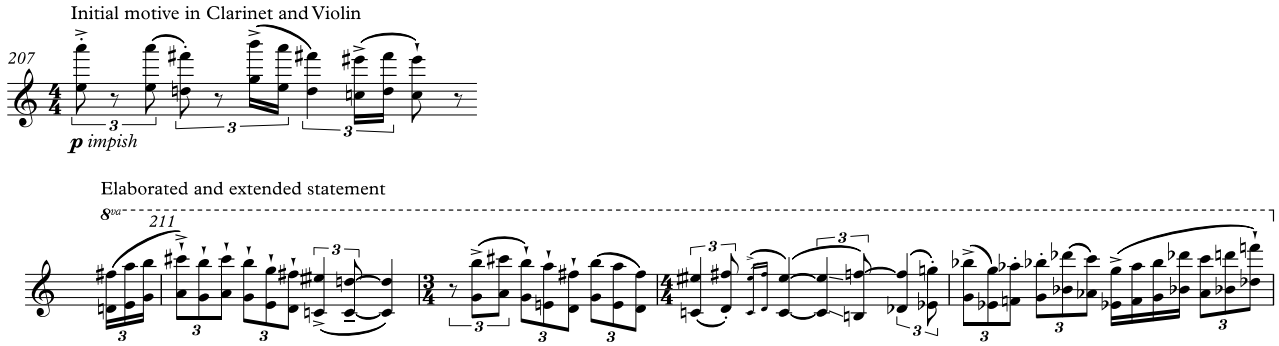


i. “Imp” Dance

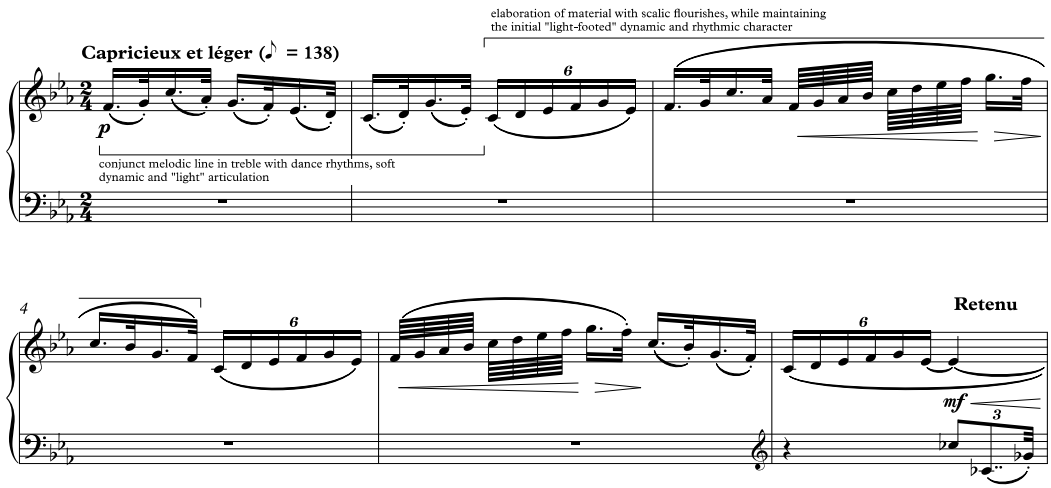
This material, first heard in b. 207, and presented in the clarinet and violin in rhythmic unison (largely in parallel too), was partly intended as a response to the figures depicted in Dr Seuss’s *Sleep Book* and the “impish” dance found in Telemann’s *Gulliver Suite* portraying the tiny Lilliputians of the Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, alongside comparable works suggesting small imaginary creatures (including Debussy’s Prélude “Puck” and the overture to Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). While the dance rhythms I eventually used imply a compound metre, unlike the dotted rhythmic feel of the Telemann and Debussy, the treble register, light articulation, soft dynamic, and conjunct melodic writing (with scalic flourishes) are unifying features of all the examples.

Figure 10.6 “Imp” dance materials and sources displaying comparable use of conjunct melodic lines in treble register with light articulation and soft dynamic

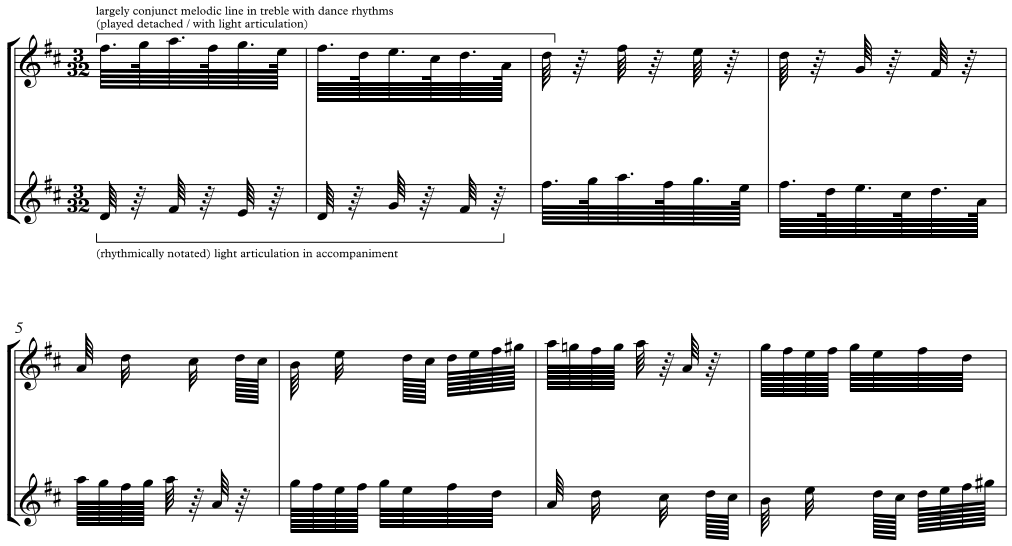
a. “Imp” dance in “The Land of Nod”



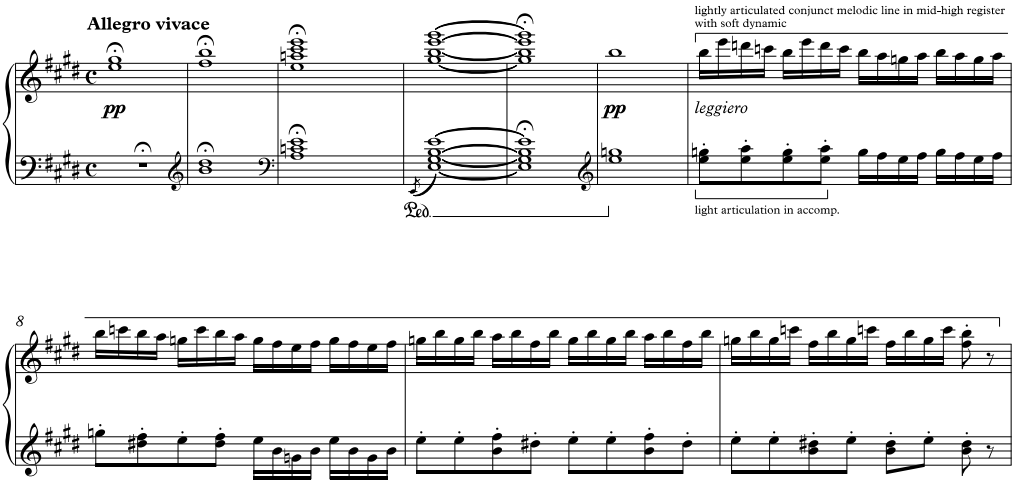
b. Debussy (1910), XI. “…La Danse de Puck” from *Préludes*, Book 1



c. Telemann (1728), “Lilliputian Chaconne” from *Gulliver Suite* for 2 violins



d. Mendelssohn (1843), Incidental Music to a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* op. 61, Overture



ii. Tiny “footsteps”

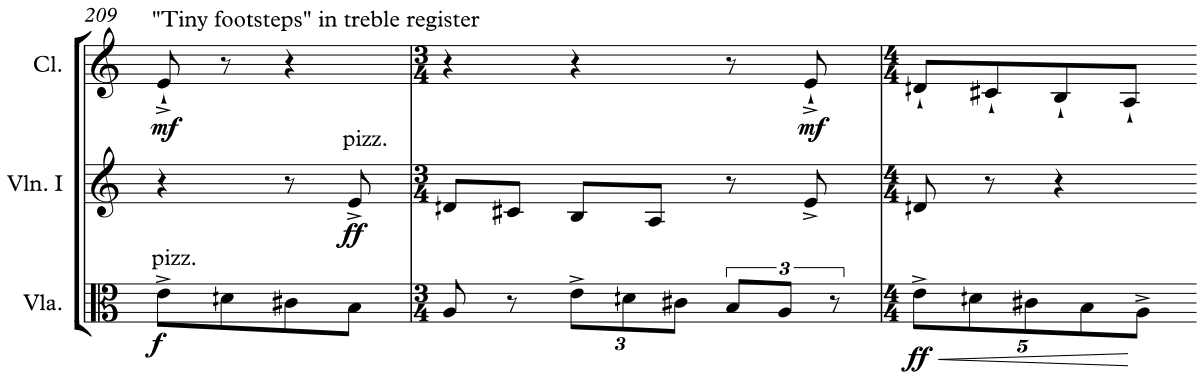
This musical idea (falling stepwise staccatissimo/pizzicato figures, first heard in b. 209) implanted itself more intuitively in my sketches; however, in retrospect, I suspect the influence of Hans Abrahamsen may have played a role, as I noted at the time, but with respect to the high register writing in his left-hand piano concerto:

> Last night remember Abrahamsen’s indication ‘fairy tale time’ in the sixth movement of his Left, Alone concerto. Wow that piece is fast, and seriously hard rhythmically for the orchestra! But I love the flurries - it really is like magic dust glistening or something…. Maybe there’s an idea for me there too… (Composer’s Diary Entry, 6 August 2021)

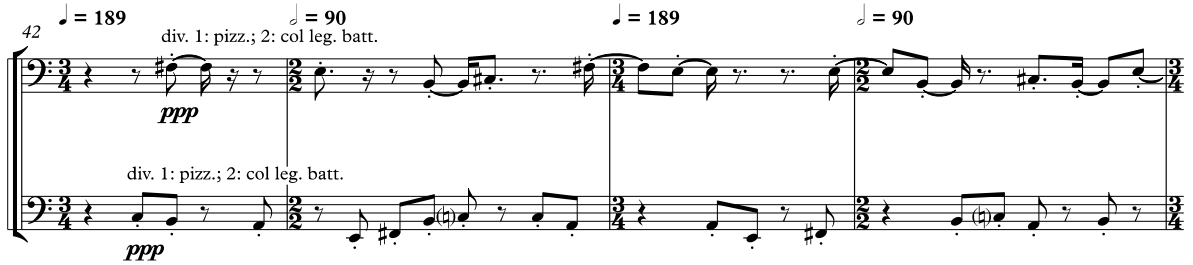
The material I wrote could be compared to the effect of rhythmically displaced cello divisi in his work, but transposed to a higher register, as shown:

Figure 10.7 Footstep effects in Kaner and Abrahamsen (2015)

a. Footsteps in “The Land of Nod”



b. Cello part, Hans Abrahamsen (2015), *Left*, *Alone*, VI. “In the time of Fairy Tales”, bb. 42-45



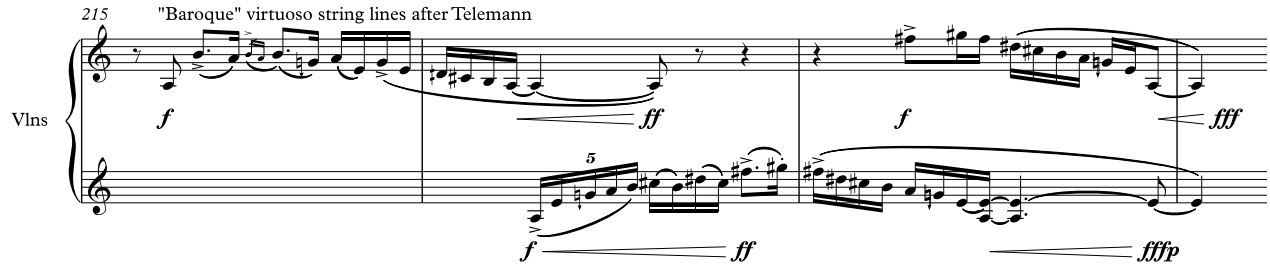
iii. Neo-baroque string lines (after Telemann’s Gulliver Suite)

Here my indebtedness to Telemann’s and his *Gulliver Suite* was intentionally overt. Having heard this work performed live during a period of collaboration with violinist Margaret Faultless of the Orchestra of the Age of the Enlightenment (which resulted in the composition of my *Concerto for Four Unaccompanied Baroque Violins* in 2016), I had long been particularly enamoured by a certain kind of violin passage work in Telemann’s music (see violin 2, Figure 10.8b), which combines rapid runs and different bow strokes in a relatively low register. As emerged during my discussions with Faultless, this kind of material is far less common in later violin repertory, for which the advent of the modern bow and use of the chin rest facilitates longer singing lines and, in faster passage work, tends to emphasise fluidity across the range

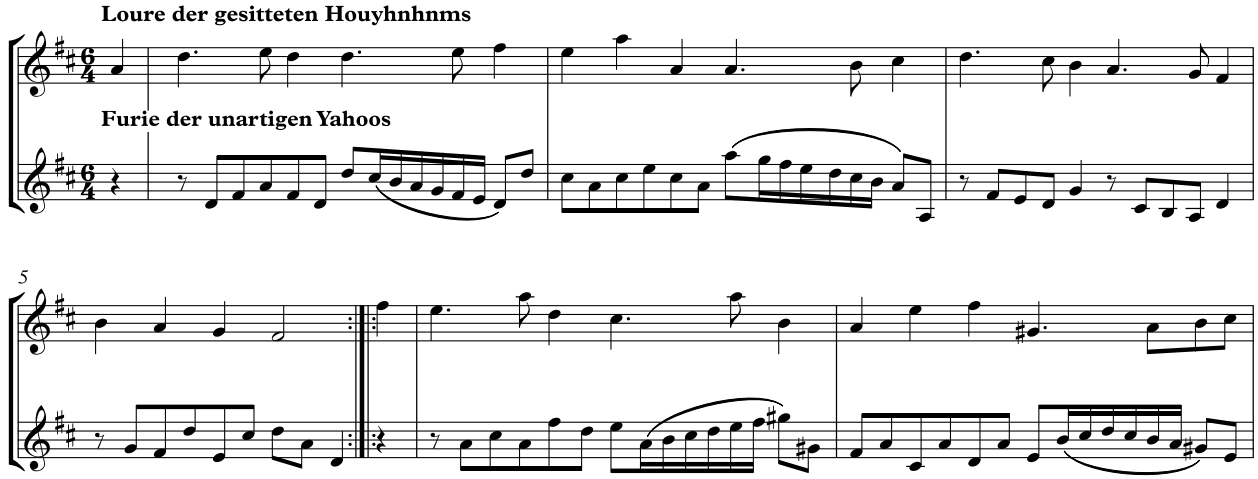
of the instrument rather than in a smaller tessitura. (Learning to write successfully for baroque violin took considerable adjustment on my part at the time.)

Figure 10.8 Neo-baroque string lines in "The Land of Nod" and sources

a. Violin passagework in “The Land of Nod” after Telemann



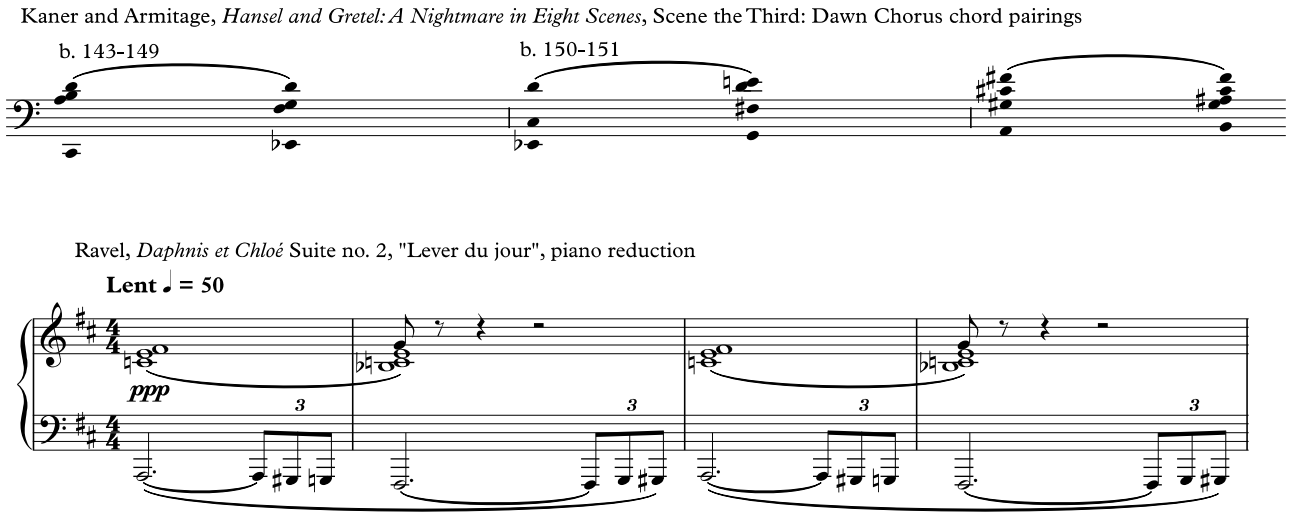
b. Telemann (1728), *Gulliver Suite*, V. “Louré of the sitting Houyhnhnms / Fury of the artless Yahoos”



6. “Dreamy” Reprise of Clock Chimes, leading to “Sunrise” Chords

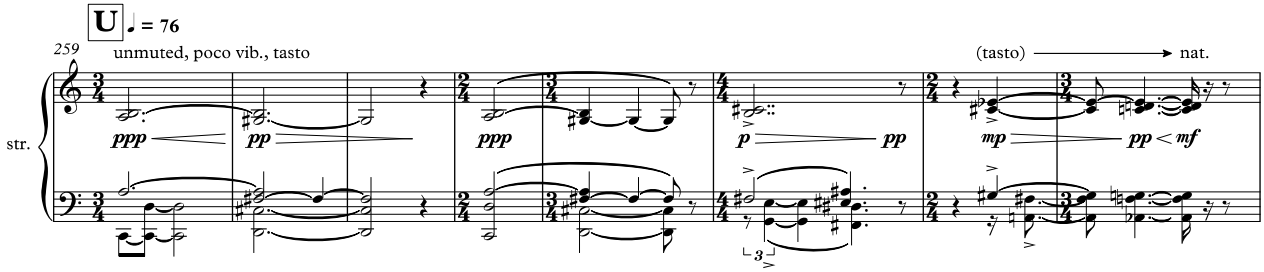
The sunrise chord pairings here hark back to the dawn scene in *Hansel and Gretel* (at [3V] in the latter score), and are treated as a topic (perhaps also inspired by the opening of Ravel’s dawn scene in *Daphnis et Chloé*; see Figure 10.9).

Figure 10.9 Chord pairings in dawn scenes by the composer and Maurice Ravel (1913)



In the “Land of Nod”, however, the intensifying warmth of the rising sun is depicted in the continuous gradual ascent in the upper voice, increasing pace (first as shorter note values, but eventually with an accelerando into **[W]),** and harmonic intensity of the writing, as shown in Figure 10.10. (The harmony of the passage is discussed in more detail under **Settings** (10.1.2.2).)

Figure 10.10 Piano reduction of sunrise chords in "The Land of Nod"



7. Coda

This passage essentially features no new materials; the clarinet lines that appear from **[V]** are intended to represent the waking of the child-protagonist of the opening, and a gradual transformation of the accelerating “sunrise” chords into an accompanimental texture more like that of the opening, whilst simultaneously serving the rhetorical function of closing the piece.

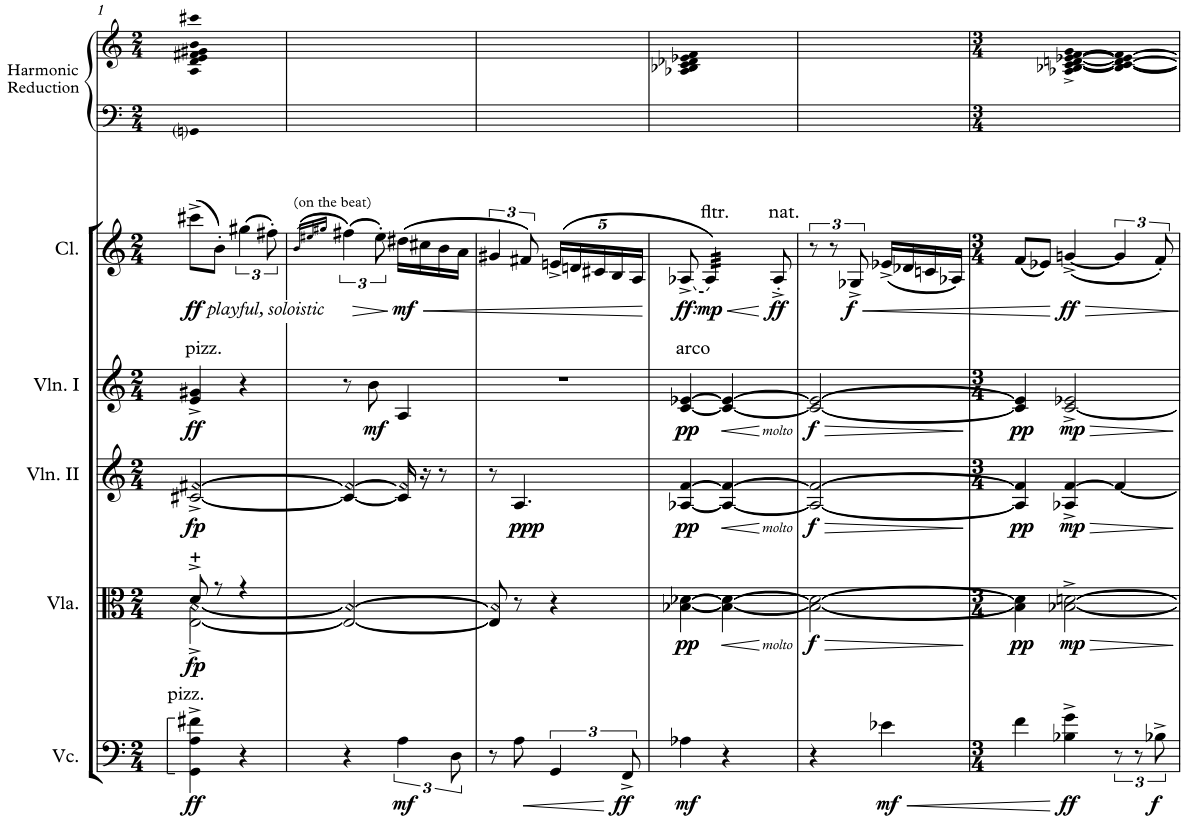
10.1.2.2 Settings: Harmonic Landscapes and Textural Backdrops in which the Existents are Located

1. "Bebop" textures and harmonies behind the Clarinet line

As the sketch in Figure 10.2(b) shows, the accompaniment for this line was part of the original conception of this "bebop" inspired material, complete with "walking bass" accompaniment and syncopated middle register harmonic filling in close spacings (often diatonic clusters) that are reminiscent of bop-era piano accompaniment.

However, as is frequently the case in my harmonic writing, harmonic tension (which can play various structural roles) is achieved by false relations between the bass and higher registers, as for example between the G♮ and G♯ in the very first beat of the piece, shown in Figure 10.11.

Figure 10.11 Opening of "The Land of Nod" with harmonic reduction



As well as establishing its topical identity, this sets up a specific intervallic profile for the harmonic accompaniment of this material, facilitating one of the musical "norms"

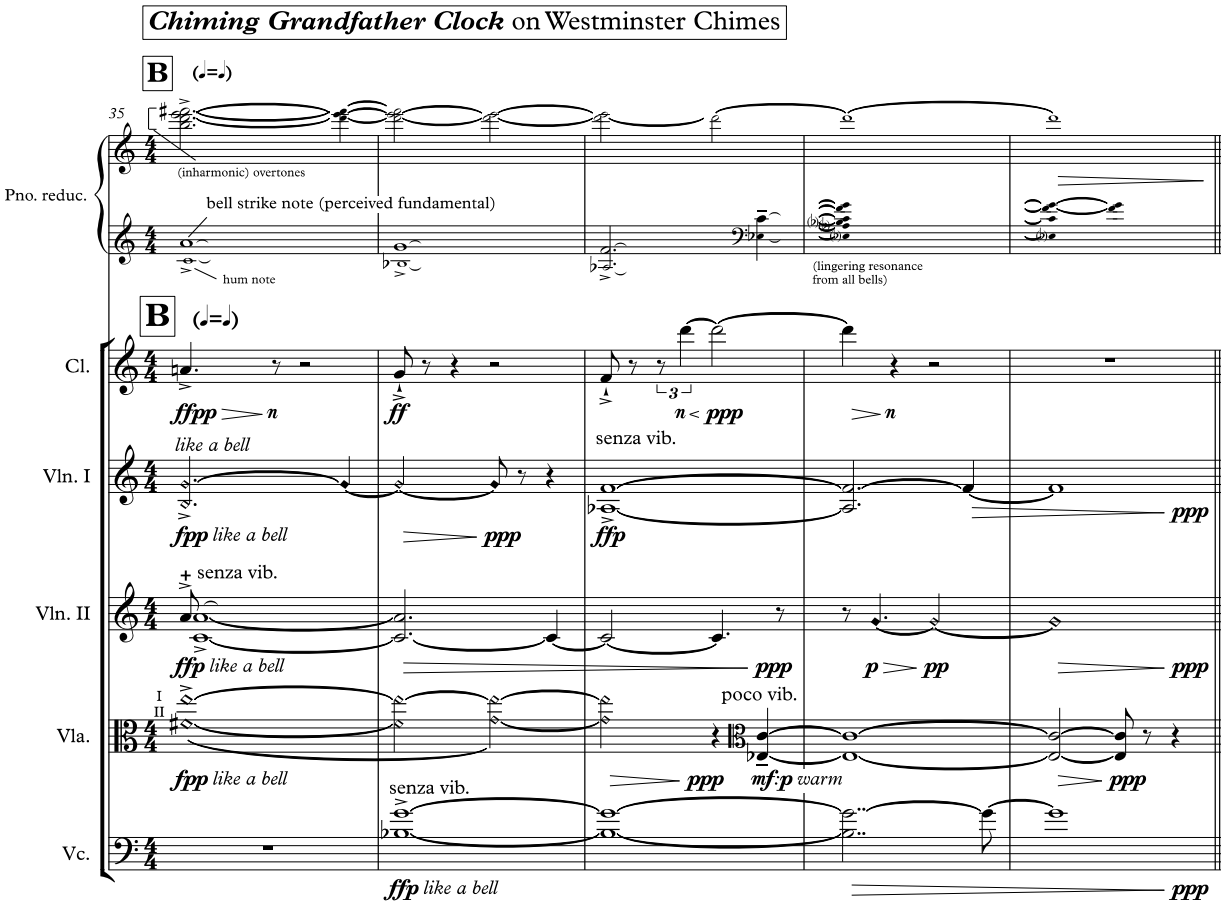
with which the subsequent materials (the grandfather clock, dreamscape) can easily be contrasted.

2. Grandfather Clock and Bell Chords

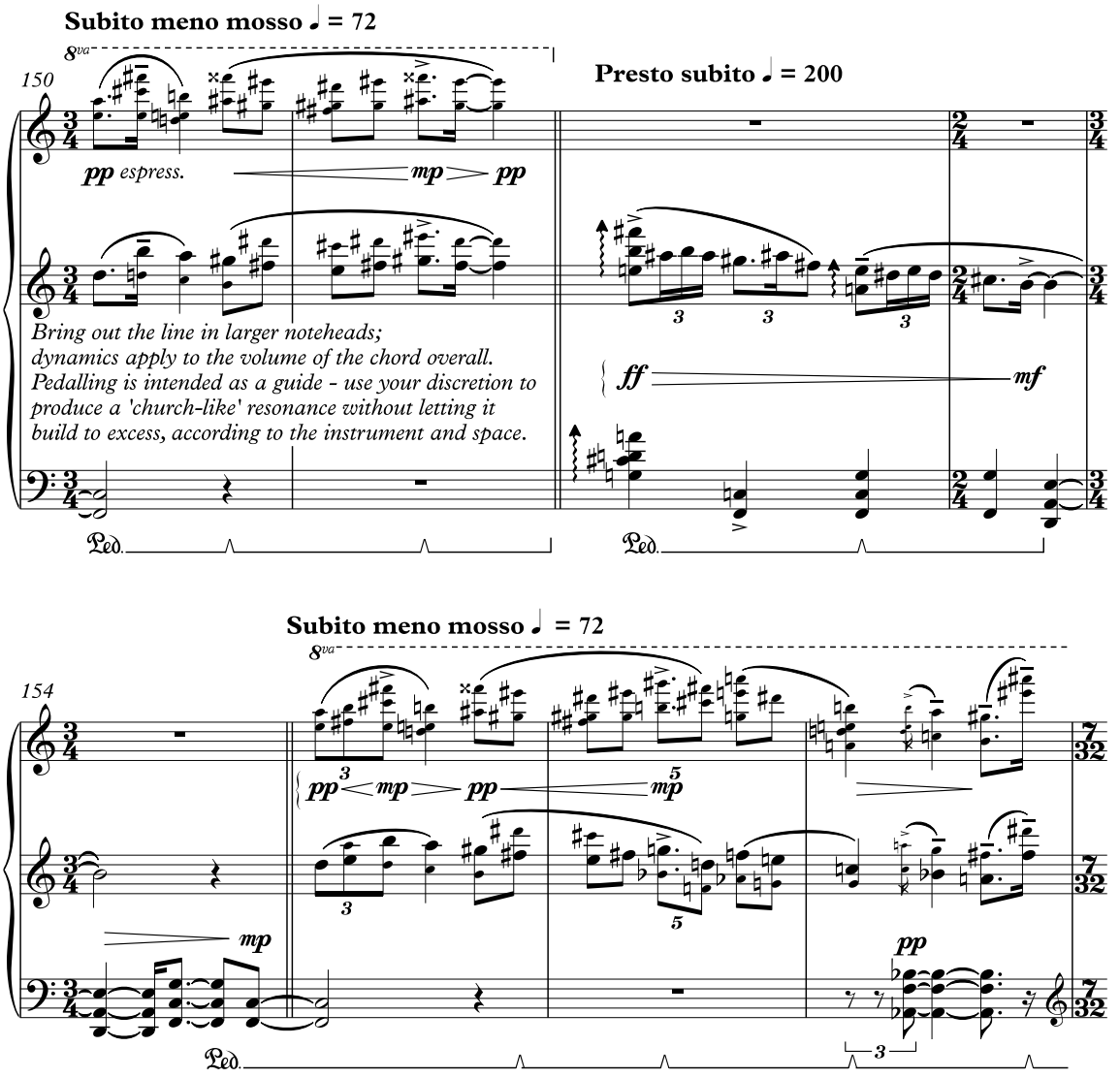
As acknowledged above, generating bell effects for this ensemble presented certain difficulties. However, drawing on one of my own earlier piano works (which in turn took inspiration from "Carillon Nocturne" by George Enescu; see Figure 10.12b and c), I focused on the inharmonicity of bells, with their complex subharmonics (or hum tones) and often oddly tuned upper partials, to create a bell-like harmonisation of the Westminster Chimes melody.

Figure 10.12 Westminster Chimes in *At Night* and related bell harmonies in other works

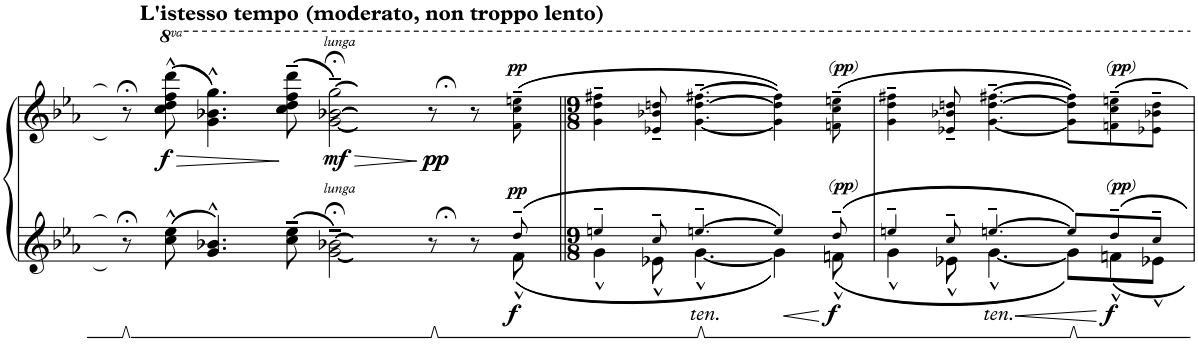
a. Westminster Chimes in *At Night* with piano reduction and analysis



b. Bell effects in Kaner (2015), II. “Mazurka” from *Dance Suite* for solo piano



c. Enescu (1958), VII. “Carillon Nocturne” from Suite No. 3 for Piano op. 18, opening

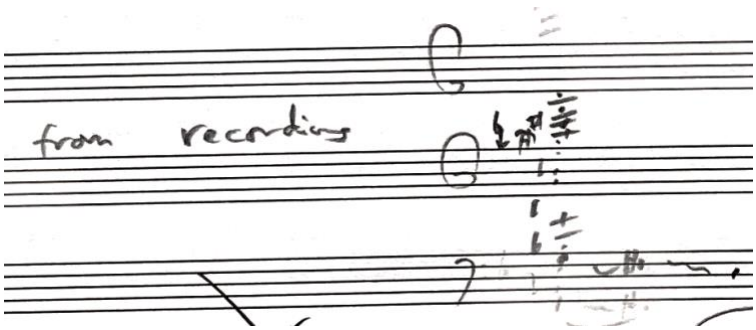


Having composed this progression largely based on my earlier experience of writing bell effects, I felt it was important to capture more specifically the sonority of a “real” grandfather clock, and so I transcribed the overtones of the striking clock I found online. (See video file 3.) However, I found this harmonically somewhat incompatible

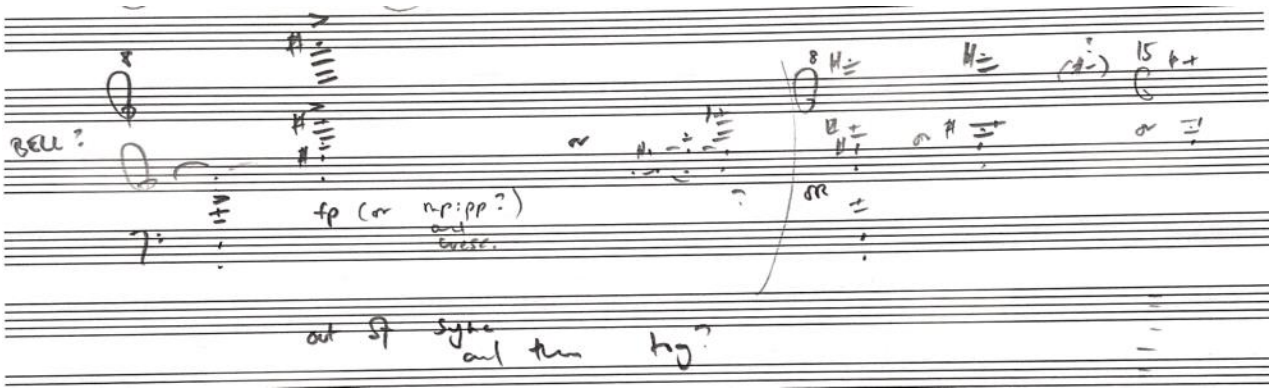
musically with the material I had already composed, so allowed myself simply to extract certain characteristic features of the bell, before adapting them to fit the existing harmonic landscape of the work. (As H. Porter Abbott notes, good adapters "don't copy"; rather "they steal what they want and leave the rest" (2002, 105).)

Figure 10.13 Original grandfather clock bell and bell chord used in *At Night*

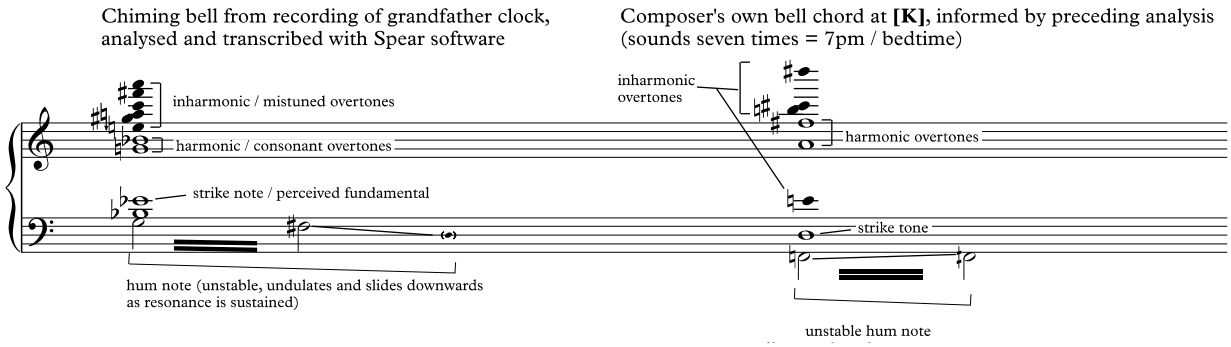
a. Composer's transcription of overtones of the original clock bell from sketches



b. Composer's sketches for bell chord used in "The Land of Nod" at **[K]**, informed by analysis above



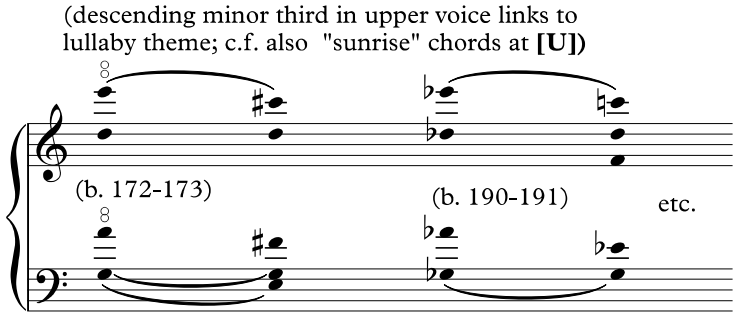
c. Transcription and analysis of original bell spectrum and final bell chord used at **[K]**



3. and 4. “Sunset” Chord Pairs accompanying Lullaby Themes

The harmonic accompaniment of the lullaby themes was intended to support the calming character of the melodic materials. The use of chord pairings here, in the middle/upper register links to the chord pairings found elsewhere in the work (see 5. and 6. below) but has a specific spacing and intervallic profile that confirms its identity. The rocking minor thirds in the upper voice provide a motivic connection with the lullaby theme itself, and the gesture itself might be compared with Jonathan Harvey’s use of two-chord progressions to depict the intake and exhalation of breath in *Tranquil Abiding* and *The Angels*. (In the latter, the chord-pairs are simply transposed inversions of one another.)

Figure 10.14 “Sunset” chords used to accompany lullaby theme

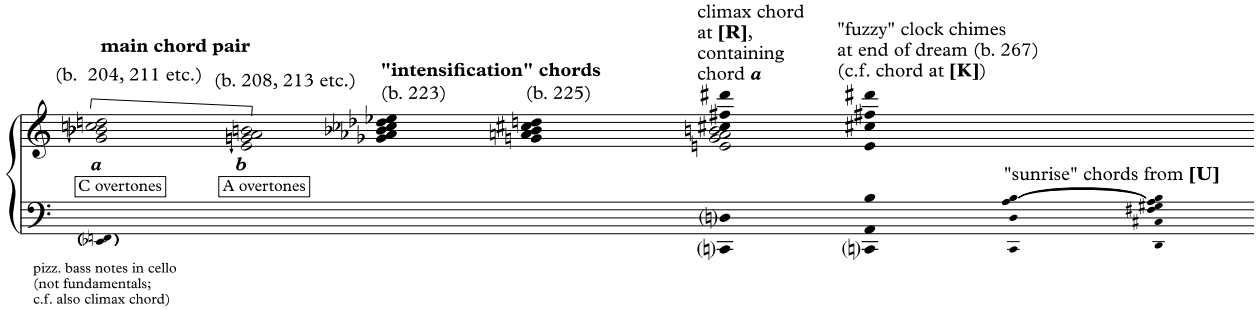


Moreover, the chords shown in Figure 10.14 might also be heard as counterparts to the “sunrise” chords of isotopy 5 (which also embed the falling minor third motive within them; see Figure 10.10a). In this case, the slow long-range descent of a semitone between bars 172-191 might be seen as the musical “opposite” of the rapidly rising upper voice of the “sunrise” chords. Their higher registration and wider intervallic spacing (with prominent ninths and sevenths) may also be contrasted with the prominent seconds, sixths and lower register of the “sunrise” chords. As such this link establishes both sets of chord pairings, as “opposite” iterations of closely related materials.

5. Dreamscape Harmonies

One of the most complex series of compositional decisions for me, in writing this work, was designing the harmonic world of the dreamscape. Having established the norms of the child protagonist's waking world, it was imperative for me to generate a harmonic backdrop that encapsulated the "strangeness" of the poem.

Figure 10.15 Harmonic materials and overview of dreamscape



As shown in Figure 10.15, I ultimately arrived at another chord pairing (chords ***a*** and ***b***), but in this case the two chords are simply transpositions of one another. Both derive from natural overtones on C and A respectively, incorporating the flattened seventh partial played as a high harmonic on the cello's C strings. (The harmonic on A is then adjusted by ear in performance in relation to this reference pitch.) However, neither chord is ever presented with its fundamental in the bass; for me this would have created too strong a sense of harmonic grounding and stability: the harmonic series is, by definition, an incredibly stable vertical. Using other notes to harmonise these chords thus provided a degree of resonance, whilst also generating sufficient tension to allow the music to move forward harmonically (or back and forth, in this case).

On the simplest level, the use of these microtones (and subsequent microtonal inflection of the melodies against these harmonies) can be seen to function as Christopher Dingle puts in relation to Julian Anderson's work; "microtones are what provide that different world of colours" (Anderson and Dingle 2020, 125). Yet there were several further details of the nature of dreams that informed my approach.

As shown in my diary, when trying to develop my initial sketches for this section (see Figure 10.5), I began to consider ideas of suspended and circular time as representative of dream states:

> Working on dream sequence in first movt.
>
> Thinking about the slow harmonic rhythm and harmonic series tuning - hadn't really realised but it seems to suggest suspended time because the harmonic rhythm is so slow (literally but also in the way that when it does move, it doesn't go anywhere - it's circular or something like that.) (Composer's Diary Entry 2 May 2021)

Having made this intuitive leap, I then explored literary equivalents for connected ideas:

> Trying to think if there's a link to an equivalent literary device here to suggest time has been suspended… Borges? Saramago? Kafka?
>
> (— 5 mins later)
>
> Just having a look at the House of Asterion (aka the Minotaur) by JLB [JL Borges] – which has an infinite number of doors and is as big as the world. (It is the world). Each part of the house occurs many times.
>
> Maybe something here? The idea that everywhere we go in the music, we're still looking at the same thing (or replicas of it)?
>
> "My other nightmare is that of the mirror. The two are not distinct, as it only takes two facing mirrors to construct a labyrinth. I remember seeing, in the house of Dora de Alvear in the Begrano district, a circular room **whose walls and doors were mirrored, so that whoever entered the room found himself at the center of a truly infinite labyrinth."**
>
> Perhaps this is why the chords are actually just transpositions of each other. It's looped around on itself….
>
> (Composer's Diary Entry 2 August 2021. Emphasis in original.) (Quotations from Adler 2017.)

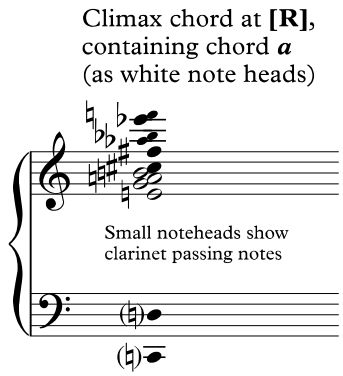
Nevertheless, as noted later in my diary, I encountered difficulties working this kind of circularity in terms of maintaining interest and momentum, but also when

considering how to achieve a sense of climax at the end of this section before (in the narrative) the child awakens.

> Thinking about how to achieve a climax without a sense of 'arrival' - I don't want it to go anywhere, just become 'maximally of itself', using these harmonic series chords and quite elaborate but ultimately non developmental materials…
>
> Plan is to segue from the most active/climactic moment back into clock chimes, which I've sketched, but need to make this harmonically not underwhelming because of the repetitive approach. (Composer's Diary Entry 5 August 2021)

This observation ultimately led me to briefly introduce what I label above as "intensification" chords, an additional pair of harmonies (played in equal temperament) that would briefly move the music away from the original chord pairing, in order to prepare for the music's arrival on the climax chord, which in itself is a "reharmonization" of chord ***a.*** When the passing notes in the clarinet are included, this chord generates a full 12-note aggregate. (See Figures 10.15 and 10.16.)

Figure 10.16 Climax chord analysis (detail)



This also enabled me to arrive at the solution for ending this section as follows:

> Think that maybe the solution for the climax is to cut it short and have the dream abruptly fade from view, with the clock chimes appearing as if they've interfered with the dream to wake you up. (Composer's Diary Entry, 5 August 2021)

10.1.2.3 Physical Laws: Musical Syntax – rules governing the melodic Entities and within the harmonic Settings

Whilst the musical "laws" that govern the isotopies in the piece are inextricably linked with their harmonic design and textural settings, certain additional aspects of the musical syntax, not described above, contribute to the characterisations of each "Storyworld" in the piece, as detailed below.

Table 10.1 Musical laws/syntax in "The Land of Nod"

Isotopy	*Label*	*Musical Law(s)/Syntax*
1	*Child at play*	Melodic material always makes elaborate use of runs, with passing tones across harmonies, straddles a wide tessitura. Often rhythmically free around the pulse(s) of the accompaniment, and only sometimes coincides with it at its own whim.
2	*Grandfather clock*	Clock strikes occur sooner and sooner; narrative time does not flow linearly but stops and starts according to the mental experience of the child (or parent)
3/4	*Lullabies*	Gaps in the texture/phrases suggest brief moments of sleep/"nodding off" (e.g. bb. 108, 194) on the way to the child being fully asleep.
5	*Dream sequence*	The relationship between materials, and phrasing is deliberately strange and ambiguous, with large "gaps" e.g. b. 220, perhaps like a strange formal dance routine. Diary notes (2 August 2021): "the kind of awkward stasis we get in dreams - empty spaces of b/g texture. Thinking about some of those moments in [the film] *Waking Life* where nothing seems to be happening apart from awkward silences / staring…"
6/7	*Sunrise and Coda*	As well as suggesting the rising intensity of the sunlight, the gradual acceleration of the chords depicts a rising energy as the child slowly awakes.

10.1.2.4 Events

While the events of the narrative have already been enumerated in some detail, the following table of musical emplotment (Table 10.2, again, informed by Almén (2008)), offers a fuller outline of the narrative events of each *isotopy* in turn, linked to their attendant topics and melodic materials.

Table 10.2 Detail of musical emplotment in “The Land of Nod”

Isotopy	*Bars*	*Narrative Imagery*	*Musical Topics/Textures/Materials*
1a	1-34	*Child playing before bedtime*	Rhapsodic and playful clarinet line whimsically moving across tessitura, supported by syncopated accompaniment and rapidly moving harmonies
2a	35-39	*Chiming grandfather clock, to suggest passing time*	Bell effects used to state “Westminster chimes”
1b	40-52	*Continuation of child playing, becoming more intense*	Rhapsodic clarinet and accompaniment
3a	53-60	*Parental intervention: calming with glimpse of lullaby to follow*	Cantabile clarinet and violin lines, looks ahead to melody at 4a (from b. 170 onwards)
1b	61-77	*Further continuation of child play*	Topics and materials as above, but with growing harmonic intensity and shortening phrase lengths, leading to climax below
2b	78-84	*Clock chimes*	
1c	85-104	*Child playing*	
3b	105-112	*Calming parental intervention*	
1d	113-119	*Child playing*	
2c	120-125	*Clock chimes*	
1e	126-135	*Child playing*	
2d	136-143	*Clock chimes*	
1f	144-161	*Climax of child playing*	12-note chord reached and sustained
2e	162-169	*Clock chiming the hour: seven strikes*	Quasi-spectral evocation of clock, with fluctuating subharmonics and overtones
4a	170-182	*Segue from striking clock to lullabies, accompanied by “breathing chords”*	Lyrical clarinet line, based on free improvisation on Brahms, *Wiegenlied* op. 49 no. 4 “Sunset” chord pairs in accompaniment (bb. 173-174) suggest slower breathing/calming (cf. Jonathan Harvey, *Tranquil Abiding*, and Kaner and Armitage, *Hansel and Gretel*, especially Scene 6)

4b	183-194	*Multiple lullabies heard (including quotations), mingling together as child falls asleep*	Quotations from Chopin *Berceuse* op. 57 (b. 183, vln 1); Fauré *Berceuse* op. 16 (bb. 184-186, vln 1); Stravinsky *Berceuses du Chat* (bb. 189-190, cl) alongside further allusions to Brahms *Wiegenlied*
4c	195-202	*Dissipation of lullabies into silence*	"Breathing" chord pairs return, slowing with each statement
5a	203-236	*Dream sequence: "the curious music that I hear"*	New harmonic world constructed around a single overtone-series harmony that is transposed to create a pair of chords (***a*** and ***b***), used in alternation like "two facing mirrors" (bb. 205 and 208, after Borges; see discussion above). New melodic materials and figures: • "Imp" dance (cl and vln 1: bb. 207, 211-214 etc.) • "Tiny footsteps": descending pizzicato lines in treble (bb. 208-210) • "Baroque" virtuoso string lines (bb. 215-217 vlns after Telemann, *Gulliver Suite*) Extended breaks between phrases emphasises strangeness (e.g. bb. 220-21). New chord pair ("intensification" chords) introduced in bb. 223-225 to briefly move away from main pair in preparation for arrival on climax chord (reh. **[R]**) containing chord ***a***.
5b	237-250	*Climax of dream, distant clock chimes within dreamworld*	Reprise of Westminster chimes (bb. 240-243) and hour strike (b. 247)
5c	251-258	*Striking clock becoming clearer, dreamworld dissipates*	"Fuzzy" transposition of clock strike chord from isotopy 2e
6	259-266	*Clock strike harmony segues into "sunrise" chord pairings, growing in intensity*	(cf. Dawn chorus in *Hansel and Gretel:* Scene 3, bb. 144-163)
7	267-273	*Child awakes and resumes play*	Reprise of rhapsodic clarinet writing from **isotopy 1**
8	274-281	*Climax of final section and coda*	

10.2 Reflections on *At Night*

10.2.1 Rehearsal and Premiere

The response from the ensemble was very positive and the narrative characterisation of the first two movements was quickly understood. In an informal interview via WhatsApp messenger with Romano beforehand she noted (later written up for a feature on the venue website in lieu of physical programme notes (2021)):

> I'm thinking about the 'world' of the new quintet… lots of gorgeous resonances of H+G… and the evocative titles…and your other works like 'Snowbells'… You know I love fairy stories and miniature worlds…
>
> […]
>
> It's very very playful and mischievous… are you telling a story? I can hear the clock chiming again and again…

Nonetheless, the third movement was, despite my best efforts, completed late (due to illness, childcare issues and a conflicting schedule at Guildhall at the start of academic year), which meant it took rather longer for the ensemble to get to grips with. While technically no more challenging than the other movements, its expressive language (or storyworld) is markedly different. In our WhatsApp conversation Romano simply noted, "Not gonna lie, can't recall 3rd mvt so well having only played it in one reh!!" (26 November 2021).

Consequentially, the premiere of this movement was a little less assured, and I realised soon after the premiere that the opening tempo was too fast to convey the eeriness of character required to distinguish it from the end of the second movement. Having sent some specific comments on its realisation in preparation for the recording, Romano aptly responded with the simple question: "Is it right to say that as a general note, 'embrace and play into the weirdness more'?"

Some of the more unusual effects I had called for also needed some verbal reinforcement to confirm my intentions. For instance, it was assumed that the high

pizzicato written on the A string in violin 1 in bar 5 was a mistake (and was played on the E string instead), whereas I had specifically composed this (using my own violin) to evoke the creaking of a building, rather than a conventionally sonorous pizzicato.

10.2.2 Quotations, Topics and Specificity

Implicit in my preceding discussion of adaptation is the extent of the personal nature of my response to the three poems. The process of constructing these musical storyworlds went beyond a mere "reading" of these texts and involved probing myself more deeply to determine how they relate to my own experiences. As such, the significance of the musical topics and quotations for me is peculiarly personal, and I was unsurprised that some of the quotations were not recognised by the players:

> KR: Are there any other real world mimimickings [sic] like the clock in the quintet?
>
> That we might have missed!
>
> 
>
> MK: haha
>
> that's the most specific one really
>
> there are some quoted lullabies
>
> but they should just feel embedded into it really
>
> KR: Oh nice… they are embedded!
>
> Ie I've not immediately spotted them!
>
> MK: yeah I didn't want them to feel clunky or anything
>
> (Extract from WhatsApp conversation with Romano, 26 November 2021)

As Romano eloquently put it in her completed piece for the venue website, "[t]here are always two storytellers in music; the composer and the playing musician. Perhaps this is why performing Matt's music feels like such an exciting and open invitation to keep telling the story in your own voice, and a uniquely engaging way of sharing the experience with an audience" (2021). In a sense, the specifics of the way in which musical narrative is constructed is less important; it is the overall condition of narrativity in the work that I hope the performer can convey in their own performance. As such, my ambition is that any listener might sense the narrative intention of the movements, which, while suggested by the three poems, are "independently viable", as Boyd would have it (2017, 11), and fulfil a *musical* definition of narrative (after Almén and others), such that listeners can detect and engage with, especially when presented with the works' descriptive titles, and possibly the poems that they refer to.

Reflecting on this question of specificity in storytelling across different media, Ryan notes:

> We may also want to ask how the mental construction of story-worlds is affected by the types of signs that a medium uses. This process of mental construction is highly sensitive to the distinction between language-based and visual media. Language-based narratives require an extensive filling-in work because language speaks to the mind and not directly to the senses. (Ryan 2004, 42)

Extending this to musical narratives, one might argue that, regardless of any topical allusions or musical intertextuality, the limits of specificity are entirely dependent on the listener's knowledge of other repertory and ability to recognise tropes and quotations. To an extent, this can be mitigated by programme notes and/or discussion around the performance of a work. Yet it is my hope that, even without such prompts, a listener would have some sense of the music's narrative conception and detect elements (rather than all) of its characterisation and changing hierarchies over time.

Anecdotally, I was, pleasantly surprised that my partner noted (unprompted) the influence of Telemann's string writing in the first movement. Nevertheless, it was through one of her previous employments with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment that I had myself discovered Telemann's Gulliver Suite, which is otherwise rarely performed. (It seems unlikely she would have known the work otherwise.)

10.2.3 Reception

While there were no members of the press at premiere, its small audience responded warmly and engaged well in the pre-concert discussion. (The premiere took place at the beginning of the Omicron wave of Covid-19.) Nevertheless, as I had anticipated, the works are formally quite complex, especially the first movement and, I suspect, would benefit most from repeated listenings. The upcoming release of the recording on Delphian Records (Kaner et al. 2022) will perhaps allow a more comprehensive response to the work as a whole.

10.2.4 Personal Response

Ultimately, I feel the piece achieves the aim of offering three very different musical narratives on a broad common theme, with three distinct sonic palettes that convey the expressive and stylistic range of the poems that prompted them.

Within my wider catalogue (and on the forthcoming album) the three movements include musical ideas and effects quite different to my other compositions, and the first movement, in particular, is formally more ambitious than anything I have attempted elsewhere.

Writing for the ensemble itself presented certain challenges. As I have discovered in informal conversations with colleagues, many composers seem to agree that availability of the cello as the sole bass instrument in this ensemble (and string quartets) is quite restrictive.

I became acutely aware of this when I completed a Piano Trio immediately after *At Night*, in which the lower register of the piano allows the cello to explore its middle

and high register much more freely. (I should also note that Bass Clarinet was not a practical doubling within the concert programme for the premiere. Moreover, its presence would undoubtedly reduce the likelihood of further performances of the piece.) Nevertheless, I felt that this restriction prompted certain creative responses from me, particularly in the very extensive use of double stops (in all three movements), even though this was very time-consuming when checking the feasibility of the part-writing.

11 Wider Reflections on Instrumental and Vocal Narrative Works

11.1 Creative Discoveries

As a body of work, the music presented here demonstrates a range of approaches to narrative, from the explicitly texted through spoken narration in *Hansel and Gretel*, explicitly programmatic in the case of *At Night*, and lastly, more implicitly in *Five Highland Scenes* and *Flight Studies:* ii. "The Kestrel", where no specific text exists but, a narrative was intended, and may be identified using Almén's (2008) analytical methods.

Compositionally, these projects resulted in many artistic discoveries for me, some of which might perhaps have been anticipated, and others that were more unexpected. Foremost amongst these are:

- A vastly expanded approach to form, including, for example in "The Land of Nod", much more complex (and longer) structures within a single movement, suggesting many further possibilities for future works (see also my later comments on *Pearl*)
- A more developed approach to the characterisation of material, including a new boldness in the use of music evocative of other works or styles (including quotation) and employing more extreme contrasts
- A greater understanding of the storytelling potential of (my own and others') music, both when combining text and music and in instrumental writing

On the second point above, I feel this research has had a particularly valuable outcome for me artistically, by allowing me to address a core aspect of my relationship with the legacy of Modernism. Having studied at length the language and aesthetics of several modernisms (such as post-serial techniques, post-spectral approaches, post-Cageian experimentalism), I have often held the suspicion that the

singularity of these approaches might be seen as outdated in response to the complex multifaceted nature of contemporary life, composers' (portfolio) careers and tastes. Discovering the array of approaches to material in Armitage's poetry (consider, for example, the very fluid and playful shifts in style and register that occur throughout *Hansel and Gretel*) has emboldened me to embrace a more eclectic approach of my own, and I believe will continue to do so, offering me a new sense of equanimity with the broadness of my own musical interests and tastes and how they might feature within my own work.

As discussed below, the creative discoveries yielded in this portfolio have also greatly informed my approach in the ongoing completion of my new work *Pearl*, which has now been rescheduled to premiere in August 2022.

Finally, this extended study of narrative music has also ultimately made me more aware of its limitations, which are examined in section 11.3.

11.2 Research Findings

In addition to the artistic research findings above, the project has enabled me to reach a less equivocal position in response to the research questions and aims set out at the inception of this project, namely:

i. To what extent can instrumental music convey a sense of narrative, or enhance a given narrative,

and,

ii. how can I compose music that enhances, supports and articulates a narrative of a text?

Having completed this folio of works, documented their creative development and linked my practice with its theoretical underpinnings in this commentary, I now feel able to address these aims as follows:

- Instrumental music can indeed articulate narrative, firstly within the parameters identified by Almén (2008), through the establishment of music entities that undergo shifts in their hierarchical arrangement within the timespan of a piece. Secondly, these can gain greater (if not universal) specificity via the use of familiar cultural objects, such as musical quotation, and topical allusion.
- The same devices and techniques can equally successfully be employed to enhance and support the narrative of music with a performed text. As such, a vast array of compositional devices that encompass (perhaps even all) its technical and artistic parameters (rhythm, timbre, harmony, line, tempo, texture etc) may be applied by the composer in the service of narrative emplotment if desired.

Ultimately, the perceptibility of music's narrative emplotment can, of course, only be confirmed on a subjective (or intersubjective) basis. Yet the same can be said, to a degree, of all narratives. Different audience members (and even its creators) responded differently as to what *Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes* was a story "about"; yet this does not diminish its inherent validity as a story.

Nevertheless, it would, I believe, be imprudent to overstate this position. As discussed, scholarly consensus does not exist on the notion of music's inherent narrativity, and from a creative perspective, I do not believe it applies to all my work.

11.3 Limitations of Narrative

Though clearly an important focus of my creative activity during the period of this research, narrative occupies one strand of my creative interests. I have written other works during this period (two solo Cello Suites, a Piano Trio) that have no intentional narrativity at all. It would be hard to argue, for example, that single-focus modernist work (by Cage, Tenney, LaMonte Young, or even Steve Reich, for instance) could or should be seen as narrating a plotline, even if Almén, Hatten, Klein and others have

developed the means to argue that this category of works should be understood as "anti-narrative", and thereby still engaging on some level with narrativity.

Moreover, writing the non-narrative works mentioned above was fundamentally more intuitive, particularly in terms of form and continuity, once I had generated their initial materials. While composing these pieces, I noted that this approach fostered greater spontaneity, which I struggle (but do not necessarily fail) to attain as easily when predetermined narrative structure is in place. Using a narrative can help me in certain cases when I feel unable to generate a form more intuitively (such as in "The Kestrel", which was not originally planned that way). Yet there are undoubtedly many other ways to do so that I have still to discover in my practice.

More fundamentally, despite the many arguments to the contrary (such as those presented in Boyd (2010)), it is also important to recognise that the urge to narrativise may not be universal and is not always necessarily a valuable one.

Galen Strawson, in his famous essay "Against Narrativity", argues that the urge to narrativise might be seen "as an affliction or a bad habit" and risks "a strange commodification of life and time – of soul, understood in a strictly secular sense. It misses the point. 'We live', as the great short story writer V. S. Pritchett observes, 'beyond any tale that we happen to enact'" (Strawson 2004, 450). Nevertheless, it could also be argued that Strawson's comments pigeonhole narrative as adhering to classical conditions that assume a unified teleological sense of emplotment (which would, of course, commodify life and time).

Yet so many narratives after modernism, as Brian Richardson argues in his examination of narrative innovation since 1900, "resist, elude, or reject this model of plot and its explicit assumption of narrative unity, cohesion and teleology," by means of "strategies [that] supplement or supersede more traditional modes of sequencing", including those that "most spectacularly overthrow it" (2007, 168). Nicholas Reyland (citing the example of Lutosławski's *Livre pour Orchestre* written in Communist Poland) posits, likewise, that musical works that adopt such "rehabilitated forms" of

narrativity have the potential to undermine one's sense of reality altogether, even the very principle that there may "in fact, be only one reality", with complex political and societal ramifications (Reyland 2013, 52).

In such circumstances, then, perhaps a more balanced approach is wise. Narrative, as an analytical tool and creative guiding principle, may offer certain benefits, which, if understood "in the wider context of contemporary scholarship's kaleidoscope of methodologies" allow one to "access ideas that cannot be revealed in other ways and that therefore have the potential to make a unique contribution to criticism and scholarship, productive for creators, critics, performers, and audiences alike" (Reyland 2013, 52).

Ultimately, whether a narrative approach (or element) is appropriate in a developing composition depends, for me, entirely on the work in question, rather than as part of any broader aesthetic framework. As I surmised in my discussions with Romano, each piece has its own demands, and what's most important to me is the continual process of creative discovery.

> KR: I like this liminal world you inhabit... between 'real world sounds' that belong in the world of the piece... was this a recent discovery or has your music always existed in this place?
>
> MK: I think it's something that really emerged during *Hansel and Gretel*
>
> KR: It is - I think - a storybook world...
>
> Is it something you will develop beyond? Or do you feel you've found your distinctive voice in this place?
>
> MK: Hmm that I'm not sure about - I feel like every piece is a discovery in a way[.] In fact I would say I actively don't like it when I feel that I'm doing something I fully understand. It's scary of course, but I think there needs to be an urge to discover something new, even if it's in quite a subtle way.
>
> (WhatsApp correspondence with Kate Romano, 26th November 2021)

11.4 Methodological Benefits of Self-Narrative/Autoethnography in Practice as Research

Moving forward from this position on the benefits of narrative as one creative and critical tool among many leads me, at this endpoint, to reflect on the effectiveness of autoethnography or self-narrative as a methodology for sharing my creative research process.

Fundamental to this question is whether or not such an approach successfully averts "the dangers of post-fact rewriting of history[…] ever-present in self-reflection", warned against by Leedham and Scheuregger's conference paper on the role and challenges of the written commentary for composers, especially in composition PhDs (2018, 12). On one level, this is difficult for me to assess objectively (for the very reasons they cite). Yet adopting the autoethnographic model did yield certain methodological epiphanies for me.

At its core, the biggest danger of commentaries is the urge to explain "musical decisions too objectively and in doing so create teleological justifications that tacitly assert idealised notions of genius" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 1). While it would be disingenuous to claim this commentary comprehensively avoids this pitfall, the approach revealed ways to break some links in the common chain of events, in which intuitive, messy decision-making is described post-hoc as if elegantly pre-planned and technically watertight from inception to completion.

Documenting my creative thought-process during the period of composition itself has, to an extent, prevented me from idealising the realisation of my musical intentions in that, while still explaining what they were, it also openly demonstrates that I was not always fully aware of them, and that they revealed themselves gradually through a complex, and often very messy, process of searching for ideas (and perhaps even inspiration), by examining models, reading (scholarly and artistic texts) and self-interrogation. Moreover, while my musical decisions are ultimately still examined with critical and/or analytical techniques (including set-theory, no less, in

section 5.2) these are explicitly, rather than tacitly, conducted post-hoc as a means to uncover, as much for myself as the reader, the relationship between my artistic intentions and the strategies I may have used to achieve them, with an acknowledgement that I may not necessarily have been aware of these strategies (or perhaps partially so) at the time.

This has generated a change of emphasis when writing the commentary and, in turn, fostered a methodological eclecticism enabling me to interrogate my process and the completed scores, from a wider range of perspectives with the aim of discovering, rather than simply asserting an "idealised notion" of my creative journeys. One specific insight this has afforded me is the more open acknowledgement, and ultimately greater understanding and acceptance of the role of intuition (especially under time-pressure) in my compositional process, which I had not anticipated, and in some unquantifiable way, sense has benefitted me as a creator beyond the confines of this research. This is examined further in the following section (11.5).

To conclude, the use of the autoethnographic methodological tools here, I hope, offers readers some "elucidating insights afforded by examination of the more ephemeral aspects of the creative process" (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 3). As a technique, it presents certain difficulties, and inevitably some of the "messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft" (Bochner 2000, 267) lived experiences of composing the work has had to be tidied to an extent, in order to generate a comprehensible (if not completely linear) neo-narrative of the artistic process. The intuitive, tangled, and simultaneous manner in which the musical ideas occurred to me (possibly as a result of various insights and accumulated ideas coming together in a condensed "epiphanic" moment of creativity) requires substantial unpicking, and I hope the application of theory has helped to facilitate this for readers.

Nevertheless, it would be dishonest to portray the research process as entirely positive or productive at all times. In particular, the creative diary-keeping did at times seem like an intrusion, or as Strawson might put it, like an attempt to "commodify" my compositional journey for the consumption of others, including when this was affected by personal (and interpersonal) difficulties that I would not

necessarily wish to share in this context. The decision to self-censor in this fashion is ultimately an ethical one requiring the researcher to determine the degree of openness with which they wish to conduct their research.

However, as Leedham and Scheuregger argue (2018):

> [I]t would be straightforward to demonstrate that the approach is a step towards generating 'a portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates experience' as a 'process for theorising practice' (Nelson 2013, 126), especially if the goal of autoethnography is to break the cycle of writing commentaries entirely after the work has been created. (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018, 12)

11.5 The Role of Intuition in my Creative Process

At several points in the commentary, the importance of intuition, in arriving at the final iteration of a score, is acknowledged. Yet, broadly considered, intuition in compositional practice might be described as something of a taboo subject. As Pohjannoro notes in her anlaysis of the compositional process of a single participant, the "mystical" nature of composers' accounts of their working process can be "partly attributed to the desire to maintain professional secrets" (2014, 179), but perhaps more fundamentally, to their "inability to describe or understand the intuitive component of their work, and the ways in which it is actualized in their concrete compositional acts" (2014, 179).

Having engaged with the emerging research on this aspect of the creative process, I believe two processes may be at play when I label my process as intuitive:

- First, is the simple process of experimentation (invariably at the piano) in which I deliberately vary material until I feel I have somehow improved and developed it.

The approach is intentionally loose and free, to allow association, memory and reflection to inform the writing. It often involves "accidental" discoveries; I may

realise a fragment reminds me of another work or alludes to a topic of some kind; I may even simply play back something incorrectly and find the results agreeable. During this process I attempt to judge according to various criteria whether some material, or an iteration of it is worth keeping using both my conscious analytical faculties and my intuitive or embodied knowledge. ("Do I like this? Is it better?" etc.) In the latter case, this is something that I can often unpack later through analysis and reflection.

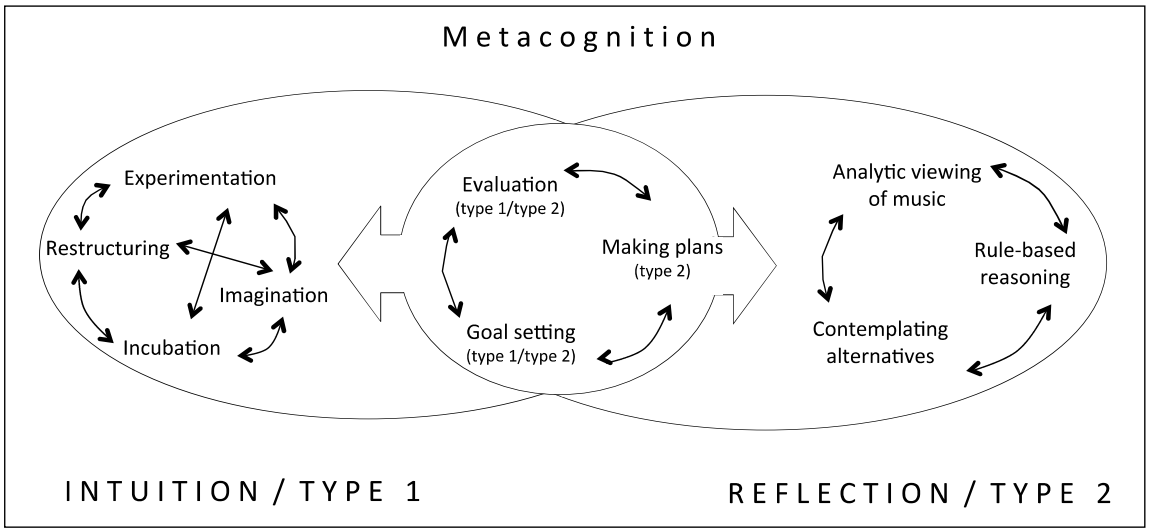
Most often, this analysis of my material and decisions occurs within a short timespan (during the same sitting, or a day or two later) and is something I become actively aware of during the piece. I can then use this to inform subsequent decisions: for example, I may notice that some material projects a certain topic that can be developed in a certain way. Perhaps put most simply, I experiment with material, and reiterate through a process of "trial and improvement", according to my accumulated musical judgment and taste.

- Secondly, I very occasionally achieve what I believe is a "flow state", at which point, I find myself unaware of the passing of time (hours can seem to pass incredibly quickly) and write music without really paying any attention to how this occurs.

From my conscious perspective, music written in this state simply "comes out", and my role during those moments is to notate it as efficiently and accurately as possible while I can still "hear it" in my mind. This can be a satisfying and/or distressing process. Sometimes deadline pressure makes the "birth" of the music in this way extremely tense, effortful and uncomfortable; I feel creatively at the mercy of some invisible process. At other times, it can be exhilarating, as new music that appeals to me seems simply to emerge on its own in moments of "inspiration". (The latter term is what I would have considered the process to be in a rather embarrassingly earnest Romantic way during my early twenties.) I believe this process differs from improvisation, which perhaps more closely fits the first category of controlled "experimentation" described above.

From a cognitive theoretical perspective, the first category of intuition could be argued to comprise what Pohjannoro labels "imagination, experimentation, incubation, and restructuring" (2014, 171–72). These occur alongside reflective operations, in which the music is consciously analysed, processed according to rules and compared with alternatives. Between the two poles of thought, a metacognitive (intermediate) mode of thinking can be identified that entails evaluation, planning and goal setting, summarised in the following chart.

Figure 11.1 Compositional acts as categorised by Pohjannoro (2016, 209)



While Pohjannoro's findings must be understood as provisional and limited, given the sample size, they do I believe, mirror my own to a large degree. Moreover, Pohjannoro subsequently observes that the composer, as the piece developed, began to accumulate compositional unknowns by (consciously and unconsciously) deferring decisions.

> Regardless of the composer's intuitive and reflective compositional acts, at the beginning of the process he could only attempt to probe his vague ideas and materials, whilst being unable to devise far-reaching formulations. […] He could not see all of the relevant compositional options or their implications for the congruence of the whole work. Consequently, he just suspended the decisions and moved onwards through the emerging piece, leaving behind empty bars and unanswered questions, and formed only a skeleton of the section of the score

> that would later become the first movement of the work. (Pohjannoro 2014, 177)

In Pohjannoro's later article (2016), she returns to the same case study to analyse this deferral and accumulation of problems in more detail, noting that:

> After this point, the composer began to work fluently, made quick and effortless decisions, and reported that these decisions were 'surprisingly intuitive'. From the music analyst's perspective, the composer's choices appeared to be logical deductions based on nearly all the composer's actions from the very beginning of the process. (Pohjannoro 2016, 224).

On some level, this may then also account for the second category of intuition I describe; what I may perceive to be intuitive may in fact be a rational process of deduction based on problems generated and accumulated through the deferral of decisions. Thus the "flow state" described in my second category above, may in fact arise as a result of this process. Studies on the role of flow states for composers (as opposed to performers and improvisers) are relatively rare, but some recent publications (Chirico et al. 2015; Harmat, de Manzano, and Ullén 2021) address it to some extent.

Flow, the term first coined by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), entails "a sense of total absorption, concentration, action-awareness, distortion of time and intrinsic enjoyment during an activity", resulting in "a state of full engagement, control, concentration […] characterized by clear goals, unambiguous feedback, distortion of time perception, loss of self-consciousness" (Chirico et al. 2015, 1–2). This closely mirrors my own experience in moments of the second category of intuition.

One proposed explanation for this sensation is "positive affect shifts cognition to a more 'diffuse' mental state, which is characterized by *less gating of information and reactive control*. In the context of creative activities, this mental state would thus *benefit free association, fluency of performance, and output that is more original*" (Harmat, de Manzano, and Ullén 2021, 381, italics mine).

In another study discussed by Harmat et al, it is noted that participants in a flow state described a sense of "surprise in looking at the artwork as it took shape, as if they had been suspending their conscious presence and suddenly came back to consciousness" (Harmat, de Manzano, and Ullén 2021, 382). They note that these "phenomena are markers of a reduced influence of extrospective processing" (383).

At this point, my autoethnographic methodology perhaps risks sinking into the solipsism, self-indulgence and circularity warned against by Freeman (2011), so I will only speculate briefly on this. Yet I feel it is possible that the positive feedback I have received for music written in this way owes something to the fluency and freedom of creative thinking engendered by these flow states when composing. (See for example the performers' responses to the extracts discussed in 5.3 and 8.1.1.)

Moreover, while these studies are limited, this pattern might also fit those described anecdotally by other composers. (See Figure 11.2.)

While it remains clear that "more research is needed to fully understand the causal relation between state flow and quality of creative performance" (Harmat, de Manzano, and Ullén 2021, 384), initial findings in cognitive music studies appear to support the notion of what Pohjannoro deems "intuitive expertise" (2016, 227). This phenomenon seems to require certain prerequisites:

> (1) a guiding principle, which centralises and guides searches in the problem space; (2) constant fluidity between different processing modes so that intuition is guided by as much evidence as possible and explicated to the point that ensures the achievement of generic aims (aesthetic coherence); (3) expert ability to learn implicitly; and (4) the ability to tolerate ambiguity. (Pohjannoro 2016, 227)

Figure 11.2 Twitter thread, potentially describing “problem accumulation” by composer Tom Coult (2022)

The importance of an ability to tolerate ambiguity may also account for the distress (aside from deadline pressure) that I sometimes encounter during or in the run up to achieving intuitive flow states in my work. *Flow* is typically described as enjoyable (see Chirico et al. 2015, 1), yet for me it would appear that the accumulation of uncertainty, while intrinsic to the achievement of this state, can be unsettling.

Perhaps the findings gathered here (which demonstrates scope for much further work with other composers) will bring me some feelings of equanimity around the process moving forward.

12 Looking Ahead: *Pearl* and Beyond

Originally intended for inclusion in this portfolio, I have now resumed work on my setting of an abridged version of this medieval poem translated into modern English by Simon Armitage (2016), for performance in August 2022, and it is complete in piano reduction. (My abridgement of the original text is included in the appendix: section 14.2.) As such, it presents a direct continuation of this narrative research project. While a full account of the overlapping research aims and concerns of the project is not possible here, the following summary is intended to give a sense of their continuity with and development of those found in this doctoral submission.

Armitage's translation of the poem required substantial cutting (with Armitage's encouragement) to create a text short enough for vocal setting. Effectively this resulted in an adaptation of the narrative into a more distilled form, omitting much of the theology that underpins the conversation between the jeweller protagonist and his daughter, and creating a new role for the chorus. (The poem does depict a heavenly choir "whose joyful voices might pierce the earth and penetrate hell", but not the text they sing.)

I found this process immensely challenging; partly due to my nervousness at editing poetry by the sitting Poet Laureate for his approval, but more fundamentally, because it gave me a level of authorial responsibility I had never previously assumed. Significantly, this process took place (because the piece was originally scheduled to premiere in 2020) before I composed *At Night*, and I suspect the experience it gave me was partly responsible for the sense of freedom I felt in responding to those poems to generate my own adapted musical narratives.

Musically the poem *Pearl* suggested to me multiple story-worlds; the fantastical quality of the vision of the jeweller's daughter in the afterlife in particular relates harmonically to the dream sequence in "The Land Of Nod" sharing some microtonal harmonies related to those in Figure 10.15.

In addition, my setting of *Pearl* drew heavily on my experience of working with speech as opposed to song in *Hansel and Gretel*. Certain passages of *Pearl* are delivered more as if spoken by a narrator, using speech rhythms in a chant-like recitative, whereas elsewhere the Baritone solo "sings" at points of lyrical reflection in a more aria-like fashion.

As the longest continuous piece of music I have written (it is in one movement lasting around 25 minutes), my experience of more complex formal designs, guided by the narrative of a text was paramount in its completion. In a comparable fashion to the "Land of Nod" the first few stanzas of the poem occupy a much greater duration of the piece's structure than others, and this decision in terms of pacing is crucial for establishing the "normal" environment of the protagonist's waking state, in order to underline the surreal qualities of his dream-journey from the third verse onwards ("suddenly my spirit rose from that spot when in body I remained asleep on the ground"), which ultimately climaxes at the point where his daughter speaks from within the afterlife.

Perhaps similarly to *Hansel and Gretel*, the role of instrumental interludes (and accompanimental layers) is key in terms of narrative pacing and adding layers of emotional meaning to the text. Ultimately, I believe the projects presented here in Parts One and Two were crucial in giving me the technical means and artistic confidence to make significant structural decisions (particular in terms of the starkness of some of the musical contrasts in the piece) that I intend to incorporate into the final orchestration, through techniques of harmonic differentiation, contrasting topics, textural extremes and so on.

Beyond *Pearl* I suspect that the ultimate test of this new artistic knowledge would be to compose the music for an opera. Nevertheless, while such a project may not materialise immediately, I intend to continue to balance what I now think of narrative works with more abstract ones within my output.

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14 Appendix

14.1 Research Ethics Documentation

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
GUILDHALL SCHOOL OF MUSIC & DRAMA

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Matt Kaner
Guildhall School

9 February 2018

Dear Matt

Re: Research Ethics Application

Thank you for submitting your research ethics application, entitled "Composing Narratives: Reimagining Musical Storytelling in new collaborative Works combining Music with Speech, Sung Text and other Art-Forms" which has now been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee.

I am pleased to confirm that the Committee are satisfied with the research proposal submitted and that **full ethical approval has been granted** for your project.

Please note that you should report any untoward events or unforeseen ethical problems arising from the execution of your project to the Research Ethics Committee within a week of any occurrence. Any feedback which you provide to the participants of the project should be forwarded to the Ethics Committee.

Should you have any queries relating to this letter, please get in touch.

We wish you every success with your project.

Yours sincerely,

PM Galea

Pauline Galea,
Research Co-ordinator

Cc Julian Philips; Richard Baker

14.2 Text for *Pearl*

Baritone
Beautiful pearl that would please a prince,
Fit to be mounted in finest gold,
I say for certain that in all the East
her precious equal I never found.
So radiant and round, however revealed,
so small her skin so very smooth,
of all the gems I judged and prized
I set her apart, unparalleled.
But I lost my pearl in a garden of herbs,
she slipped from me through grass to ground,
and I mourn now with a broken heart
for that priceless pearl without a spot.

In that same spot I clasped my hands,
wholly overcome by the coldness of sorrow.
A desolating grief had gripped my heart
When reason could have put my mind at rest.
I pined for my pearl in its earthen prison
And fierce thoughts fought back and forth;
though the nature of Christ offered me comfort
my wretched desire writhed in despair.
Among those flowers I fell to the floor,
my senses suddenly swamped by scent,
and sank into heavy sleep on the ground
where my pearl was lost, on the same spot.

Chorus
That pearl had rolled away from a mound
where brightly lit plants cast bold shadows:
ginger, gromwell and gillyflower
with peonies scattered in between.

Baritone

Suddenly my spirit rose from that spot,
while in body I remained asleep on the mound,
and by God's grace my spirit embarked
On a quest to where marvel and amazements happen.

In a state of ecstasy I strolled along,
no bank high enough to prove a barrier.
Flowers were fairer the further I went,
among sedges, shrubs, spices and pears,
hedges, wetlands and splendid streams
with steep slopes like spun gold,
and arrived at the shore of a winding river,
overwhelming, oh Lord, in its ornament.

A more marvellous matter amazed me now:
beyond that beautiful water I witnessed
a crystal cliff, brilliantly bright,
radiant with glorious gleaming rays,
and seated at the foot of that summit was a child,
A noble girl, a young woman of grace,
wearing a gown of iridescent white.
And I knew her so well – I had seen her before.
Like sawn gold that glistens inside
she sat at the base of the cliff, and she shone.
I stared astonished, and the longer I looked
the more I recognised and remembered her.

'Oh pearl, in those priceless pearls,' I said,
'are you really my pearl, whose passing I mourn,
And grieve for alone through lonely nights?'

Then that jewelled one in her noble gems
looked up and gazed with those grey-blue eyes,
put on her crown of oriental pearls

and spoke without sentiment saying to me:

Chorus
‘Sir, there’s no truth in what you say.
You lament that your pearl is lost for ever
when the exquisite coffer encasing her
is this wonderful garden and glorious estate,
and here is her home for eternity
where misery and melancholy never come near.’

‘And though our corpses decay in the clay
And you cry with lament unremittingly;
One hope above all stays alive in our hearts,
That our souls are saved by a single death.
The Lamb releases us from despair;
guests at His table, we give our thanks
for He offers intense joy to us all
and no one’s honour is ever made less.’

Baritone
Delight deluged my eyes and ears
till my mortal mind was dizzied by madness.
Nothing mattered more than being near her.

I would cross the current
or die trying and drown in its depths.
But suddenly that notion was snatched away;
as the brook beckoned and I bounded forward
my bold intent was abruptly blocked:
my plan was not to the Prince’s pleasing.

Chorus
To please the Prince and join Him in peace
is the simple choice for His faithful flock,
for day and night He has never been less

than a God, a Lord, and a loving friend.

Baritone
Here on this mound this happened to me:
at first I pined for my fallen pearl,
then gave her up to go to her God,
with my blessing and also the blessing of Christ,
who the priests prove to us time after time,
his body as bread, His blood as wine.

Chorus and Baritone
May we live both as His lowly servants
and beautiful pearls, pleasing to Him. Amen. Amen.

14.3 Full text of *Hansel and Gretel (A Nightmare in Eight Scenes)* by Simon Armitage

Scene the First

The boy was called Hansel.
The girl was called Gretel.

Hence the title: Hansel and Gretel.

The father cut wood. He was a woodcutter.

(Excuse me – carpenter, joiner, cabinetmaker)

Wood for the fire, wood for the oven,
wood to repair the roof
every time it shuddered.
Hard to cut wood when there aren't any trees.
When there are only splinters and stumps.
When the wood's on its knees.

And the mother made bread. She was a bread maker.

(Beg pardon – caterer, pastry chef, master baker)

Bread for breakfast, bread for supper,
bread without jam, bread without butter.
Hard to bake bread without yeast or flour.
When there's only cinders and stubble.
When the shelves are bare and the shutters are down.

So the boy was called Cold,

the girl was called Hungry,
right down to the bone,
from Monday to Sunday.

See:
Where there was once a village there was mainly rubble.
And where there was fun there was largely trouble.
And where there were kites there were mostly rags.
And where there was bunting there were chiefly flags.
This flag one week. The next week another.

Scene the Second

Hansel and Gretel
at night in their bedroom.
A bunk bed. He had the upper.

No she had the top.
No he had the top.
No she had the top.
No he had the top.
No she had the top.

Ah, they loved each other
like sister and brother.

At night they listened.
Listened to the sky.
Listened to the hills.
Put an ear to the keyhole
or a cup to the wall.
Listened to the father.

Listened to the mother.

And you know what it's like when you're eavesdropping
when you shouldn't, when you're ear-wigging
when you mustn't.
Like sound underwater,
like an old radio,
all whisper and rumour.

This from the father:
My heart bleeds for those kids.
We can't feed or clothe them,
can't treat or school them,
can't give them a future.
We need to hide them where bombs can't find them.

And this from the mother:
They're not safe in this house.
I keep dreaming a dream:
if they lie here they die here.
We need to lead them away and leave them
if we really love them.

So what the kids received as plotting and scheming
was sobbing and weeping.

And what the parents believed was snoring and dreaming
was fretting and grieving.

Lower the bucket into the well
and there's nothing but sludge,
but now a small tear like a silver snail

that was thought extinct
comes crawling from Hansel's eye.

Boys don't cry.

Pump the pump
and turn the tap
and it coughs up dust
or hiccoughs dirt
or vomits rust,
but now a tear like a priceless diamond
comes sliding down Gretel's cheek,
a trembling, shining blob.

Girl's don't blub.

Day drags itself under the threadbare blanket of night,
day calls it a day and closes the great door of the dome of night,
day rolls over and faces the wall, the wall of night
riddled and pock-marked and punched
by the sniper rounds and bullet holes
of planets and stars,

the full moon
like a doodlebug through a barn roof.

Gretel finally cries herself to sleep in Hansel's arms.
Except Hansel's arms are somewhere else,
in the sleeves of his coat,
his feet in his boots,
his legs on the move,

his hands like pink tarantulas crawling down tracks and paths,
going from place to place,
gleaning pebbles that wink or shine,
pocketing stones till his pockets are full.

Then reaching up,
his arm now like a giraffe's neck
or a telescopic elephant trunk
(he's never seen an elephant, or a giraffe,
except in the dog-eared leaves of a charred book)
to where a neighbour's fresh white loaf cools on a windowsill.

It's theft, but needs must.
And not for eating, even if
a starving hyena prowls in his gut, even if
a shiver of ravenous sharks patrol his blood, even if
his belly like his Adam's apple's been lopped.

Scene the Third

It was a full day's hike.
It was a two-day trek.
It was a three-day slog.
It was a four-day trudge.
It was a five-day yomp.

Then:
Here's a good place.
Let's take five.
Let's make a camp, build a fire.
Kids – get some kip, some shut-eye.
Bed down like hedgehogs in a nest of leaves

below the sycamore's eaves.

And the mother says:
Why we can't stay
with the little ones –
boy of my bone
girl of my womb -
make a new house
under these thick limbs,
under these strong boughs.

And the father says:
They're safer here –
boy of my spleen,
girl of my heart.
We need to go back
to our patch of earth
to defend what's ours.

Blood will find its way home.

And the mother says:
The woodcutter's son
will be safe in the wood,
among timber and trunks.
He knows how to fence and thatch,
knows his lime from his oak,
his birch from his beech,
his ash from his mountain ash,
his box from his maple,
his elm and his hazel;
which bends and burns

which hardens with age
which keeps out the rain.
It's there in the grain.

And the father says:
the baker's girl
should be at ease in the world:
she knows how to forage and grub
for flowers and nuts,
knows her seeds and fruits,
her tubers and roots,
her berries and bulbs,
her mushroom and toadstools
her leaves and her veg.
As sure is eggs is eggs
she'll get by.
It's there in her eyes.

So under the green umbrella
of hornbeam and willow
and aspen and alder
and spindle and elder
and blackthorn and buckthorn
and on through the vigil
of standing larch and silent pine
they wave their silent goodbyes,
tread softly away…

a five-day yomp,
a four-day trudge,
a three-day slog,
a two-day trek,

a full day's hike.

We were right,
says Gretel, waking up.
Left.
Discarded.
Abandoned.
Cut off.
We're stuffed.

What food was left was only a raisin or two.
What fire was left was only an ember or so.

So it's true,
says Hansel, looking around.
Lost.
Rejected.
Deserted.
Dumped.
We're screwed.

What light was left was only a glow-worm's low-energy bulb.
What drink was left was only a foxglove thimble of dew.

I miss our room.
I miss our floor.
I miss our roof.
I miss the door.
I miss the window,
miss the walls.
I miss the mice.
I miss the fleas.

I miss my bed.
I miss my bunk.
I sleep on top.
No you don't.
Yes I do.
No you don't.
Yes I do.
No you don't.

I'm cold.
I'm hungry.
I'm thirsty.
I'm scared.
If we ever get back
you can sleep on the top.
Do these forests have wolves?
Do these woods have bears?

Then a cloud slid away
and out came the big white stone of the moon.
A great big boulder of light.

Hansel punches the air:

Oh stone is attracted to stone, says he,
and white is attracted to white, says he.
That's nothing but drivel and shite, says she.
No it's science and fact, says he - you'll see.

So I dropped these stones on the way, says he,
and now they're a luminous road, says he.
Oh I love you, you geeky nerd, says she.

These cat's eyes will usher us home – follow me.

Which was great.
Which was fine.
The moon winked
and the pebbles winked back.

Which was good.
Which was nice.
Till dawn broke
and the moon yawned and went out.

No what, oh genius brother of mine?

Hansel punches the air:

Oh I knew the moon wouldn't last, says he,
so I snaffled a loaf of bread, says he.
But a loaf of bread's not a torch, says she.
But it kind of is, says he - you'll see.

So I crumbled it up on the way, says he,
and now we just follow the crumbs, says he.
A road made of bits of bread, says she?
Yes a road, and a road we can eat – follow me!

Which was great,
which was fine,
and they tracked the trail
for a couple of miles.

Which was good,

which was nice,
but foxes eat crumbs
and so do mice.
and so do birds.
In fact birds are especially fond of bread,

be it bloomer or farl
be it sourdough or scone
be it teacake or bap
be it soft or stale.
Be it rook or crow
be it wryneck or snipe
be it jackdaw or jay
be it coot or kite.

Blackcap. Whitethroat. Redstart. Wren.
Griffin. Harpy. Phoenix. Hen.

Sun up, the dawn chorus,
a million birds all looking for breakfast,
the road of crumbs well and truly digested.

Every portion pecked,
every titbit necked
every morsel snecked
by twenty-past eight.

Gretel: Oh brother.

The morning sours into afternoon,
stagnates into evening,
curdles to dusk.

The forest a Garden of Eden by day,
full of earthly delights.
But a horror film after dark
and a ghost train at night.

Animal noises like swear-words and threats.

Ponds like eyes.

Marsh gas like strangers' breath.

Trees like kidnappers.

Pigeons like spies.

Twigs like fingers.

Dew like saliva.

Vines like snares.

Brambles like barbed wire.

Cobwebs like hair.

Scene the Fourth

SUGAR!

They'd scented it on the breeze a mile or so back,
tasted it in the air, thought they were going mad.

SUGAR!

They'd followed the whiff like a long thread
reeling them in, hooking them forward, ahead.

SUGAR!

He thought it was a pan of bubbling caramel,
she thought it was burnt fudge or marzipan.

SUGAR!

It led them up and over a humpback bridge,
its spine arched like a hissing cat,
its keystone made of chocolate bricks,
the stream underneath flowing with fizzy pop.
On the other side the soil underfoot
was pure cocoa powder and nothing but.

SUGAR!

(Not that they'd had very much of the stuff. Hardly any at all. Where they came from it was rarer than gold or plutonium, more expensive than saffron or mobile phones, worth more than the local currency, kept in bank vaults under lock and key, sold by dodgy dealers on street corners, licked from the stomachs of dancing girls by gangsters and racketeers, buried in secret locations, ransomed for millions. Even the emperor or president or shah or sheriff or whatever his name was that week could afford no more than a single granule per day, which he placed on his tongue at dusk, and the sight of the sun going down and the sudden sweetness melting into his mind made him weep every time I'M EXAGGERATING but the point is this: Hansel and

Gretel were kids and kids go loopy for sugar and here was an actual THEME PARK of the stuff and an INTERACTIVE theme park at that!)

This is a dream.

A mirage.

We're tired.

We must be asleep.

Need something to eat.

Light-headed.

Low blood sugar.

Try one of these.

They followed a trail of small white balls,
not pebbles this time
but hundreds of shiny mints
that snaked through a garden
of Parma Violets and Cherry Lips,
past bushes and shrubs
whose fruits were Black Jacks and Sherbet Dips,
past flowers and plants
whose petals were Love Hearts and Percy Pigs and Foam Shrimps.

Foam Shrimps – remember them?

And arrived at a building – amazing -

with sugar-glazed windows
and liquorice fall-pipes
and toffee tiles
and brandy-snap gutters
and Chupa Chup chimneys
and Mars Bar lintels
and nougat walls
and a butterscotch door…

Oh sweetness, sweeter than sweet.
The psycho-candy doing its work,
across the tongue and into the gut,
(Oh it's good, it's so bloody good)
and through the roulette wheel of the heart
and around the race course of the veins
and into the sweet spot of the brain
(Oh God, it's insane, it's truly bloody insane).

But you know what they say?
No such thing as a free lunch. No gravy train.

Children, this is your lucky day.
Children, children, tell me your names.

I'm Hansel.
You're most helpful.

(The boy's as thin as a streak of piss.
Too scraggy to haul and lift,
too weak to put in a full shift.
I'll fatten him up, give him some heft.)

I'm Gretel.
I'm most grateful.

(The girl's a bit on the dumpy side.
Too broad in the beam to catch the eye,
too podgy to fetch the best price.
I'll starve her, bring her down to size)

You're welcome.
You're both welcome.

(In fact – two birds with one stone:
she can wait on him hand and foot,
run around, cook and skivvy,
slave till she's skinny,
fetch and carry, wear the pinny,
work off a few pounds.
And he can loaf and lounge,
nosh and trough and guzzle and scoff,
get some bulk and ballast under his belt,
pile on a few stones,
put some flesh on his bones)

Help yourself to the yard and garden,
nibble and chomp all you like
then turn the handle
and come inside –
even the furniture's made of sweets.
Then you can wallow
in marshmallow pillows
and edible sheets,
dreaming your sweet dreams.

(“Sweet” dreams. Geddit?)

But for candy-floss read spider’s web.

And for chewing gum read super glue.

Read bird lime, fly paper, moth to a flame.

Drool over sugar, it turns to a thick, slow, syrupy goo.

Hence Hansel and Gretel
stuck to the house by their paws.
Stuck by their tongues to a door.

Scene the Fifth

Four weeks going by. Four weeks of this:

Empty crab shell for you, girl, profiteroles for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, tiramisu for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, pecan pie for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, lemon meringue for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, treacle tart for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, chocolate torte for the boy.

(I feel sick)

(I'm not done yet)

Empty crab shell for you, girl, mint chocolate chip for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, girl, six Walnut Whips for the boy.

The boy in the cage, that is.
like a sad budgerigar.

The girl going nowhere fast,
like a mouse on a hamster wheel.

The slave-driver cracking the whip,
do that, do this, don't do that, don't do this.

Monster.
Witch.
Bastard.
Bitch.

I heard that.

Her ears were good
but not her sight. Practically blind.
Glasses like milk bottle bottoms.
Glasses like core samples of ancient Antarctic ice.

Empty crab shell for you, madam, sticky toffee pudding for the boy.

Empty crab shell for you, young lady, black forest gateaux for the boy.

Every few days she comes to the cage.

Stick your finger out, son,
let's see if you've made the weight,
let's see if you've plumped up.
Stick your pinkie out, lad, let's see what you've got!

But out through the bars
comes a chicken bone
or a hawthorn twig
or a drinking straw
or length of string
or a plastic pen
or a wooden peg

Well fuck my old boots
what the hell what the hell I've pumped him with butter and eggs
and primed him with sugar and full fat milk and the rest
and he's still pipe-cleaner thin
as mean as the wind
as lean as a reed
still as spare
as a chicken bone
or a hawthorn twig
or a drinking straw
or a length of string
or a plastic pen
or a wooden peg what the hell what the hell's the matter with him?

She'll cut her losses. Take the hit.

Build a fire, girl, and rig up the biggest cooking pot.
Get the water lovely and hot.

She was only thinking of scrubbing him up.
He might be a runt
but better a pristine runt when she auctions him off.
She'll flog the sister as well,
get the pair off her hands, they'll sell as a job lot.

But no smoke without fire thinks Gretel.
Why the kindling and why the cauldron.

For bath she hears broth.

For bathe she hears baste.

For brush she hears braise.

For soap she hears soup.

For scrub she hears grub.

For fresh she hears flesh.

For oil she hears boil.

For heat she hears meat. She hears eat.

Better act fast
or it's Hansel porridge,
Hansel hash,
Hansel potage,
Hansel goulash,
Hansel and mash.

Is the water ready, you silly goose?
But Gretel plays dumb.
Did your mother teach you nothing at all?
But Gretel keeps schtum.
So not just ugly but stupid to boot.
Gretel doesn't move.
Lean over and dip your elbow in.
But Gretel just shrugs.
I'll show you how but just this once.
Then Gretel shoves.

And Gretel, let's not forget,
was a cook's daughter at heart,
and she knew about sugar and heat.

So in went the Drumstick lollies and White Mice,
the Rhubarb and Custards and Traffic Lights,
the Pear Drops and Wine Gums and Milk Teeth,
the Blue Dolphins and Flumps,
the Flying Saucers and Strawberry Chews,
the Chocolate Limes and Pineapple Chunks,
the Liquorice Allsorts and Aniseed Twists,
the Glacier Mints and Jelly Beans,
the Whistle Sticks and Midget Gems,
the Jelly Babies (for ironic effect).
And out went the fire, till the whole sugary globule
had cooled and set.

Till the job lot was a big glass fist
with a certain someone caught in its grip.
With a certain someone locked in its keep,
entombed for all time in a big boiled sweet.

Snap her in two,
it says “%#*€ you”
all the way through.

A spider in amber.

Get your brother and scarper.

Scene the Sixth

But not before
a squint through the blinds.

A shufti, a gawp
just to see what it’s like.

Kick down the door
and step inside.

House where the dark broods
House where the dark blooms
House where the dark breeds
House where the dark breathes

House where the light blinks
House where the dark seethes
House where the light squints
House where the dark glares
House where the light dares
House where the dark stares
House where the light swabs

House where the dark blots
House where the light slides
House where the dark hides
House where the light tries
House where the dark lurks
House where the light pries
House where the dark hurts
House where the light finds
House where the dark forms
House where the light falls
House where the dark clots
House where the light spills
House where the dark spoils
House where the light toils
House where the dark tells
House where the light sheds
House where the dark shades
House where the light masks
House where the dark basks
House where the light leads
House where the dark leans
House where the light peeps
House where the dark leaks
House where the light bleeds
House where the dark weeps

Gretel:
It's wrong to steal
but this silver spoon
reminds me of home.
And I won't say no to a chocolate coin.

Hansel:
It's wrong to thieve
but I love this knife
in its leather sleeve.
And I'll help myself to a chocolate coin.

Scene the Seventh

A full day's hike.
A two-day trek.
A three-day slog.
A four-day trudge.
A five-day yomp.

Still lost.

The woodcutter's son
with his stolen blade
slashing through canes and creepers.

Spoon in her hand
the baker's daughter,
spooning out honey and nectar.

Still lost.

In the ink of the night
they come to a ledge
and stop and stand
where the edge of the land
meets a watery void,
then wait on the brink

of some unknown drink
which might be a ditch
but might be a stream
and might be a river
but might be the sea.

Hop on
said a mute swan!

It wasn't there, then it was.
Like a seat on a carousel.
Like one of those fairground rides.
Like one of those pleasure boats on a boating lake.
Like one of those bedside lights
in the shape of a swan.
And it shone.
Hop on
said the mute swan.
I can take more than one.

For just a sovereign
I'll sail you across.
That's all it will cost.

So Gretel stumped up her chocolate coin and scrambled aboard.

That's a sovereign *each*.
Not a penny less. Up front, in in cash.

So Hansel coughed up his chocolate coin and clambered aboard.

And the world tilted and rocked, wobbled and rolled.

Question: when is swan not a swan?
Answer: when it's a rubber duck.

Question: can a rubber duck carry two on its back?
Answer: it can not.

Question: when is a rubber duck not a rubber duck?
Answer: when it's a leaky boat.

Question: can a leaky boat sail all the way to the far shore?
Answer: not sure.

Question: what was the weather like in the channel that night?
Answer: gale force seven or eight.

But Hansel used his knife as a rudder
and Gretel's spoon made a decent paddle

and they steered and rowed till land
emerged
resolved
declared
appeared
arrived

like new morning on the far side.

Scene the Eighth

A road picked out
by glisten and glint,

by glimmer and shine,
not pebbles or crumbs this time
but the shucked shells
of bullets and bombs
and torn off buttons
and broken medals
and lost buckles
and buckled metal
and twisted cars
and ruptured girders
and crazed ceramics
and littered shrapnel
and fractured armour
and shattered glass
and scattered parts…

that led to a pile of stones
that was once a home.
And a husk of a man
sitting there on his own.

A shadow of a dad.
But no mum.

She was knelt in prayer
by your empty bunks
when heaven delivered
a thunderbolt
When a payload fell.
When an air strike struck.
And the hole it punched
in the rock hard earth

made a sort of grave.
And what was left
of two small bunks
made a coffin of sorts.
And a rough wooden cross.

And the father weeps:
What man is this
who abandons his kids,
whose wife sleeps
in a makeshift box,
in a shallow plot,
whose estate is dust.

But the woodcutter's boy
was a chip off the old block.
And the cook's girl was the kind of fruit
that doesn't fall far from the roots.

There's this place -
it's a full day's hike,
a two-day trek,
a three-day slog,
a four-day trudge,
a five-day yomp –

it's a horror film after dark
and a ghost train at night:

Animal noises like swear-words and threats,
ponds like eyes,

marsh gas like strangers' breath,
trees like kidnappers,
pigeons like spies,
twigs like fingers,
dew like saliva,
vines like snares,
brambles like barbed wire,
cobwebs like hair…

But a garden by day,
where the oaks stand thick and deep and tall,
where the figs hang sweet and ripe and low,
where lumber will roll
and seeds will shoot
and rain will be rain
not bursts of flame.
And if all else fails
there's this chocolate house, this gingerbread hall…
Come.

And they each picked up a small white stone as a souvenir
and moved on.