Benjamin Britten: Hymn to St. Cecilia, Op. 27 -
an analysis

A Study of Britten’s setting of W.H. Auden’s poem
Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day

by

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INTRODUCTION

There are two reasons for examining Britten's Hymn to St. Cecilia, op. 27: firstly, because it is a tremendously beautiful and moving work despite its apparent simplicity; secondly, and in consequence, to discover how Britten set to music such a vivid and profoundly philosophical text. This thesis is in essence a study of compositional method.

Auden's poem itself is complex both in terms of its construction and its meaning, and it is essential to try to look within the poem on a technical level and also discover any personal associations it may have had for Auden, beyond his task of writing about the patron saint of music. These may be categorised as
(1): Auden and his relationship with and understanding of Britten; and
(2): Auden and religion. The first and second chapters in particular address these issues.

The third chapter attempts to examine Britten's formal construction on an overall and detailed level, with direct relation to Auden's own construction, allowing for differences of artistic medium of course. The next chapter views elements of Britten's rhythmic and harmonic construction, and it has been necessary to treat these two musical parameters together as they are inextricable.

Much more detail could be drawn out than is presented here. There are no detailed analyses of either the poem or the music in any other reference work to this date, and therefore the author must take full responsibility for the writing presented within. Certain subjective comments must be part and parcel of an analysis of a work of art, as must the technical aspects. Hopefully they will at least stimulate further thought on the musical setting, and the philosophy it attempts to reflect.
I

A BACKGROUND TO AUDEN'S POEM AND BRITTEN'S SETTING
Benjamin Britten’s *Hymn to St. Cecilia* was written with the intention of restoring the ancient custom of celebrating the feast of the patron saint of music on the twenty-second of November, a date which happily coincided with Britten’s own birthday. This custom was regularly observed in former centuries, the most famous examples being settings of odes by Nicholas Brady and John Dryden by Purcell and Handel respectively.¹

M.K. Spears claims that W.H. Auden privately printed for Caroline Newton in 1941 ‘Three Songs for St. Cecilia’s Day’,² while in the *Collected Poetry* of 1945 (and *Collected Shorter Poems* of 1950) the title was changed to ‘Song for St. Cecilia’s Day’. According to John Fuller, the poem appeared under the title ‘Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day’ in *Harper’s Bazaar* in December, 1941.³ Mendelson makes the same claim and adds that Auden wrote the poem in July 1940.⁴ Later editions of the *Collected Poems* and *Collected Shorter Poems* adopt Auden’s preferred title of *Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day*, but the poem itself remains the same. Britten himself was presented with the poem with the title *Song for St. Cecilia’s Day*, which he changed to *Hymn to St. Cecilia* on copying it into open score.⁵

Put briefly Auden’s *Anthem* adopts

the Renaissance theory of the divine power of musical harmony, not to redeem man, but to show him his lost innocence: before the Fall we could hear the music of the spheres. Music does not ‘translate’, it is ‘pure contraption’ (‘The Composer’, CSP, p.125), and is therefore not able

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⁵ According to the observation of the manuscript by Christopher Mark in a seminar paper presented at the Faculty of Music, University of Melbourne in 1986.
to make moral statements about the world. Its power is to draw forth the emotions, not represent them.\(^6\)

This statement is essential for an appreciation of the power of the poem and its musical setting, the strength of which lies in the dilemma of trying to reconcile that which is morally and sensually desirable and that which is acceptable. The poem is dedicated to Britten and is to a certain extent about him and also a 'lecture' to him. As Britten grew up 'he became increasingly disappointed' with the realities of life, according to Peter Pears, and he became highly conscious of and worried by his homosexual orientation.\(^7\) He was shocked by his less inhibited contemporaries and particularly disturbed by the promiscuousness and unashamedly homosexual attitude of Auden, a man for whom he had considerable intellectual respect.\(^8\) Britten was put in the uncomfortable position of being both attracted and repelled by Auden and his associates, in much the same way as the tension in the poem comes from man's inability to reconcile satisfactorily two hopelessly opposite poles (since the 'Fall'). Nevertheless Auden was not insensitive to Britten's fears and despite being 'temperamentally quite different from Britten, [Auden] understood his deep nostalgia for lost innocence'.\(^9\) In this context alone can Britten's last opera, Death in Venice, be fully understood.

'O the taste of knowledge', the writer Aschenbach cries as he awakens from a Dionysiac dream of the beautiful boy Tadzio. 'The opera was, in some sort of way, a summing up of what he felt', Peter Pears has said. 'At the end, Aschenbach asks ... what it is he has spent his life searching for. Knowledge? A lost innocence? And must the pursuit of beauty, of love, lead only to chaos? All questions Ben constantly asked himself'.\(^{10}\)

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6 Fuller, p.177.
7 In C. Headington, Britten (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.34.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., p.35.
10 Ibid., p.36.
It seems then that Auden understood Britten remarkably well from this poem, which makes the lines in section III so much more powerful; lines such as:

And Dread born whole and normal like a beast
Into a world of truths that never change:
Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange.

Similarly:

O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain,
Lost innocence who wished your lover dead,
Weep for the lives for wishes never led.

The third stanza again echoes these sentiments:

O cry created as the bow of sin
Is drawn across our trembling violin.
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the stain.
O law drummed out by hearts against the still
Long winter of our intellectual will.
That what has been many never be again.

Auden’s advice to Britten about his ‘inner foe’ is clear from the final line: O wear your tribulation like a rose.

But as ‘character is destiny’, so Britten could never declare himself unashamedly homosexual as if overridden by some inner moral conscience, and he may have suffered for it. It also seems that the philosophy born out by the third section goes beyond this however, for Auden’s message in more general terms is a profoundly Christian one,\textsuperscript{11} and it is not surprising that he became more and more attracted to Christian religious values at this time, after earlier diverging from the ‘devout Anglo-Catholic atmosphere of his home, which had the advantage that his first religious memories were of “exciting magical rites”’.\textsuperscript{12} Such an atmosphere is echoed in the poem. One does however wonder at this ‘uniquely Anglican conception of the Church’\textsuperscript{13} with which he seemed to

\textsuperscript{11} See chapter II.
\textsuperscript{12} See Spears, p. 193 and indeed the whole of his third chapter.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
be able to reconcile his blatant homosexuality, unlike Britten, although perhaps deep inside he shared the same fears as the composer.

In the first stanza of the poem, Auden transforms the anonymous lyric of Orlando Gibbons’ madrigal, ‘The Silver Swan’. Ironically the swan’s beautiful song is also its death-knell. Auden then follows Dryden’s example by telling the legend of St. Cecilia’s invention of the pipe-organ. The second stanza draws a sensual picture of Aphrodite delighted by the sound and erotic aspect of music, which eases the pain of the damned and jolts even angels into human ‘time’ again. This contrasts markedly with Cecilia’s vows of celibacy and role as patroness of church music – a contrast with parallels in relation to Britten’s own inclinations and moral views. After the invocation to Cecilia as patroness and muse of musicians, section II assumedly introduces the voice of music itself with its ability to transform the emotional state of man in spite of being inert and unfeeling itself – a fact which causes another love/hate dichotomy. The last stanza follows Dryden’s example, providing opportunities for the imitation of various instruments.

After Britten had sailed for America in 1939, following the example of Auden and Isherwood, he was invited to Stanton Cottage, the home of the Mayer family at Amityville, Long Island, and during his stay there Mrs. Elizabeth Mayer became almost a second mother to Britten. It is to her that Britten’s Hymn is dedicated. By the age of twenty-five, Britten had lost both his parents and despite the warmth he found with the Mayer’s, he became depressed and homesick although his original intention was to settle in America. There is a very early mention of

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14 Cecilia was proclaimed patroness of church music in 1584 as the kind of music she is known for sublimes the erotic. (Fuller, pp.177-8).
the Britten/Auden *St. Cecilia* project in a letter of Britten's of late 1940,\(^{16}\) the musical setting of which Britten completed 'At sea, M.S. Axel Johnson, 2 April 1942'.\(^{17}\) Britten's decision to return to wartime England in 1942 may have lifted a psychological burden from his mind - he felt he belonged inextricably to his native country. With this decision made at last and the renewed warmth he found in his life with the Mayer family, Britten was able to write a work of comfortable, flowing grace yet laden with powerful melancholic beauty and a tragic sense of lost innocence. It was also the end of a close collaboration with Auden which lasted seven years.

The *Hymn* was published by Boosey and Hawkes, London in 1942. It was first performed with tremendous success on the twenty-second of November (St. Cecilia's Day), 1942, by the B.B.C. singers conducted by Leslie Woodgate.


\(^{17}\) Inscription on the final page of the score.
AN ANALYSIS OF AUDEN’S ANTHEM
Before looking at Britten’s setting of the words, it will be necessary to examine Auden’s text. Auden’s poem falls into three sections and is labelled as such, although it should become obvious later in the text that the sections may not be read independently of each other or in any other order without damaging the composite meaning and structural integrity of the whole. In the first section Britten made no changes to the text Auden presented him, and similarly the second section follows Auden’s published version, apart from the addition of the italicized four-line ‘Blessed Cecilia’ stanza which Britten decided to use as a refrain at the end of each section, which at first glance seems not to damage the structure of Auden’s poem, and indeed enhance the symmetry and completeness of the whole. Thrice invoking the patron saint of music itself contains structural and symbolic parallels which will be addressed later in this chapter. Perhaps the idea of using a refrain crossed Auden’s mind, but there is some internal structural evidence to doubt this hypothesis (see below). There is also the fact that further italics occur in section III, and were it not for this the answer may have been more clear-cut. It is all the more interesting therefore that Britten has the italics in section III removed, and tries to emphasize lines rather by an adjusting of the spacing, so that the only italics in Britten’s Hymn occur in the refrain which rounds off each section.

Unfortunately this adjustment on Britten’s part leaves Auden’s Anthem looking structurally less neat in section III.\(^1\) This change in its setting on paper makes the third stanza look too long and slightly upsets the ternary symmetry of the whole section, for it is the second stanza which must act as a contrast (being italicized in Auden’s original), while the first and third stanzas should seem similar. Not

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\(^1\) The lay-out of Auden’s Song for St. Cecilia is exactly the same as the Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day. Only the title was changed.
only does Auden achieve this in the original, he also shows the third stanza to be a further progression of structural thought by incorporating italics every third line— an idea which grows naturally out of the second stanza, and lays extra weight and summary ability on this final stanza which is made up of four groups of three lines (and which Britten separates out in his version.) It should be stressed that the layout of a poem prefacing a musical setting will be the first thing noted consciously and subconsciously (with our inborn need to give formal symmetry and structural clarity to groups of objects whether aurally or visually), and thus in purely visual terms the poet’s layout in the Anthem is much to be preferred to Britten’s typesetting. It may well have been Hawkes’ printing which insisted on this layout in order to incorporate the refrain in italics, and perhaps ideally with Britten’s addition to Auden’s poem the Anthem typesetting should have been used with the refrain set in a different kind of type after each section. What Britten failed to achieve visually, however, he did achieve in a musical conception of the poem extremely close to Auden’s Anthem setting. The following chapter clarifies this. Besides changes in the visual layout of the poem, Britten made only one other change from the Anthem version by altering the second line of the first stanza of section III from ‘Calm spaces unafraid of wear or weight’, to ‘O calm of spaces unafraid of weight’. Either text would fit Britten’s musical setting as both can be similarly scanned, so musical reasons cannot be the basis for such a change. It does seem strange then that only one line should be changed in a seemingly unnecessary way.

In examining the structure and scansion of Auden’s poem, we find that the three sections are set in different metres.²⁹ Section I is

²⁹ The appendix contains a full scansion of the poem.
set in a four-beat popular\(^{20}\) metre, predominantly triple, or in traditional terminology, 'anapaestic tetrameter':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In a garden shady this holy lady} & \\
\text{With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,} & \\
\text{Like a black swan as death came on} & \\
\text{Poured forth her song in perfect calm:} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\ldots
\]

The second section is written in a two-beat popular metre, largely duple (traditionally, 'iambic diameter'):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I cannot grow;} & \\
\text{I have no shadow} & \\
\text{To run away from,} & \\
\text{I only play.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\ldots
\]

Section III, by way of contrast, is in orthodox iambic pentameter:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall,} & \\
\text{Calm species unafraid of wear or weight,}^{22} & \\
\text{Where Sorrow is herself, forgetting all} & \\
\text{The gaucheness of her spent state,} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\ldots
\]

Indeed as a whole the third section is much tighter in construction than the other two, and contains the majority of the poem's philosophical 'truths' and emotional weight. Therefore it must be regarded as the most important section.

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\(^{20}\) That is, it does not maintain a fixed number of off-beats and tolerates fairly wide distortion of normal patterns of stress and intonation.

\(^{21}\) When set against the music, these two words are truncated to 'rev\'rent' and 'Pour\'d'. The former scanion is perfectly acceptable in this metre, and indeed this scanion is to be preferred.  

\(^{22}\) Britten's alteration: 'O calm species unafraid of weight'.
It is itself divided into three stanzas, each line of which is completely orthodox in containing five iambic feet and thus a consistent ten syllables throughout the thirty lines of this section. Being so metrically consistent, it would be the easiest section to set to music. This greatly contrasts with section I which, not being written in a strict metre, varies between eight and twelve syllables in the first stanza, and nine and eleven syllables in the second. This would make the first stanza the hardest to set in a consistent pattern for Britten. He would have much less trouble with the 'refrain' (and indeed it flows quite naturally in Britten's setting), as this contains four lines each of ten syllables, provided one slurs the last two syllables of 'Cecilia' as Britten does: 'Ce - ci - lia', not 'Ce - ci - li - a'. The first two stanzas both contain exactly twice as many lines (eight) as the third 'refrain' stanza (four).

The second section is much of a contrast in containing on average half the number of syllables of the surrounding two sections and half the number of lines per stanza (apart from the 'refrain'). This matches the simpler language which lacks the tremendous mental imagery of sections I and III. This central section then contains five stanzas of between four and five syllables, the first four stanzas having four lines each, the last two. The syllabic content of each stanza generally follows the pattern: 4,5,5,4; apart from the third stanza which slightly varies: 4,4,5,4; and of course the two-line fifth stanza: 5,5; or with Britten's truncation of 'Diff'rent' in the last line: 5,4.

Now that we have examined the first two sections, we may have the clue that the 'Blessed Cecilia' stanza was certainly not regarded as a refrain by Auden as it would upset the structural patterning. The first section in Auden's version contains two balanced eight line stanzas, matching the four half-length four line stanzas in the second section.
The 'Blessed Cecilia' (third) stanza of section I, as well as being italicized is only four lines long, and balances the third stanza of section II, again with half the number of lines. Thus both are linked by a structural symmetry which would be upset by any additions. Similarly sections I and III are balanced in having three stanzas each. The third stanza of section I must only have been placed in italics as the words are an invocation to St. Cecilia, and not because Auden regarded them as a refrain. When read aloud, Auden’s Anthem contains a structural coherence, emotional unity and progression of thought which in purely poetic terms makes any return of the 'Blessed Cecilia' stanza unnecessary. When setting the text to music, however, Britten must have felt that a recurrent refrain would help the musical unity, although with the internal thematic and intervallic unity displayed in Britten’s setting it would have been possible to do away with it if he had so decided, and keep the layout exactly as in Auden’s version.

The number three contains some structural and symbolic parallels in Auden’s poem which should be recognized. The text falls into three distinct sections. Sections I and III each contain three stanzas; the third stanza in each case is the most important, and it may even be argued that the central (third) stanza in the five stanza second section is, in terms of uncovering profound truths in the nature of human experience, more important than the fifth stanza which is emphasized by its brevity. The words of the last stanza of this section:

I shall never be

Different. Love me.

are an appeal from one who is emotionally and intellectually static, as compared with the words of the third stanza:

I am defeat

When it knows it
Can now do nothing

By suffering.

which are an essential statement of the human condition by which
suffering leads us into new realms of experience and understanding.  
A human being who has never really suffered any great physical or
emotional pain cannot learn compassion and will be a person of little
depth and shallow understanding, and thus it is that the language of
this section is so simple. Therefore suffering can make us more human
and also more Christian. 

The person referred to in this stanza cannot
grow, having no ‘shadow’ or pain to ‘run away from’, and also lacks the
capacity to hurt or be hurt. Ironically we can never love anyone who
lacks a capacity for understanding.

My use of the word ‘Christian’ has another meaning connected with
three – the Trinity – and it is not unreasonable to see a reference to
Christ as the paragon of suffering. It is this depth of understanding
concealed by trite language and pagan ritual which creates great
underlying tension in this second section. In the third section there
occurs the only line in the poem which is repeated:

O weep, child weep, O weep away the stain.

Its importance is thus emphasized by repetition and the fact that the
word ‘weep’ occurs thrice. After its appearance in the second stanza,
this line recurs as the italicized third line of the third stanza.

References to ‘our fallen day’ and ‘sin’ support such a Christian
interpretation whereby the stain of our iniquities can only be removed

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23 It will be remembered that this stanza is the ‘odd one out’,
having syllables 4:4:5:4, not 4:5:5:4. This may be because Auden could
find no better way to put this profound truth on paper than exactly as
set out here.

24 ‘[God] Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be
able to comfort them which are in trouble, by the comfort wherewith we
ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound
in us, so our consolation also abundeth in Christ’, 11 Corinthians,
1:4–5.
by weeping, an outward sign of suffering. The crucial last line of the poem:

0 wear your tribulation like a rose.

can be interpreted as an instruction to suffer tribulation as Christ suffered it. The 'rose' we picture in our minds will most probably be blood-red, a damning contrast to those innocent 'white children' incapable of any depth of feeling.

Just as sections I and III consist in Auden's version of three stanzas, and in the overall context section II acts as a contrast to the surrounding two, so in section III the italicized second stanza is a contrast, which Monroe Spears takes 'to be spoken by Music'. As previously mentioned, the third stanza consists of four groups of three lines, every third emphasized in italics. Each of the three stanzas in section III are thus a multiple of three: the first two contain nine lines and the third, twelve.

It will also be noticed that the majority of the lines in this poem are written in the third person, indeed the first section is all third person. The first two stanzas of section I are narrative, the third being more an invocation, written in the vocative. The fact that the third person is used would not really warrant comment were it not also for the fact that the first and second person also occur, though not to the same extent. Section II is almost all written in the first person but for the fourth stanza, which is in the second person, but it is a much shorter section. Use of both the first and second person is scattered throughout section III, though most is in the third person, a reflection of the whole in this most important third section. In

25 'And there should be no greater comfort to Christian persons, than to be made like unto Christ, by suffering patiently adversities, troubles, and sicknesses'. Book of Common Prayer, p.222. 'And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also ...' Romans 5:3.
containing no third person, another element of contrast may be seen in
the second section;\textsuperscript{17} while the difference between sections I and III
being that the third person is common to both and first and second
person also incorporated into III, we see how this last section has
increased in constructional complexity from the first.

With this emphasis on the number three in macro- and micro-
construction, and also in terms of symbolism, Britten's use of the
'Blessed Cecilia' stanza occurring thrice as a refrain at the end of
each section in order to lend clarity and unity to the musical
construction (paralleling the clarity of construction in other musical
parameters) seems at first to add to the completeness of Auden's formal
scheme. Unfortunately this very addition disturbs the symmetry as it
repeats a stanza which is already a vital constructional element by
occurring in the first section alone. With the refrain, the third
section now consists of four stanzas, the second six - the latter
looking distinctly odd due to the length of the refrain's lines. In the
musical context however, it is possible to accept the recurrent refrain,
by suspending our appreciation of the poetic thought and form for the
duration of its two repeats.

\textsuperscript{17} Another reason why the addition of the third person 'refrain'
changes Auden's intentions.
BRITTEN'S FORMAL CONSTRUCTION
Britten's musical form follows that of Auden's poetic form remarkably closely. Britten divides his setting into three large sections. The first section contains a setting of the well-balanced first two stanzas of eight lines each. In Britten's score the first stanza is set over twenty-eight bars, and the second over twenty-seven bars, beginning after a clear cadence at figure 4. The rhythmic and melodic material employed is appropriately similar. The third stanza of this section, the four-line italicized 'Blessed Cecilia' refrain, receives appropriate emphasis by being set to rhythmic and melodic material quite closely derived from the previous material in order to keep with the unity of the section, yet varied just enough to be heard as a concise summary of the preceding material in a memorable turn of phrase (as a refrain should be). Its short twelve-bar length adds to one's ability to remember it accurately, and corresponds to the half-length of the previous two stanzas. Twelve bars is actually a little less than half the twenty-eight and twenty-seven bar length of stanzas one and two, but since the third stanza consists of a constant ten syllables and does not vary like the others, Britten is able to set it more precisely, with no allowance for extra syllables. Each line of the refrain is set over three bars, thus totalling twelve bars in all. Perhaps it is the unison rhythm (and melody)28 of the refrain which makes it seem quite a new musical block as compared with the previous two parts of this section, for there are always two distinct rhythmic strands moving throughout the setting of the first and second stanzas. The sound seems totally new despite the close correspondences and derivations of the refrain from the preceding material:

28 At 7, bb.7-8, there is a slight exception - q.v.

(a) First refrain, 7, b.1.

Opening stanza, 1, b.4.

(b) First refrain, 7, bb.3-6.

Opening stanza, bb.2-5.

(c) First refrain, 7, bb.7-8.

Opening stanza, b.5.

(d) First refrain, 7, bb.11-12.

Second stanza, 6, b.10.

Britten sets the second section in a contrasting texture by employing light and quick contrapuntal movement, the material of which is Scherzo-like, to reflect words like ‘run’, ‘play’, and ‘Dancing’. Just as Auden’s speaker here lacks emotional depth, yet is fully aware of her situation (which revolts us on pondering the text), so Britten’s musical language seems amazingly facile and depends utterly on the listener’s comprehension of Auden’s words to realise that although the speaker feels nothing, that very lack of feeling stirs up emotions inside the listener which cause rebellion against her very lack of human warmth. Important lines are drawn out and underscored in the altos and
basses, but Britten's playful setting allows the listener to treat the whole section as written in a thoroughly sprightly mood. The simple diatonic lines of almost all of the section justifies such an interpretation. But in essence it is like setting the words, 'I am the devil', to a playful melody, and the contrast between the music and real meaning of the text is vast. Yet it would be out of character with the words to suggest anything sinister through such means as an underlying recurrent dissonance, for Auden's speaker can feel no pain in herself, only we the listeners can feel it, and then only if we have the capacity to understand great emotional pain. Such a concept is extremely difficult to put into words and even more complex to try to argue in musical terms or directly convey through the emotions. So Britten presents the words in a musical language approximating only their surface meaning to us, or rather from the speaker's point of view alone, with no allowance for subjective reaction from outside. There is nothing in this section like the emotive appeal, '0 weep, child, weep, 0 weep away the stain', of the next section. The very musical lack of warmth in this central section contrasts greatly with that following it and thus the impact is also built on retrospectively. It is a masterstroke of apparent simplicity on the part of both Auden and Britten. Dressed in simple attire, Britten's setting (and Auden's words) contain under the surface a great richness which is not always immediately apparent. The huge contradiction between what the work appears to be, and what it really is, constitutes the greatness of the work - it is Britten's responsibility to see that we are led to Auden's truths, and that when told, they reach us with sufficient impact. Yet even though we will see an emotional contrast between sections II and III, Britten's musical language restrains from being nearly as powerful as it could be, barely pointing the way to the power contained in the
words and leaving us to appreciate their full depth. It is as if Britten does not presume to be able to present such concepts in finite terms, and in merely leading us toward them to the best of his ability, reminds us of T.S. Eliot's concept of the 'idea and the reality'.

Further evidence as to the importance of the third stanza of section II, rather than the last, is supplied by the fact that Britten seems to have read this central stanza as worthy of emphasis, for it is set as a distinct part, lacking the overlap of the other stanzas (yet flowing without break), also employing unexpected duplets in $\frac{6}{8}$, and containing the section's only chromatic shifts on its second repeat, which are quite smooth nevertheless. In setting the final two-line stanza, Britten thoroughly integrated it into the contrapuntal texture so that it cannot be separated from the fourth stanza. It is nevertheless somewhat emphasized in the final bars of the section by the thinning contrapuntal texture, new extended (developed) melodic fragment on 'I shall never be Diff'rent', and the final solo soprano appeal, 'Love me'.

Ex. 2. Section II, final stanza, [16], bb.3-8.

It is difficult to state the exact lengths of Britten's setting of the individual stanzas in section II, as they generally overlap one another, but for the beginning of the third stanza. We may assume, however, the proportions of the five short stanzas to be roughly (i) 25 bars; (ii) 22 bars; (iii) 17 bars; (iv) and (v) 27 bars (which could

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be broken up as 19 and 8 bars). The proportions of the fourth and fifth (four-line and half-length two-line) stanzas seem shorter than the length established in the first two stanzas when separated out, but it must be remembered that with a thorough integration the total length need be less, and the individual part length may be said to extend into and encompass some of the other part. The first words of the last stanza are actually heard twenty-one bars before the end of the section, so it may be seen how difficult it is to give exact proportions, twenty-one bars being an unreasonable length for a two-line, eight-syllable stanza when compared to the established length of stanzas one and two, of twenty-five and twenty-two bars, which are twice as long. Thus stanza three stands out as being a little shorter (seventeen bars), being set in a different texture to the surrounding parts. Thus Britten sets the five stanzas of section II to a ternary structure about the central third stanza, which allows him to set each of the three sections in three parts (the second and third repeats of the refrain are no more than structural buttresses). There can be no doubt that Britten appreciated Auden’s use of groups of three in regard to formal structure. At the end of section II the refrain’s twelve bars are now harmonized and the entries staggered in two groups on the motive from figure 1, bar 4 (see Ex.1 (a)). The music still derives stylistically from the first section alone, and at least by this means does not seriously arrest Auden’s poetic thought, as the refrain acts as a breathing space before the weightier concepts of section III are introduced. The words of the refrain need little further contemplation.

Before looking at the form of the third and final section, it will be instructive to look at the approximate length of time which elapses in the performance of each section, the total of the whole being approximately ten minutes.
Ex. 3. Table of approximate performance time.  

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<td>(= refrain)</td>
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<td>(iv &amp; v) :20⁺ (14/16)</td>
<td>:24 (16/8)</td>
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OVERALL TOTAL

|    | 9:11 | 9:44 |

The proportions seem to match those of Auden’s text in terms both of form and importance. In section I the first two balanced stanzas take approximately one minute each and the half-length ‘refrain’ half a minute. The average performance time for a four-line eighteen syllable stanza in section II is about sixteen seconds, the central stanza standing out by being three seconds under this average, so that in terms of time elapsed the form moves in both directions away from the short middle stanza (allowing for the half-line at the end to be half the average of course) -

:19, :17, :13, 20 (:14 and :6⁺);
or

The actual recorded performance shows similar figures:

:20, :17, :13, :24, (:16 and :8);

or


Britten’s setting of section III intends that each stanza will take progressively longer in performance time as the stanzas increase in expressive and philosophical content, but unfortunately the recording

³⁰ The first time in each case (to the nearest second) denotes Britten’s fastest marking; i.e. section I d. = 60 (d. = 56-60)
section II d. = 160 (d. = 152-160)
section III d. = 46 (d. = 42-46)
The + sign means that time must also be allowed for each pause. The second timing is taken from the performance by the Quink Vocal Ensemble on the Etcetera Label: ETC 1017.
sampled here does not bear out the composer's intentions. The standard
lengths of the first two stanzas are increased on the corresponding
stanza lengths of section I, even making allowance for the fact that
nine lines are used in section III, stanzas one and two, and eight in
section I, stanzas one and two. Britten allows us to dwell a little
longer on Auden's complex analogies and philosophy in the final section.
Britten also points out the fact that the third stanza of the final
section is the real crux of the poem, every third line defining its
philosophy, by setting each italicized line in an illusory 'free time'
as it were and suspending the pulse for its duration. Thus although the
rhythmic values are defined, sustained chords in all other voice parts
apart from the solo voice (employed to expound clearly Auden's
philosophical concepts) give the impression of a suspense of real time,
and in this way Britten creates an effective means of emphasis in terms
of contrast between 'real' and unexpectedly 'suspended' time. One may
also break up stanza three into four blocks of three to find that in
terms of real time the final block is to be at least ten seconds longer
than the previous three blocks, which should in performance themselves
progressively take a little longer each time. It is no coincidence that
this final block contains the line to which the whole poem is leading:

0 wear your tribulation like a rose.

In terms of the actual number of bars in this third section, the
three stanzas are set to 21, 23, and 20 bars in length. This does not
allow for the fact that four of the bars in the last stanza are open
bars, rhythmically notated to cover a total of 35 minim beats. Thus the
actual proportions may be cited as 21, 23, and 27 2/3 bars in length.

31 This last stanza may be divided into blocks of 4, 4, 5 and 7 bars,
bearing in mind that each block contains one 'open' or 'extended' bar.
The texture of the first and third stanzas is similar, although the mood is more animated in the third and it contains four open solo bars, one for each voice colour. The use of the solo voice occurs both here, and more prominently in the second stanza, which utilizes a texture upon which the beautiful melancholic soprano solo floats with elegant suavity. Thus Britten sets section III in ternary form, and the contrasting middle sections may be likened to a trio. This is appropriate as Auden’s middle stanza was italicized. It will also be remembered that every third line of Auden’s version was italicized in the final stanza, and these are the very lines in which Britten employs the solo voice again—his kind of musical ‘italics’. Perhaps it could also be argued that the italicized ‘Blessed Cecilia’ stanza of section I is consistent with this pattern in a sense, for it appears in rhythmic and melodic unison, and so is a kind of ‘reinforced’ unison or solo of sufficiently different texture to let it stand out. Despite the contrasting middle stanza setting, the motivic unity of the whole section is kept through Britten’s employment of the following melodic and rhythmic fragment:

Ex.4.(a). Section III, middle stanza, \[21\], b.2.

**SOPRANO SOLO**

```
\[\text{casual as birds,}\]
```

(b). Section III, first stanza, \[18\], b.2.

**BASSES**

```
\[\text{cannot wish to fall,}\]
```

Further motivic unity within sections and throughout the work will be demonstrated later, but a fascinating example occurs here although of a
more subtle nature than that above. Britten's setting of the first 
stanza begins with this bar in the bass:

Ex.5. Section III, first stanza, [18], b.1.

Basses

\[\text{pp rather marked} \]

\[O \text{ ear whose creatures}\]

It is heard in this descending form all but once, when the change of 
direction parallels through upward movement and heightening expression 
in the music a corresponding deeper move in Auden's poetic revelations.

Ex.6. Section III, first stanza, [19], b.5.

Basses

\[\text{And Dread born whole and}\]

When 'Dread' is born a new turn is initiated which reaches no 
fulfillment, as 'Dread' is born 'Into a world of truths that never 
change' and thus the music sinks back to the inevitable pattern 
established before, despite vain attempts by the melody to move upwards 
(relieving the monotony of the downward motion) on 'O rearrange'. But 
the soprano line drops back sharply from A - E,\(^{32}\) breaking the pattern 
of stepwise movement, and is finally forced into submission by the bass. 
These lines are very important as Auden reveals (to paraphrase him) how 
'Dread' is born like a 'beast' in our hearts. It comes to be accepted 
by us as 'whole and normal' for the duration of our mortal lives, the 
pattern of which cannot change since our 'fallen day'.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) Before the basses' change of direction after 'And Dread', the melodic line always moved downward over the compass of a fifth, between E and A. Now it continues to move right up to C. These are all important reference notes in the work.

\(^{33}\) In my interpretation the Fall of Man or/and in consequence the inevitable failure of all our idealistic hopes and plans.
An inverse melodic pattern links the two stanzas, first heard to the frightening words ‘And Dread born whole and ...’ in the low bass register, and now heard in the delicate high soprano to the contrasting words, ‘So small beside their ...’.

Ex.8. Section II, second stanza, [21], b.5.

With regard to the refrain which separates the sections, we see that Britten sets it to twelve bars in length on its first and second appearance, while the final refrain is set to nineteen bars, so as to
form a satisfactory coda. This final refrain then is extended by
repetition of the words 'Composing mortals', and also through the use of
a written out rallentando utilizing the duplet pattern introduced in
section II to act as a metrically disruptive central part. But this is
not the only material from section II employed to extend the refrain
before it softly dies away. The use of a cantus firmus-like phrase in
longer note values, than those of the above voices in the tenor and then
passing to the bass, derives from a similar technique employed
throughout section II, and is indeed originally derived from the very
first tenor notes of section I and occurs in the form closest to that
heard in the first section. A third use here of integrated material
occurs on the very last notes heard as the refrain dies away - 'with
fire' which forms a correspondence with the repeated Es in the first
soprano to the last two words of section II - 'love me'.

Although the first two appearances of the refrain are both twelve
bars in length, the second may take longer in actual performance
(despite the same tempo marking) as it contains two strands of rhythmic
movement and a greater attack and dynamic range than the very soft and
smooth unison setting first heard. So perhaps in spite of having the
same intentions with regard to tempo, conductors seem to dwell a little
longer on the second refrain in order to bring out all of the subtleties
in the music, and the overall effect is that the refrain as a structural
buffer becomes progressively longer throughout the work, which seems to
suit the formal balance quite comfortably.\textsuperscript{34}

Looking then at the formal structure as a whole, we see that in
terms of performance time the second section is appropriately the
shortest, while the final section is by far the longest, being over

\textsuperscript{34} The recording sampled is a classic example. The refrain lengths
are :29, :35, :44.
twice as long as the first section — an accurate reflection of Auden's poetic weighting in terms of depth of meaning.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{35} The total number of bars in the work is 253. In terms of actual bars section II contains the most, and section I the least. This is of little consequence, however, in the face of the reality of the performance time proportions.
IV

HARMONIC AND RHYTHMIC ELEMENTS IN BRITTEN’S HYMN
There is a certain modal feel to Britten’s Hymn to St. Cecilia which marks it out as firmly belonging to English tradition and related to those ‘neo-modal’ works characteristic of English music in the early part of this century. The very opening also has a lilt not unlike that of a folk-song, although the rhythm soon begins to move the work’s roots away from the period mentioned and towards a more progressive style, in which Britten more fully developed his characteristic use of rhythm.

Beginning with a chord in E major, the bass line moves down a fourth from E at the beginning of the bar (thus 3), to B on the second half of the bar (4). The last crochet beat of the bar implies a passing B minor seventh chord in root position. In bar two the bass line moves up a step to C before falling a fourth to G, and a pattern is established which next moves up to A and down to E. Thus in the first three bars the three key tonalities of the work are introduced — E major 5/6 3/4 — passing to C major 3/4 and then A major 3/4. As in most of the work there are two rhythmic planes of contrasting note values forming a background to the work. In the first half of the phrase they function together harmonically, while in the second half they diverge, becoming a model of subsequent interactions and divergences. The rhythmic pattern established as the basis of this section can be outlined as follows:

Ex.9. Rhythmic plan, first five bars.

\[
\begin{align*}
6 & \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \\
4 & \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \ \vdots \\
\end{align*}
\]

The bass line presents the root and fifth of the chords in the first three bars and is thus a very basic chordal outline, matching the basic constant dotted minim pulse. Yet the construction is more complex than this — while the bass notes move down a fourth within each bar, they move down a third between bars, thus outlining triads: in the first three bars the first beat of each bar outlines E – C – A while the
second beat outlines B - G - E. It is an extremely interesting point to notice that while I have said that E major and A major tonalities are of great structural importance in the work (as is C major as a central point between them but not to as great an extent), the linear reading points out the minor of these triads. It is the upper voices in a dancing rhythm over this bass which on a much shorter time-scale and in a vertical (triadic) harmonic format define the major triads. (It is also interesting to note that an ambiguity is created at the very opening through Britten’s use of two rhythmic planes, and one cannot help but see a parallel between the fact that Auden’s poem functions on two levels of understanding - that of the bright surface with its colourful imagery, and that of his deep appreciation of the immutable truths of human reality in which lie the real emotional depth and power of the poem). These first three bars stand out not only because they present reference tonalities but also because of the slight variation in the fourth bar in order to lead back to a perfect cadence on E at a point which corresponds to the end of the second line of stanza one, so the whole stanza can be set in four phases. So the first three bars are a microcosm of the whole, being a kind of minute ternary form in their own right (framed by E and A majors and with C major in the middle), over a bass which outlines chords a third apart, and above which are simple triads. In bars two and three the upper parts, when viewed without relation to the bass, move from 3 chords on the first beat, to 3 chords into the second beat of the bar. When placed with the bass we see this pattern emerge:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
6 & 5 \\
3 & 3 \\
5 & 6 \\
3 & 4 \\
\end{array}
\]

So all positions of the triad are presented in the one bar, the root
position being emphasized by occurring twice. Here are the first five bars in piano score:

Ex. 10. Piano score, bb. 1-5.

In bar four the established sequence is broken, and instead of the bass moving up a step from E in bar three, it moves down a step to D and then down a fifth rather than a fourth, to G. This movement down a fifth is the precursor of the type of bass movement employed in the opening of section III, where the notes between the interval are also filled in. Where the interval of a fourth is not prominent in the work, the interval of a fifth fulfills the same motivically unifying function.

Yet despite the bass movement in bar four which accommodates a return to E major via an A - E bass in bar five, the upper triad on the first beat of bar four is consistent with the previously established pattern of chords moving down a third. Again the harmony can be read on two levels — as an F major 3 triad functioning independently as the bass, or reading from the bass, as a D minor seventh chord. The second beat of
bar four is best read as an F major chord with a ninth or added second in the bass (G). This type of chord is really quite a harmonic peculiarity of Britten's since the strong G bass has little in common with the chord built on the tone lower. The octave-and-a-half spacing between this G bass and the treble F triad promotes euphony, but also begins to suggest that the bass can function on a harmonic level which does not always coincide with that of the triads above, and this becomes much clearer at the beginning of section III where there is a distinct reason for this. But for the most part we may scan the outer parts to find that they are mainly simple octaves (and sometimes thirds), and indeed this holds true for much of the work.

To be consistent with this statement it is possible to take the G bass to belong to the G₆ triad on the fifth crotchet beat of the bar four (the triad delayed by one beat), and the A bass of bar five to belong to the A₃ triad of the previous bar (the triad anticipating the bass by one beat), for the A bass of bar five does not seem to belong really to the B₃ chord above, although it can be read as a B₇ chord. The most important point to note is the structural significance of the interval of a fourth throughout the work and the E major tonality as being the most dominant. Britten neatly summarizes these two constructional devices by moving the outer parts of bar five onto an E major triad by contrary motion in fourths, the A bass on the strong beat of the bar indicating the secondary importance of this tonality. But the cadence is clearly of the perfect type as implied more by the treble than the bass. The tonic occurs on the weak beat as a necessary factor for allowing the music to drive onwards towards a strong beat cadence at the half-way point of the first stanza, and not at figure 1, which is only a quarter of the way through the first stanza.
The second phrase which leads to this cadence begins on the same harmonic pattern but the bass does continue this time onto the expected F – C in an interpolated extra bar necessary to accommodate the words in their appropriate accentuation, before moving to the D – G bars as before, then to a strong-beat perfect cadence on C. The format of the upper triads in these two bars before the cadence is changed, most notably in the manner that they are all in the form of 4 chords, if the triads are read alone. Whereas the chord at the beginning of bar four would be an F major chord were the sequence strictly observed, here the D minor chord is still employed despite the F bass (thus 3) in the second phrase. The C bass in the second half of this bar implies a chord still in D minor, followed by D minor in root position at the beginning of the next bar. Passing triads in E minor and F major lead to G, V of the following bar’s C major resolution. A chromatic step downwards from the G bass (4 in C) in the first bar of figure 2 leads the sequential harmonic movement into more expressive chromatic areas for the second half of this first stanza: through F sharp major (F sharp – C sharp bass), E flat major for two bars (E flat – B flat bass then B natural – F sharp bass), to two chord changes per bar for the next two bars: G sharp minor with a seventh in the bass to A major in second inversion, and then to a C major seventh and F major in root position. This F in the bass on the second beat of figure 2 bar six, then moves down a step to E flat which resolves onto A flat at a cadence point in the next bar at figure 3. Thus the bass outlines a perfect cadence in A flat, but the chord above the E flat is still a 4 on F. The E flat bass may be read therefore as an F 6/2, moving to a chord a minor third away – A flat – and thus is hardly a strong cadence at all, and appropriately this corresponds to the end of the sixth line.
of the eight-line first stanza. Once again the bass implies something which the treble chord does not bear out exactly.

The bass of the final (fourth) musical phrase of this stanza roughly matches the third, but the chords above do change somewhat, providing plenty of musical variety. From figure 3 bar three they read: A flat major (E flat - B flat bass), B major (B natural - F sharp bass), F major (G - D bass), then a 4 bar with an E flat bass with A flat major above them an implied F minor seventh on the last beat (\(\frac{6}{2}\)). This leads to an E flat chord held in the treble for four bars, while the bass and tenor have an almost unison solo based movement in fourths and steps from the E flat bass at the beginning of the first of these four extended bars. The 'cadence' may be viewed as a IV-I in E flat, which is confirmed before figure 4 by a perfect cadence sufficiently well outlined by the bass.

The second stanza is set to a slightly different melodic pattern and texture with the first sopranos singing the second, fourth, and the last half of the fifth lines as they alternately emerge from the choral background, again with intervals of seconds and fourths. The harmony still moves mainly between chords a third apart: figure 4, bar one - E flat major, bar three - C flat major (3), bar six - E flat minor and C flat major (3), bar seven - C minor (3), and then the first sopranos outline E flat major over the held E flat bass to reach the half-way point of the second stanza. The third phrase becomes more complex harmonically with the addition of a third rhythmic strand in the tenors, which quickens the rate of harmonic change. The E flat bass of the previous phrase leads into movement in thirds from figure 5, bar one: A flat - C, E flat - G, A flat - C. Bars four and five both move up a fourth from E flat to A flat. The E flat becomes either the root of a triad on E flat or the third of a C minor chord. The 4 bar again
repeats the E flat up to A flat motion, then stepwise movement through B flat, C and D natural leads to the final phrase of the stanza beginning with a return to an E major chord at figure 6. So this third phrase revolves around an E flat - A flat bass, with G and C acting as their subordinates. The chords above these bass notes outline E flat major/ C minor and A flat major exclusively - a tonal principle which may be related back to the first three bars of E major, C major and A major. The final phrase begins with the texture and method of sequential movement in the bass (down a fourth and up a step) characteristic of the opening, but the word colours swing the harmony to the sharper chromatic side. With the standard pulse as two dotted minims per bar as is standard in this section, the bass moves from figure 6: E down to B and then C sharp to G sharp and A to E. The harmony above outlines E major 3 and 4 (figure 6, bar one), G sharp major 4 above the C sharp bass then passing through F sharp major (thus 4) to another E major chord, this time in first inversion (bar two), then an E major chord moving again to G sharp major and a passing F sharp chord but this time over the unrelated A - E bass (bar three). So in bars two and three the bass sequence changes while the treble triads do not, to create harmonic tension in the appropriate part of the text spanning '... in Hell's abysses The huge flame ... ' In the next bar (bar four), the treble 6 passes in the pattern established to an E major 3 triad, while the bass by sequential logic arrives on an F sharp. Read in conjunction, these notes are difficult to explain in a traditional harmonic sense. Indeed this whole phrase from figure 6 outlines definite twentieth-century characteristics and chords which Britten was particularly wont to use. There are two levels of rhythmic movement which when set in motion do not always harmonically coincide with one another in a 'traditional' way. This sets up the type of chords we encounter in figure 6, bars
two, three and four, and which are most easily labelled as chords of the added second, fourth and sixth, with the added notes occurring in the bass. The first beat of figure [6], bar two, is a G sharp major chord with a C sharp in the bass, and the first beat of bar three shows an E major chord with an A in the bass — both similar formations. They could possibly be explained by reading the bass as the root of a ninth chord, but the vital third is missing, and on the next beat of the bar the bass moves onto the root of the treble triad, by which time the upper triad itself changes. This creates further ambiguity, but increases the strength of the case in favour of the treble and bass being read as (sometimes) separate strata, because of the contradictory fact that the next beat emphasizes the preceding treble triad’s tonic note. Perhaps then these chords could be read in traditional language as eleventh chords with no seventh and ninth, and the eleventh in the bass, but this tends towards the ridiculous. Therefore if these chords are to be considered vertically, one must note here Britten’s use of the ‘added fourth’ chord, the fourth being in the bass. Similarly figure [6], bar three, second beat, shows a G sharp major triad with added sixth (E), and bar four an E major triad with added second (F sharp), again both notes being in the bass.

The basses and tenors have a solo on the word ‘flicker’d’ on the fifth bar of figure [6], built on upward fourths and downward seconds once more — C sharp, F sharp, E, A, G sharp and C sharp — from the E major collection. The following ff chord on ‘and’ consists of the notes (reading upwards in Britten’s exact voicing) : D sharp, E, G sharp, B, C sharp. The E major triad stands out with added notes at each end, which could be read as belonging to the triads of C sharp minor and G sharp minor. This one five-note chord then is really the combination of three triads, with E major in the centre (or alternately and less meaningfully
a C sharp minor ninth chord in last inversion). The next chord on ‘eas’d’, the seventh bar of [6], is a combination of C sharp minor and A major, moving to a chord which retains the A major triad and adds the B and F sharp of B major (no D sharp) on the second beat. This then acts as V of the resolution of the following bar, to end the first two stanzas in E major, where they began. The four final bars before the refrain emphasize the E tonality by building up an E major triad over their duration, while the hemiola pattern \( \frac{3}{4} \) serves as a written out rallentando.

The first refrain setting is of course heard almost in unison, but the harmonic implications are fairly clear. E passes through a brief D to C and A then stepwise up through F, G, A and B to E (V to I), in almost exactly the same format as that of the first sopranos in the opening five bars of the work. (Here the first E is extended over two bars to accommodate the words). E major is once again reinforced over the next two bars for the second phrase, this time with a G sharp in the tenors and first sopranos which is heard simultaneously with the E, as is an F sharp which is passed through briefly on the way back to the unison E. The prominence of such a second is characteristic of the work, and in effect fills in the interval of a descending third – G sharp to E – just as the next E passes through D to C. The harmonic pattern is in fact built over a six bar phrase which is then repeated exactly but for this very brief ‘descant’ rising up a third and falling stepwise back through the interval to E. The last few ascending notes: E – F – G – A – B – E place emphasis on the notes outlining an E minor triad as well as the phrygian mode by filling in the fifth. Indeed all the notes of the phrygian mode occur between the last crotchet beat of figure [7], bar eight, to the end of the refrain four bars later. The fact that when these passages are harmonized at the beginning of the
work E major and A major chords are employed, rather than the minor forms as implied by the melody, is indicative of Britten's use of harmonic colour and the influence of the English modal tradition through Vaughan Williams and Holst. (Further indications of an old English musical tradition are the part-writing clashes of the first section. At figure 2, bars 3 - 4, the B flat in the first sopranos (which comes from movement down a fourth from E flat) remains held while in the tenors and basses A sharp leads chromatically up to B natural (then down a fourth to F sharp in the basses). Thus for the duration of the bar both B sharp and B natural are sounded together. The passing clash of G flat in the basses against a sustained first soprano G natural (figure 3, bar seven) is a more subtle instance, as is the D natural/D sharp clash one bar before figure 6.)

The phrygian scale on E of the refrain is immediately changed when the scherzo begins at figure 8 with a soprano run up a fourth from E to A, through F sharp and G sharp, firmly establishing the E major tonality of this whole section. Again it may be argued that just as the speaker does not grow, neither does the harmonic pattern - with one small exception between figure 13, bars 8 - 15. This chromatic unison solo in the alto and basses emphasizes the central third stanza on its repeat:

I am defeat
When it knows it
Can now do nothing
By suffering.

Figure 13 bar eight moves from an E/B chord through a D natural/E/F sharp chord on the third beat, to a C major triad on the first beat of

36 This move is foreshadowed by the fact that G sharp and F sharp are the only notes to break the unison melodic line and stand out in the refrain.
the next bar, with the outer parts moving in contrary motion. The unison solo then moves through the notes C, B flat, A flat, F, G, F, D, E, G, E, C (this last four-note bar outlining C major), then turning through B flat and A flat back onto a C whence it started, this time sustained. Next at figure 14 a C – E chord then E – F sharp chord leads quickly back to E major. The notes of this alto and bass passage utilize intervals of seconds and thirds exclusively, the first and last notes of figure 13, bars ten and eleven, outlining a fourth.

The rhythm of the scherzo is enlivened through a contrapuntal texture on the same diatonic note pattern with generally only two parts moving at one time to the five-bar rhythmic phrase shown below, although a third part may overlap sometimes:

Ex. 11. Rhythmic plan, figure 8, bb.1–8.

A second rhythmic strand is added in dotted minims in the altos and basses at bar eleven but this has little play in the rhythmic movement of the section, for these notes always occur at the beginning of the bar. The chords outlined in this section are simple ones all belonging to E major, (apart from the brief exception noted in the middle) with an emphasis on I and V. The intervals employed are almost all seconds and thirds. These combine in short melodic phrases to cover intervals of upward and downward fourths – motivic cells which unify the section:

37 Thus note the secondary importance of the A major triad.
Ex.12. Figure 8, bb. 1-3.

The cantus-firmus-like entries were in the first section comprised of downward fourths and upward steps, while here they are more diverse, covering ever wider intervals in each of the four entries heard during section II stanzas one and two, but revolving around E.

Ex.13.
(a) Figure 8, bb. 11-14.

(b) Figure 10, bb. 1-4.

(c) Figure 11, bb. 1-4.

(d) Figure 12, bb. 1-4.
The second refrain is harmonized to the chords of A, C, F and G majors, the first phrase coming to rest on an E major triad. Similar harmony is again used in the second half but this time it arrives at the pause in C major, G acting as the dominant. This paves the way for section III, beginning at figure 18, which like the refrain reverts to having no key signature.

Harmonically speaking, the first of the three parts of section III is the most interesting. It maintains a simple rhythmic ground which moves for much of the section from E down to A each bar, through C as a central point (which is used as a pivot for a change of direction at figure 19, bar five). These again are the three key tonal poles of the work. Here are the first two bars of the section in piano score:

Ex.14. Figure 18, bb. 1-2.

Two rhythmic strands also characterize this part as in much of the work. The slow-moving upper parts create tension through clashing tones within themselves, and when allied with the harmonically static bass (see the last beat of bar two: A against G). But it is not a grinding chromatic tension - rather a softer and gently blended haunting melancholic texture utilizing diatonic part-writing clashes, the parts themselves moving with great linear sense, the largest intervals being fourths and fifths. The second soprano, which is the first of the upper voices to enter, notably begins with A, moving up a fifth to E.
The central part at figure 21 with its beautiful soprano solo, moves felicitously into A major, a brighter change after the strangely quasi-modal, minor-sounding first part. In this second part the first fourteen of the twenty-three bars are unified by an A bass pedal repeated mainly in crotchets. The A major chord itself features prominently until the bass moves in bar fifteen to a G, then to a C, another G, and a B flat in bar eighteen. The chords implied are simply those of C, G and B flat major. Bars 19 - 23 all fall under a pedal on D, a fourth above A. The whole part is harmonically rather static, which allows gentle chains of thirds to float around in stepwise motion about these chords. The soprano solo, which begins on a high E, moves across the top of the texture in a linear fashion which outlines an E major scale, thanks to the addition of a D sharp, the whole part being in Lydian A.

The third and final part at figure 23 moves back to the texture of the first part and maintains no key signature, though now it is more forceful and animated in the full sections which alternate with the solos. The use of key in these solos is particularly interesting. The first, an alto solo, 'quasi Violino', outlines in fifths the open strings of the violin:

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{violin_strings.png}}\]

Notably the pivot is E, approached by A. The sustained chords around this solo comprise G and C in the lower voices, and D and F in the upper voice. This collection of notes therefore derives from a combination of D minor and C major chords. The second solo for bass is written 'quasi Timpani' and thus occurs in sharp repeated quavers in the midrange of the timpani - all on the tonal pole C. (The held triad above is a simple
E flat major chord.) If we must describe the combination vertically, it may be an E flat major 'added sixth' chord or a C minor seventh chord. The third solo continues to move to the flat side as the second soprano outlines D flat mixolydian:

The scalic rise and fall is appropriate as it is marked 'quasi Flauto'. Bass and tenor sustain a D flat and A flat with a held C flat in the first soprano. But for this C flat, the scale outlined would be D flat major. The final phrase moves to the sharp side, rising to a ff climax 'quasi Tromba', utilizing fanfare-like trumpet writing to blaze out the final line of the poem:

0 wear your tribulation like a rose.

Below a sustained E major chord - the apotheosis of this chord's fundamental importance in the work - the tenor melody moves through an E major triad and then a C major triad, as if to emphasize the ambiguity of these two tonal centres in much the same way as the half-point cadence in the second refrain ended on an E major chord, only to finish in C major via a perfect cadence, despite sharing an identical melodic line. E major's dominance can never really be doubted in the work, however, and the tenor's melodic line concludes as an E bass, the root of the sustained chord. Perhaps the divisi bass B and G sharp placed underneath this (one bar before figure 27) to form a 4 chord to the wordless 'mm', was added so as not to indicate finality before the refrain.

This last refrain takes up the treble chordal movement and bass chains of disjunct fourths of the very opening bars of the work, to cadence in E major at the end of the first phrase. The second phrase -
extended to form a satisfactory coda - moves through this bass pattern (down a fourth and up a step) without breaking the sequence for the first time until E is once more reached. Thus the bass moves E - B, C - G, A - E (the most important tonal poles of the work), F - C, D - A, B flat - F, G - D, then up to E. The final E major chord is thus reached not by a traditional cadence, but via a G minor seventh chord which merges into an E minor seventh chord at figure 27, bar fifteen, then two bars later becomes a simple triad on E major. The tension built up through clashing notes low in the vocal tessitura (as in bar thirteen with F natural against F sharp), is resolved in the last chord as the sopranos enter to enlarge the vocal tessitura and balance the spacing, while from the previous minor chord the dominant, bright and simple E major triad emerges before the voices die away, leaving us perhaps with a ray of future hope and the merest glimpse of heavenly light.

So the whole construction of Britten’s Hymn to St. Cecilia revolves, tonally speaking, around the key of E major, while C major acts as its foil. Thus Britten uses triads with a note in common to provide the harmonic essence of the work. C might even be described as Britten’s ‘dominant’ of E. The third important tonal pole in the work - A major - acts as a key area of secondary importance to E (and its associate C), and is most useful in providing a contrasting key area, being a fourth above the main tonal pole, E.
V

BRITTEN'S AIMS
One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the
musical setting of the English language a brilliance,
freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare
since the death of Purcell. In the past hundred
years, English writing for the voice has been
dominated by strict subservience to logical speech-
rhythms, despite the fact that accentuation according
to sense often contradicts the accentuation demanded
by emotional content. Good recitative should
transform the natural intonations and rhythms of
everyday speech into memorable musical phrases (as
with Purcell), but in more stylized music, the
composer should not deliberately avoid unnatural
stresses if the prosody of the poem and the emotional
situation demand them, nor be afraid of a high-handed
treatment of words, which may need prolongation far
beyond their common speech-length, or a speed of
delivery that would be impossible in conversation.

As in many of Britten's works, rhythm is very much the life-blood in his
Hymn, and he achieves his aim as stated here with remarkable success.
The refrain is a memorable musical phrase, and there is a prolongation
of important words and phrases which are however not allowed to upset
the form. Metrical and musical rhythms almost always correspond, yet
there is no 'nineteenth-century dullness' here due to lively
syncopations and sufficiently harmonically and rhythmically varied
phrases which never allowed a pattern to be 'established' to the extent
of predictability. The emphasized rhythmic accent of figure 1, bar
four:

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|  \  |
O---\
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falls on the word 'Pour'd' rather than 'forth' as the metrical accent
would suggest. This disrupts the previous rhythm and gives a lively
mid-phrase impetus toward the cadence-point. A feeling of freedom and
spaciousness pervades the music through the rhythmic vitality, and also

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the widely separated vocal registers. Milner sees the relationship with Purcell:

but his [Britten's] treatment of words was more immediately transformed by the influence of W.H. Auden's verse, by his discovery of Purcell's music (which seems not to have begun till after A Boy was Born was finished), and by the increasing intensity his musical style demanded of its performers. ... For the first time Britten's choral writing approaches that of Purcell in vigour, force and delicacy, in the way word-rhythms and weight of syllables decisively influence the shape of melodic lines as well as of musical rhythms. 

Britten wished to become a latter-day Orpheus for the British people, or a Henry Purcell in twentieth-century garb. Over later years Britten completed the continuo-structures of many Purcell works. His influence at this stage may be seen in the vocal writing and ground basses in the Hymn, such as he would have known from the Odes of Purcell. The alto and bass ground at section III stands out, but the opening bass chains of fourths are also reminiscent of Dido's aria, 'Ah! Belinda', from Act I of Purcell's Dido and Aeneas.

Britten does not interrupt the musical flow of the work by fussing over each of Auden's intensely graphic images in turn, 'though he accommodates some delightfully graphic touches within a fine sweep of phrase'. Consider the setting of 'Roman air' one bar before figure [4] - the low tenor and bass movement on emphasized plodding dotted minims to octaves and fifths give an appropriately 'ancient' sound. Three more instances deserve to be singled out where the simplistic word-painting is delightful:

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Britten knew how Auden worked after seven years of uneasy collaboration, and must by this stage have been able to appreciate instinctively Auden’s formal and expressive intentions. Such a fine setting of Auden’s poem with its presumably unconscious and detailed technical correspondences to the verse would suggest this was the case—it seems absurd to believe Britten would have thought ‘scientifically’
about each of the details within the work on composing it, and produced such a fine work of art. Britten’s inspiration of course came from one of the finest poems in all of Auden’s output. The fantastical images are graphic and infect the imagination, and yet behind this lie great philosophical truths derived from Western Christian tradition. It is a profoundly knowing and depressing poem in reality, which fulfills the poet’s mission as according to Ralph Vaughan Williams’ favourite poet, A.E. Housman. Housman states the purpose of poetry is ‘to harmonize the sorrows of the world’. Britten marries the music and text in such a way that neither overshadows the other, and the beauty of melody and texture poignantly draws out our emotions to be mercilessly exposed to the powerful truths which lie well beneath the surface of Auden’s haunting poem.
[N.B.: PAGE 52 IS OMITTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS]
[N.B.: PAGE 53 IS OMITTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS]
APPENDIX B

Scansion in full of Auden’s *Anthem for St. Cecilia’s Day.*

Britten’s variants are shown in brackets, while the numbers in the right hand column show the number of syllables in each line.

I

\[\begin{array}{ll}
\text{In a gar-den sha-dy this ho-ly la-dy} & 11 \\
\text{(rev’-rent)} & (9) \\
\text{With re-ve-rent ca-dence and sub-tilे psalm,} & 10 \\
\text{Like a black swan as death came on} & 8 \\
\text{(Pour’d)} & \text{Pour’d forth her song in per-fect calm:} & 8 \\
\text{And by o-cean’s mar-gin this in-no-cent vir-gin} & 12 \\
\text{Con-structed an or-gan to en-large her prayer,} & 11 \\
\text{And notes tre-men-dous from her great en-gine} & 10 \\
\text{(Thun-der’d)} & \text{Thun-dered out on the Ro-man air.} & 8 \\
\text{Blonde A-phro-di-te rose up ex-ci-ted,} & 10 \\
\text{(Mov’d)} & \text{Moved to de-light by the me-lo-dy,} & 9 \\
\text{White as an or-chid she rode quite na-ked} & 9 \\
\text{In an oyster shell on top of the sea;} & 10 \\
\text{At sounds so en-tran-cing the an-gels dan-cing} & 11 \\
\text{Came out of their trance in-to time a-gain,} & 10 \\
\end{array}\]
And a-round the wick-ed in Hell's a-bys-ses
(flick-er'd) (eas'd)
The huge flame flick-ered and eased their pain
Bless-ed Ca-ci-lia, ap-pear in vi-sions
To all mu-si-cians, ap-pear and in-spire:
Trans-la-ted Daugh-ter, come down and star-tle
Com-pos-ing mor-tals with im-mor-tal fire.

II
I can-not grow;
I have no sha-dow
To run a-way from,
I on-ly play.
I can-not err;
There is no crea-ture
Whom I be-long to,
Whom I could wrong.
I am de-feat
When it knows it
Can now do no-thing
By suffering.
(liv'd)

All you lived through,

Dan-cing be-cause you

No lon-ger need it

For a-ny deed.

I shall ne-ver be

(Diff'-rent)

Dif-fer-ent. Love me.

III

O ear whose crea-tures can-not wish to fall,

(o calm of spa-ces un-a-fraid of weight,)

Calm spa-ces un-a-fraid of wear or weight,

Where Sorr-ow is her-self for-get-ting all

The gauch-ness of her ad-o-les-cent state,

Where Hope with-in the al-to-geth-er strange (ev'-ry)

From ev-ery out-worn im-age is re-leased,

And Dread born whole and nor-mal like a beast

In-to a world of truths that ne-ver change:

Re-store our fall-en day; O re-ar-range.

O dear white children casual as birds,

Play-ing a-mong the ru-ined lan-guages,
So small beside their large con-fus-ing words,

So gay a-against the greater si-len-ces

Of dread-ful things you did: O hang the head,

Im-pet-uous child with the tre-men-dous brain,

O weep, child, weep, O weep a-way the stain,

(wish'd)

Lost in-no-cence who wished your lov-er dead,

Weep for the lives your wish-es nev-er led.

O cry cre-a-ted as the bow of sin

Is drawn a-cross our trem-bling vi-o-lin.

O weep, child, weep, O weep a-way the stain.

(drumm'd)

O law drummed out by hearts a-against the still

Long win-ter of our in-tel-lec-tual will.

That what has been may nev-er be a-gain.

O flute that throbs with the thanks-giv-ing breath

Of con-va-les-cents on the shores of death.

O bless the free-dom that you nev-er chose.

O trum-pets that un-guard-ed child-ren blow

A-bout the fort-ress of their in-per foe.

O wear your tri-bu-la-tion like a rose.
DISCOGRAPHY

Britten: *Hymn to St. Cecilia*, op.27.

(1) Quink Vocal Ensemble  
    ETCETERA ETC 1017 (c.10 min.)

(2) King's College Choir, Cambridge;  
    Richard Cross, soprano/  
    David Willcocks  
    HMV     HQS 1285 (c.11 min.)
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