Supported by Tradition: Sonority, Form, and Transcendence in Britten’s String Quartets

Christopher Mark

Donald Mitchell: Ben, you were talking about some composers—some, only—young composers, who reject the past. Well, of course, certainly that has never happened in your case. To a composer standing at the point of his life where you do today [February 1969], you have a great inheritance, not only in your own music but also with regard to the past. I would like to ask you how it feels standing in that situation? And are you conscious of this wonderfully exciting but also great burden of tradition behind you?

Benjamin Britten: [A long pause.] I’m supported by it, Donald. I couldn’t be alone. I couldn’t work alone. I can only work really because of the tradition that I am conscious of behind me.1

Britten composed only three quartets to which he was happy to give opus numbers, and of these only the third, completed barely a year before his death and given its first performance a matter of days after his funeral,2 can be said to have approached repertoire status. Yet the genre was of substantial significance in the composer’s apprentice years, String Quartets Nos 1 and 2 are important markers in his development, and the three ‘official’ quartets contain some of his most characteristic music, No. 3 being generally regarded as one of Britten’s finest works. Although the stylistic approach is undoubtedly conservative when set alongside some of the other music discussed in this book, Britten’s textures and sonorities do not lack inventiveness: as the quotation above suggests, his quartets engage with tradition—with traditional quartet-writing and with traditional tonal syntax—but like Shostakovich (to whom he pays tribute in String Quartet No. 3) he constantly reworks, subverts, and transforms his models, sometimes to ironic purpose (most clearly in the scherzos of String Quartets Nos 1 and 3), sometimes (most obviously in No. 3) in the service of a powerful sense of transcendence. Like Britten’s music in general, the quartets have already stimulated a generous amount of commentary.3 To my knowledge, however, they have not so far been considered as a group, and I take the opportunity in this essay to investigate the extent to which Britten’s thinking for the genre can be said to have been consistent, and to what extent it can be said to have developed. While I attempt to sketch what I believe to be the most characteristic aspects of each

2 Britten’s funeral took place on 7 December 1976; String Quartet No. 3 received its first performance on 19 December.
Table 1
Britten’s music for string quartet

**Juvenilia (pre-Op.1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fragment in E flat major</td>
<td>1925?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[incomplete]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet in B flat major</td>
<td>1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[incomplete]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet in G minor</td>
<td>21 November 1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet in A minor</td>
<td>June–July 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavatine</td>
<td>15–17 July 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Poems</td>
<td>23 December 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet in G major</td>
<td>March–May 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartet in F major</td>
<td>11 April 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novelette for string quartet</td>
<td>28 September 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miniature Suite</td>
<td>26 January–8 February 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhapsody</td>
<td>28 January–21 March 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piece in E major [incomplete]</td>
<td>1928–30?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderato in A major</td>
<td>1929/30?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartettino</td>
<td>3 January–17 April 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Quartet in D</td>
<td>8 May–2 June 1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[rev. 1974]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Withdrawn (post Op.1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alla quartetto serioso: ‘Go play, boy, play’</td>
<td>February–October 1933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>revised as:</td>
<td>January 1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Divertimenti</td>
<td>January 1936</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Official**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>String Quartet no.1,* Op.25</td>
<td>28 July 1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Quartet no.2 in C, Op. 36</td>
<td>14 October 1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Quartet no.3, Op.94</td>
<td>November 1975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Listed in the Britten catalogue as being ‘in D major’, though the key doesn’t appear in the title in the score.
Table 2
String Quartets acquired by Britten, 1927–32

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Date of acquisition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haydn</td>
<td>String Quartet in C, Op.76 No.3</td>
<td>Jan 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in F, Op.59 No.1</td>
<td>Apr 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in C minor, Op.18 No.4</td>
<td>Apr 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>Complete String Quartets vol.II</td>
<td>16 Sept 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in E minor, Op.59 No.2</td>
<td>Dec 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in C, Op.59 No.3</td>
<td>Dec 1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in G, Op.18 No.2</td>
<td>Jan 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in F, Op.18 No.1</td>
<td>Jan 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>An Irish Melody: Londonderry Air</td>
<td>Apr 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozart</td>
<td>Ten Celebrated String Quartets</td>
<td>22 Nov 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ravel</td>
<td>Quator</td>
<td>Nov 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in D, Op.18 No.3</td>
<td>Xmas 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in B flat, Op.18 No.6</td>
<td>Xmas 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahms</td>
<td>String Quartet in C minor, Op.51 No.1</td>
<td>Xmas 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven</td>
<td>String Quartet in A, Op.18 No.5</td>
<td>Xmas 1928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahms</td>
<td>String Quartet in B flat, Op.67</td>
<td>Apr 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borodin</td>
<td>Deuxième Quator</td>
<td>27 Apr 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haydn</td>
<td>String Quartet in G minor, Op.74 No.3</td>
<td>17 Sept 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahms</td>
<td>String Quartet in A minor, Op.51 No.2</td>
<td>Dec 1929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendelssohn</td>
<td>String Quartet in D major</td>
<td>22 Apr 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Three Idylls</td>
<td>Aug 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Sir Roger de Coverley</td>
<td>Sept 1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debussy</td>
<td>Quartet</td>
<td>Feb 1932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>Noveletten</td>
<td>May 1932</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
movement of the three numbered quartets, I focus particularly on the first movements, since Britten’s approach to sonata form is one of the most interesting features of his engagement with the genre.

**Juvenilia**

Table 1 lists all of Britten’s extant quartets. Immediately striking is the number of them in his juvenilia. He composed a very large amount of music in a wide range of genres during his childhood, and this should be borne in mind when assessing the significance of the string quartet to him in this period. But it is clear that the medium was at least as attractive during his apprenticeship as other forms of chamber music, or orchestral and vocal music. Composition was supported by the study of scores: Table 2 lists quartet scores that are known to have been in Britten’s possession during this period. The list might seem surprisingly unadventurous until one reminds oneself of Britten’s conservative provincial upbringing. But it does not tell the whole story of his interests. He was an assiduous listener to the radio, and is known to have responded enthusiastically to performances of Schoenberg’s Chamber Symphony, Op. 9 (arr. Webern), Suite for Piano, Op. 25, and *Pierrot lunaire*, Op. 21 that he heard on the radio in April 1930. He also bought a score of the Six Little Pieces, Op. 19 a week later. By this time he had been a pupil of Frank Bridge (1879–1941) for over two years (they had met in Autumn 1927, and Britten became his pupil in January 1928). Given that Bridge, who was the most radical English composer of his generation, composed some of his most progressive music for the quartet medium (his String Quartet No. 3 of 1926 approaches the intense thematicism and total chromaticism of the Second Viennese School), it is perhaps not surprising that the most adventurous music of Britten’s juvenilia should appear in quartet form, in the *Quartettino* completed just ten days after the Schoenberg broadcast mentioned above.

The most characteristic features of this work are the derivation of most of its material from a five-note ‘motto’ of interlocking thirds, and its chromaticism. The five-note motto acts as kind of Schoenbergian *grundgestalt*: exact pitches are not so significant as the overall shape. Britten himself indicates this by presenting the motto on a clef-less stave as a prefix to the score: see Ex. 1, which also demonstrates the working-out of the motto in the opening bars.

Ex. 1 i)

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2 These scores are housed in the BP Library. Britten numbered his miniature scores in acquisition order and usually dated them. For a complete list, see Mark, *Early Britten*, 335-41.
3 Of the full list of scores, the only item that could in any way be regarded as still possessing a radical air at the time of acquisition was Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre*, which Britten bought in 1932.
Ex. 1 ii)

Intensive motivic working is central to Britten’s compositional approach throughout his career, as we shall see when looking at the ‘official’ quartets; the kind of chromaticism employed was much less long-lived. Indeed, it can be said actually to peak with the Quartettino and a couple of other chamber works composed either side of it, the Two Pieces for violin, viola and piano (17 November – 24 December 1929) and the Elegy for solo viola (1 August 1930):\(^\text{10}\) the first of Britten’s works to be published—Sinfonietta,

\(^{10}\) Briefly discussed in Mark, ‘Juvenila (1922–1932)’, 29, and Mark, *Early Britten*, 31 respectively.
Op. 1 (1932), Phantasy Quartet, op. 1 (1932), and choral variations, *A Boy was Born*, Op. 3 (1933)—have a firm basis in diatonicism that is prefigured in another choral work completed less than a year after the *Quartettino*, *Thy King’s Birthday* (February–March 1931).\(^{11}\) Possible reasons for this apparently retrogressive move (retrogressive in terms of the modernist paradigm of progressiveness), as as I have argued before, include the influence of Mahler, particularly the last movement of his Fourth Symphony, which Britten heard a few months before *Thy King’s Birthday*,\(^{12}\) or an attempt to distance himself from Bridge; or he might simply have been able to see greater potential for structural control and depth, and hence expressive power, in a fundamental diatonicism.\(^{13}\) As my discussion of String Quartets Nos 1–3 will make clear, Britten’s music does not shirk chromaticism—indeed, an important role is assigned to twelve-note aggregates in No. 3—but at no point in his mature quartets is fundamental chromaticism accorded overall structural control.

Of especial significance for a study of the progress of Britten’s quartet-composition is the re-working in the first of the three movements of the *Quartettino* of the sonata-form archetype. The re-thinking is not particularly dramatic—it is a case mostly of blurring boundaries, with the development section growing out of the repeat of the second theme and finishing with a return to the opening *Andante* material that peters out rather than coming to a clear conclusion. But an attitude is established that informs all the subsequent quartets. Thus a similar strategy is employed in the much more diatonically-based String Quartet in D major (June 1931),\(^ {14}\) which follows the same overall shape of sonata-form first movement, slow second movement, and quick finale. In the first movement, it is the recapitulation that draws most attention to itself, for, as Evans points out, it begins (at b. 155) against ‘a misty superimposition of ostinato versions of the opening motive. […] The tonal ambiguity created at this point, E flat persisting as no less valid than the returning of the cello’s augmented theme, […] sounds a prophetic note (echoed very clearly […] in the official first quartet)’.\(^ {15}\)

**String Quartet No.1: Sonority and Form**

We will come to the point in String Quartet No. 1, Op. 25 (completed on 28 July 1941) that is pre-echoed here shortly. But before we become involved in formal details, it will be useful to say something about texture and sonority, for it is with regard to these aspects that the first official quartet makes its most immediate impact, and it is from the sonorous conception that the innovative first-movement form flows.

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\(^{11}\) For detailed discussion of Opp. 1–3, see Mark, *Early Britten*, 45-82.

\(^{12}\) Britten’s diary entry for the day of the concert remarks that the work was ‘Much too long, but beautiful in [?] parts’ (Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds, *Letters from a Life: Selected Diaries and Letters of Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 141. This hardly seems a ringing endorsement, but in an article written some 11 years later he maintained that he ‘wasn’t bored for one of its forty-five minutes’, that ‘the form was so cunningly contrived’, and that ‘Above all, the material was remarkable, and the melodic shapes highly original, with such rhythmic and harmonic tension from beginning to end’ (Paul Kildea, ed., *Britten on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 38.).

\(^{13}\) Mark, ‘Juvenila (1922–1932)’, 31.

\(^{14}\) This was begun just after *Thy King’s Birthday*. The opening unison statement, which introduces all the thematic material for the work, uses the pure D major collection, though succeeding harmonized version introduces some chromatic variants.

\(^{15}\) Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 22.
Impressive though the *Quartettino* and the 1931 Quartet are as apprentice pieces, there is little in either that can be said to burn itself into the memory in terms of sonority or—apart from the superimposed ostinati—texture. This can hardly be said, however, of String Quartet No. 1, which has one of the most arresting openings in the quartet repertoire, with its bright, high cluster of major seconds and pizzicato cello arpeggios (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2

![Ex. 2]

Of course, much had changed in Britten’s style since the 1931 Quartet. First of all, there was the matter of harmonic focus. Though works such as Opp.1–3 and *Our Hunting Fathers* Op. 8 (1936), Britten’s first major commission, are diatonically based, their structures are controlled by broad movement of pitch collections: there is little role for traditional harmonic progressions or traditional tonal harmonic vocabulary (there is, for example, a conspicuous lack of pure triads—*A Boy was Born* has only one metrically highlighted root position triad, and that is the very last chord). The years 1937–39 saw a rapprochement with tonal functions, culminating in the focused tonal structure of *Les illuminations* Op. 18 (1939), which is based around a dichotomy between the centres of E and B flat announced in the bold triad juxtapositions of the first number, ‘Fanfare’. Britten’s new confidence in ‘old’ materials and procedures is consolidated in the immediately succeeding works, such as *Sinfonia da Requiem*, Op. 20 for orchestra (1940).

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16 See Mark, *Early Britten*, Chapter Two.
and the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, Op. 22 for tenor and piano (1940). These works, all written during Britten’s stay in North America, to which he travelled with his partner Peter Pears, come immediately before String Quartet No. 1, and it is perhaps the new certainty of technique achieved in them that enabled the quartet’s remarkable sense of fluency: there is little of the self-consciousness or problematizing of some twentieth-century quartets, little sense that the composer has to ‘do something’ with the medium. There are new approaches to texture and re-thinking of form, but they are addressed without the rhetoric of ‘difficulty’.

As suggested above, the first movement seems to grow out of its initial sonority: the rich harmonic circuit of the initial *Andante* returns to its starting point at b. 19 only to be disturbed by a low C natural at b. 22 that is not fully resolved until the final bars of the movement. The C natural is logical enough on an intervallic level: it is simply a downward extension of the whole-tone cluster. Harmonically, though, it is clearly at odds with the D elements. Later, in the passage from b. 160, the C is subsumed within the D orbit through the harmonic series on D (see in particular the cello from b. 171). But in b. 22 the rhetoric—and in particular, the colour and registral extremity of the open C string—mark the C as an outsider. It is clear that the *Andante* is not going to resolve the dissonance, and that a new kind of action is going to be necessary for this, though it isn’t immediately clear in what ways the new *Allegro* section will oblige. Its initial material is obviously derived from the *Andante* (not only is the final chord taken up, but also—vastly speeded up—the syncopated rhythm of the opening bars), and so is the thematic material: the initial violin 1 shape, C sharp–D–F sharp–E–B–C sharp, has at its core the *Andante*’s cluster. Even the close canon of bb. 37ff and (particularly) 47ff is a textural analogy of the cluster principle, also constantly re-creating the (mostly diatonic) clashes embodied in the cluster. But the low C natural remains obstinate.

The rest of the movement is a dialogue between the two types of material. The form that results has been the focus of a good deal of discussion. While all commentators agree that there is a mixture of rondo and sonata form, opinions vary as to the nature of

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18 For the biographical details of this period in Britten’s life, see Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 119-31.

19 It might be argued that this has something to do with the nature of the commission, from the famous patron of chamber music, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. (Mrs Sprague Coolidge had also commissioned Bartók’s Fifth (1934) and Schoenberg’s Fourth (1936), as well as Frank Bridge’s Third and Fourth, and work from other British composers. For the history of Coolidge’s relationship with British composers, see Stephen Banfield, “‘Too Much of Albion’? Mrs. Coolidge and her British connections”, *American Music* 4/1 (1986).) As Britten noted in a letter to Elizabeth Mayer written in Escondido, California, and dated June 14th 1941, he had only three months in which to fulfil it: ‘Mrs Coolidge came over to see us in the afternoon – and has definitively commissioned me to do a quartet for her – to be played next September over here! Short notice & a bit of a sweat to do it so quickly, but I’ll do it as the cash will be useful’ (Mitchell and Reed, eds, *Letters from a Life*, 938; Britten’s official response to Mrs Coolidge, dated two dates later, is reproduced on p.940). In the event it took him only just over a month. Having to work at such speed, one can understand Britten absolving himself of any imperative to grapple with musical history.

20 It is for these rhetorical reasons that the C–D–E–F sharp chord isn’t heard as the last inversion of a V9/7 chord in G. There is thus an interesting parallel with the opening of the first movement of Vaughan Williams’s Symphony No.5, which begins with a horn call based on D–F sharp above a C natural in the bass that is also clearly not a dominant seventh.

the interaction. Rupprecht suggests that the second *Andante* takes on the role of the second subject (see Ex. 3), but this can hardly be regarded as ‘a contrasting second thematic group’ since the material is the same, even though it obviously provides tonal contrast, with the irritant (to use Evans’s word) C natural being treated as a long-range dominant to F.

Ex. 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Allegro vivo</th>
<th>Andante</th>
<th>Allegro</th>
<th>Andante</th>
<th>Allegro–Andante–Allegro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>2 Exposition</td>
<td>1 2nd Group or Rondo</td>
<td>3+2 Devel</td>
<td>1+2 Return or Devel (D)</td>
<td>1 Rondo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonic</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>(F)</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It makes better sense to regard the passage from b. 62 as the second subject—or, as Evans says, a “‘transitional’ second subject”, a more apt description because the passage simultaneously projects a ‘vestigial dualism’ and develops the C sharp–D–F sharp shape announced in b. 28 (it also introduces migratory harmony for the first time in the work: the various chromaticisms of the first subject strain against D-based moorings rather than move harmony away from the tonic). It is highly significant for the perception of the form that, while there is little sense of flow from *Andante* to *Allegro* sections, the *Allegro* music always effects smooth transitions to the *Andante* music via rallentandos and graduated ascents into the higher register. It is this continuity that lends the impression of the *Andante* sections (and, hence, the central *Andante* sonority) as ‘controlling’ the form.

The second *Andante* is modelled on the first, but is notable for departing from the model trajectory and, rather than returning to the F–G–A starting-point, progressing to E flat minor in b. 92 (essentially through the wedge-like voice-leading most clearly seen in the cello part). The low D flat apparently undertakes a similar role to that of the C natural in the first *Andante*. This flat-side territory evokes the ‘point of furthest remove’ of Classical music, and it is the business of the second development section to effect the return from this. The second development is of markedly different character to the first—homophonic rather than contrapuntal, with an arching, languorous melodic line in the cello; and rather than ascending gradually, the texture is thinned to the lowest reaches of the quartet range.

Not, however, to the lowest available note, for the new section beginning at b. 119 is based, not on C, but on C sharp. The latter is crucial in forming the tonal ambiguity that Evans says is pre-echoed in the 1931 Quartet. C sharp is set up as tonic by the goal-directed motion shown in Ex. 4. Above the C sharp, however, is a D major (or, rather, D Lydian) stratum articulated by the recapitulation of the first subject—or, at least, its 3-

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22 Ibid., 246.
24 Ibid.
note head-motive (all the more dramatic after the minor version at bb. 112ff). The tonal matrix is not, however, so much conflicted—a direct confrontation between the two centres—as partitioned: during bb. 119–26 the cello inhabits C sharp Dorian, while the other instruments inhabit D Lydian (violin 2 straddles both, beginning in D Lydian territory and then moving to C Dorian as an extension of its scalic runs in b. 125); such is the degree of common ground that the two tonalities appear as extensions of each other. At b. 144 C natural returns in the bass, the generating harmonic proposition is re-engaged, and a definitive sense of recapitulation arrives—though the theme starts, not from C sharp, as in the exposition, but from F sharp, and the recapitulation is very much compressed. Because the C natural and the contour of the first subject arrive so late, it is impossible to regard the whole of the section simply as recapitulatory: rather, there is a combining of recapitulation and development in which recapitulatory aspects gradually gain the upper hand.

Another aspect that lends bb. 119ff especial significance is the very clear recalling of the first Andante’s D–E–F sharp sonority in violin 1’s ostinato. Such cross-referencing suggests that Whittall’s statement that ‘it is of opposition and not of interaction’ between Andante and Allegro material ‘that one is most conscious’ is perhaps an overstatement. Interaction is even more to the fore at the end of the movement. After the third Andante, from b. 149 (D-based again, but with the flat-side move at b. 184 a momentary deflection and a reminiscence of the second Andante rather than anything genuinely propulsive) the initial Allegro’s introductory rhythm returns. This then winds down, and the ensuing texture (bb. 195ff) is a kind of symbiosis of the two textural types, incorporating the initial F sharp–A movement of violin 1 in the first Andante and the chord and spacing from the beginning of the first Allegro. Harmonically, there are two stages to the process of closure: the resolution of C natural to A via B flat in bb. 195–7, and the progression to I at the end.

Beguiled by the sheer sonority of the first movement, the listener is drawn into ‘pure’ musical drama. The middle movements, however, have more sense of the extramusical about them. Thus the second movement is an ironic scherzo, with an especially sardonic episode beginning at b. 238. The tone results from what Richard Taruskin, writing about Poulenc, has identified as a surrealistic approach,27 and is created here by unusual chord-juxtapositions and sudden, unpredictable eruptions of the motive first heard in the viola in b. 6 (but foreshadowed in the cello arpeggiation of b. 2). As for the third movement, ‘the quartet’s emotional core’.28 Isabel Morse Jones suggested in a review of the first performance of the quartet in The Los Angeles Times that this ‘might be titled “In Memoriam for a Lost World”’.29 Certainly there are aspects of lament here: the main theme on violin 1 from b. 367 may climb from the initial D to the A of b. 370, but it does so achieved via a series of falling scalar fragments, the first of which includes the highlighted flattening of the leading-note (A to A flat) in b. 368. And the mood is reinforced by the plangent diatonic dissonances between violins 1 and 2 when the theme is repeated with descant from b. 376 (see also the decorated reprise of bb. 440ff). There are a number of places where the music brightens considerably—in the shift from the tonic B flat to C major at b. 392, for example, celebrated by arpeggio fanfares. But it is noticeable that the first of these is immediately tempered by a descending phrase on violins. And when this energizing move is reprised at b. 457, it is followed by an ending whose subdued character is actually emphasized by the ascent that begins at b. 460, moving through the ensemble from the depths of the cello to the highest register of the violin 1: the build-up of intervallic tension is released in the tonic chord in its least stable (6/4) position. Britten is not generally regarded as a nostalgic composer, but it is difficult to hear the wistful sweetness of this ending in any other way.

The 6/4 outcome might be interpreted as a recognition that straightforward tonal statements are problematic. If so, the doubts are blown away by the fourth movement, which ends with as unequivocal a tonal statement as one can imagine. This represents closure not just of the movement, but of a tonal process that spans the entire work. As I noted in an earlier commentary, this process involves the working out of the opposition between D and F:

The second movement is centred on F in opposition to the overall D centre of the first movement. After this the third movement, centred on B flat, provides a neutral environment for exposing common ground between D and F: between bb. 404 and 414 arpeggiation of the D and F triads are juxtaposed, with the common A being highlighted as a harmonic. In the D-centred fourth movement this harmonic is distilled in the transition between first and second subjects (from b. 537), but it is now clearly V of D, and when the F triad reappears, arpeggiated in the cello from b. 651 and counterpointed by an F Lydian scalar descent, it leads directly to D as the last stage of gradual simplification of D/F interaction across the work.30

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27 See Richard Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), vol. 4, 576: ‘[T]he essentially surrealist musical device, as Poulenc (following Satie) demonstrated again and again, was to surround the extravagant dream-imagery with a music that sounded insistently “normal” and commonplace in its evocation of the familiar music of one’s surrounding “lifestyle”’.  
29 See Banfield, ‘“Too Much of Albion”?’, 82.  
30 Mark, Early Britten, 226.
The distillation of A is a passage of considerable wit, and epitomizes the way in which the listener is again drawn into a 'purely' musical argument in this movement. He or she will be aware from the start of an obvious cross reference with the first movement: see Ex. 5, which also shows further transformations of the first-movement Allegro’s headmotive in the second and third movements.\(^{31}\)

Ex. 5

Another, particularly telling, cross-reference occurs from b. 458 in the third movement, where the cello’s change of articulation to pizzicato clarifies the provenance of the arpeggios first heard at b. 394 as the opening of the work.

**String Quartet No. 2: Form and Fantasy**

If String Quartet No. 1 is a fine demonstration of the structural role of sonority, this is no less the case in String Quartet No. 2, Op. 36 (completed 14 October 1945) and not least in its ending: it is difficult to imagine the sheer weight of sonority that is the defining feature here being achievable in another key (the C major triad is built on cello and viola open strings). But if the particular grain of C major is significant, so too, according to some commentators, is its symbolism. The role of C in *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33, which was completed in full score by February 1945, seven months before String Quartet No. 2, prompted Hans Keller to write of ‘Britten’s own C major’,\(^{32}\) and the notion of C major representing some kind of purity—white notes unsullied by accidentals—has also been taken up by Humphrey Carpenter, who views the C pedal at the beginning of the work (actually a C/E double pedal) as representing ‘a state of naturalness’.\(^{33}\) Given the long-breathed lyrical unfolding, it seems reasonable to concur with this. The harmonic shifts

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\(^{31}\) The third movement also contains an explicit reference to the *Andante* sections of the first movement when the cello arpeggio is played pizzicato at b. 458. This might be seen to contribute to the feeling of nostalgia.


\(^{33}\) Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, 230.
during the first section are equally effortless, moving around the circle of fifths, C–G–D, then back to C via G at [B], while the chromaticism is decidedly of the ‘enhancing’ rather than the ‘destabilizing’ kind (for instance, the A flat in b. 3 has the effect of highlighting rather than eroding the major mode): there is little sense of ‘pollution’.

The leisurely, spacious opening stretch comprises three themes all announced by the same motive of a tenth: see Ex. 6, which reproduces Evans’s Ex. 14.1.  

Ex. 6

This spaciousness sets the scene for a movement that has usually been interpreted as a sonata-form variant, with the recapitulation being singled out for special comment because of its superimposition, rather than delineation, of the three themes. Obviously enough, the superimposition results in the recapitulation being much shorter than the exposition, and most commentators have found this problematic. Evans, for example, writes that

On any hearing or reading of this movement, the superimposition of the three thematic ideas must appear the climactic moment. Yet repeated hearings may make one wonder whether too much weight has not been thrown on this contrivance: a development so episodic in character and restatement so drastically abridged can invest the return with a rhetoric that sounds spurious. And that one does measure the movement against ‘sonata’ norms may create an acute feeling of imbalance; though statistics are not to be trusted too far in such matters, they are indicative of the very odd proportions here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Restatement</th>
<th>Coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in bars)</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Ibid., 296.
He goes on to note that ‘a grandiose “resolution” is offered for which all too little dramatic conflict has called. Indeed, the movement is perhaps more accurately regarded as a balanced alternation, fundamentally as much decorative as dramatic, between statements and development’, and he supplies a diagram to outline this, reproduced here as Ex. 7.

Ex. 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[B]</th>
<th>[D]</th>
<th>[F]</th>
<th>[H]</th>
<th>[M]</th>
<th>[O]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>+ 37</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Statement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b c</td>
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<td>(a)</td>
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<td>b + c</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Whittall, too, is uncomfortable about the form:

It is not so much that the exposition fails to balance the remainder of the movement (development plus recapitulation), but that the exposition itself lacks the necessary momentum. The lyric and dramatic aspects make uneasy partners, and the basic tonality of C is not as effectively challenged as the immediately established tonic of such a vast structure needs to be: only in the last bars of the development does a truly tonal drama spring into focus.

There is little doubt that the part of the form that, applying the sonata-form yardstick, would be regarded as ‘the development’ is highly sectionalized, and that it lacks the sense of continuous evolution one would normally expect. In fact, none of the three sections marked ‘development’ in Evans’s diagram is developmental in the traditional sense. In [B]–[D] the harmony is certainly mobile, tracing alternate movement sharpwards and flatwards through the circle of fifths, as Ex. 8 shows; but the endpoint of all this (at [C]) is a return to C major, which is then prolonged until [D].

Ex. 8

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36 Ibid., 297.
37 NB the error here, and in diagram at end of quotation: ‘91 bars’ should be ‘92’.
38 Whittall, _The Music of Britten and Tippett_, 108.
The passage between [H] and [M], meanwhile, is simply too episodic to work as a development section, while [O] is essentially concerned with distillation. Contrariwise, [D]–[F] has too much sense of involving ‘treatment’ to be admitted as ‘statement’ (there is, after, an inversion of theme b at [E]).

Perhaps the sonata-form ‘line’ has been pursued too vigorously as the guiding narrative. An alternative view might be that the movement is *fundamentally* episodic in nature—that it is a fantasy into which aspects of sonata form are interposed. The strongest support for this is the treatment, not of the ‘recapitulation’ *per se*, but of the way it relates to surrounding events. The moment of ‘recapitulation’ is not joined up with what precedes it; indeed, it has something of the quality of a Mahlerian ‘breakthrough’—paradoxically, since Adorno’s notion involves interpolation in a sonata-form scheme. An alternative view might be that the movement is fundamentally episodic in nature—that it is a fantasy into which aspects of sonata form are interposed. The strongest support for this is the treatment, not of the ‘recapitulation’ *per se*, but of the way it relates to surrounding events. The moment of ‘recapitulation’ is not joined up with what precedes it; indeed, it has something of the quality of a Mahlerian ‘breakthrough’—paradoxically, since Adorno’s notion involves interpolation in a sonata-form scheme. Comparison of the passage between [L]+12 and [N]+13 with that between [F]–[G] shows that the recapitulation is literally an insertion thematically and tonally: the tonality anticipated by the music leading to [M] is not the C major that bursts in, but D flat Dorian (with the viola F sharp/A ostinato acting enharmonically as G flat and B double-flat).

The view of the movement as being essentially to do with fantasy is not out of sorts with the circumstances of the work’s conception: it was composed to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of Purcell, one of the greatest English masters of fantasy (the movement’s title, ‘Chacony’, is Purcellian), and the programme in which the quartet was given its first performance, on 21 November 1945, included Purcell’s Four-part Fantasia no. 4 in F and Five-part Fantasia no. 13 in F (Fantasia upon One Note). While the first movement does not attempt the dizzying manipulations of archaic contrapuntal devices for which Purcell’s Fantasias are celebrated, Britten’s textural imagination is given full rein, the most memorable passage being that beginning at [H], where, as Evans puts it, ‘a highly imaginative passage of harmonies […] slowly change under the influence of a succession of sliding tenths’, the upper note in each case being a harmonic: see Ex. 9. Comparison of this with the passage sketched in Ex. 8 will give some indication of the variety of Britten’s harmonic procedures.

Ex. 9

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It is common in Britten’s music of all periods for formal sections to be differentiated by harmonic process: it is a fundamental aspect of his technique. Given this, it is not surprising that he should have taken to the passacaglia, the form that underpins the final movement of String Quartet No. 2, so enthusiastically. This is not Britten’s first use of a ground. Previous examples include the final movement of the Violin Concerto, Op. 15 (1939) and the fourth interlude in Peter Grimes, while the final song of The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, Op. 35, ‘Death be not proud’ (completed on 19
August immediately before the Quartet was begun) is based on a five-bar ground bass.\textsuperscript{40} It is, however, the lengthiest ground-bass movement (at around 17 minutes) and, arguably, the most ambitious. Evans has described the movement in some detail, highlighting the division into three sets of six variations, on harmony, rhythm, and ‘a new melodic counterpoint’, punctuated by cadenzas for cello, viola, and violin 1, the whole rounded off by ‘3 variations reaffirming the ground’s properties and (ultimately) C major’.\textsuperscript{41} He questions whether the ‘sporadic exchange of corporate order for individual fantasy was necessary’, with the cadenzas threatening to dissipate ‘that cumulative tension on which so many of the greatest ground-bass treatments, Purcell’s most notably, have depended’. Some kind of deviation from the ground is probably necessary in such a lengthy structure, but it is difficult to disagree with Evans’s view that ‘in anything less than an eloquent performance these cadenzas can sound the most contrived of links’.\textsuperscript{42}

As in the Passacaglia, C major is never very far away in the scherzo that forms the second movement, further reinforcing the sense of the quartet being a ‘Fantasia upon one Key’. Yet while there is no real doubt about the tonality of the opening—as Evans says, ‘the flying staccato arpeggios constantly incorporate prominent open strings, while reiterated chords of C minor (and eventually major) aggressively punctuate the design’—the opening harmony (as Evans goes on to note) is oblique. The return of the scherzo after the trio at [H] is even more so, though even here C has a toehold at the top of the texture: violin 1’s c\textsuperscript{4} is easily related to the forceful emergence of C major at the end of the first scherzo section at [C]+10ff (see Ex. 10). Given the formal intrigue of the first movement and the virtuosity of the third, it is easy to forget the importance of the second movement in ‘the cumulative effect of the entire three-movement span’.\textsuperscript{44}

\section*{String Quartet No. 3: Allusion, Distillation, and Transcendence}

Rupprecht sees the influence of \textit{Peter Grimes} in the first movement of String Quartet No. 2: in the development section ‘The drama unfolds by stark confrontation: lyric episodes, “tranquillo”, are interrupted by “agitato” outbursts. This musical dichotomy suggests the character of Peter Grimes himself, given to states of poetic calm and violent instability’.\textsuperscript{45} There is, though, little genuine suggestion of violence or psychological trauma, unless one is inclined to view the (surreal?) reprise as portraying the latter (which, given its ‘easy’ resolution, seems implausible). Connections between String Quartet No. 3, Op. 94 (October–November 1975) and Britten’s final opera, \textit{Death in Venice}, Op. 88, completed two years earlier, are rather more concrete, however, not least because the final movement (actually entitled ‘La Serenissima’) begins by quoting various parts of the opera. Since the final movement also makes poignant use of E major, the key associated with the protagonist of the opera, Gustav von Aschenbach, the quartet has often been

\textsuperscript{40} Another ground forms the basis of the revised third movement of the Piano Concerto, Op. 13, thought to have been completed in September 1945 (see <http://www.brittenpears.org/?page=research/catalogue/detail.html&id=96>, accessed 29/5/05)—though this time it is not a ground \textit{bass} but a repeated melodic line.
\textsuperscript{41} Evans, \textit{The Music of Benjamin Britten}, 299.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 297-98.
\textsuperscript{44} Rupprecht, ‘The chamber music’, 247.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 248.
Ex. 10 i)

regarded as a codicil to, or gloss upon, the larger work. But it is rather more than this. Originally conceived as a ‘Divertimento’ and consisting of five relatively short movements, the work has a more complex relationship with the opera than simple recycling, and much of the work floats free of the opera altogether. Such is its richness that only two main issues can be pursued at any length here: the translation into instrumental terms of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy that underpins the opera, and our over-arching interest in Britten’s evolving relationship with sonata form.

While Death in Venice can be plotted in terms of the dramatic interaction of Apollonian and Dionysian polarities, there is no such discernible narrative in String Quartet No. 3. Indeed, the ‘aesthetic counterpoles’ operate more on the abstract level Ex.

identified in much twentieth-century music by Arnold Whittall in his recent book, *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*.\(^\text{37}\) In particular, they can be seen throughout the work in the guise of ‘mechanism’ versus ‘freedom’. Mechanism is employed at various levels. In the first movement, ‘Duets’, it can be seen to reside in the exploration of all possible combination of duets: see Ex.11, which is reproduced from Evans.\(^\text{48}\) It can be seen on a ‘middleground’ level in Britten’s use of twelve-note aggregates, as in the cello and violin 1 lines in bb. 11–18—though while this is mechanistic in that all twelve notes

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of the chromatic scale have to be used, it also embodies freedom in that the order of pcs appears to be free, subject to the composer’s intuition. The interaction—interdependence, even—of mechanism and freedom will surface on numerous occasions in the discussion that follows. I begin, however, with the aspect of the work that has been most contentious—the form of the first movement. This has most often been regarded as a variety of sonata form, which by 1976 itself constituted a mechanism of sorts, but one which is used in such a free way that at least one prominent commentator has doubted its presence.

Chief amongst those who assert sonata form’s controlling authority is Hans Keller. In his short essay on String Quartet No. 3, first published in 1979, he argues that its presence is all the stronger for being in the distant background:

Myself apart, nobody has yet dared to call that movement a sonata form in public, though there have been evasive whispers about ‘elements of sonata’ and the like. The reason is that the structure is so original, so precisely and pregnantly composed against the background of sonata form that people who can only think in terms of form (that which musics have in common) as distinct from structure (that which they haven’t) are confused: how can these contradictions of sonata be called sonata? Easily—first, because the basic sonata contrasts—thematic and tonal as well as developmental—are there anyway, though things tend to happen in the wrong place.\textsuperscript{50}

There is something of an agenda behind Keller’s pushing of a sonata-from interpretation. He opens by immediately reminding us that he is the quartet’s dedicatee, that he had had a discussion with Britten ‘many, many years’ earlier ‘about string-quartet texture in general, sonata structure in particular, and quite especially, about development’, and that on opening the score of the work found ‘a stunningly novel answer to my lifelong preoccupations with quartet and sonata—so specific a creative response that the experience was that of a causal relation. My delusion? Maybe—but it doesn’t matter, for the musical relation is there, whether it’s causal or not, a question which is of little interest to anybody but myself, anyway’.\textsuperscript{51} Whether or not ‘the musical relation is there’ as far as individual listeners are concerned depends, of course, not on Keller’s assertions

\textsuperscript{49} Britten’s sketchbooks show that he wrote out the chromatic scale and crossed off the notes of the scale as he used them, in the manner of Webern: see John Evans, ‘Britten’s Venice Workshop’, \textit{Soundings} 12 (Winter 1984-5), 7-24, especially the sketch reproduced on p. 17.

\textsuperscript{50} ‘Britten’s last masterpiece’ in Keller, \textit{Essays on Music}, 111-2.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 111.
but on whether they find his arguments convincing. Unfortunately these arguments are rather general, with no detailed reference to the score. At the beginning of his essay he states that he regards ‘the very heart of the sonata’s matter’ as being ‘the contrast between statement and development, and its integration’—statement meaning stability, and development (continual modulation in tonal music) a labile structure which was not confined, of course, to the official development section’.\textsuperscript{52} It is the instability and stability that, according to Keller, ‘happen in the wrong place’: ‘for the first time in the history of the sonata, the very material of instability’s climax, of the development proper, is used for the diametrically opposite purpose—extreme stability, tonal relaxation, the coda before the coda’. Since Keller doesn’t give bar numbers it is difficult to be sure of where in the score he is referring to, especially since there is no bar in the movement that could be regarded as stable in the conventional tonal sense, let alone as exhibiting ‘extreme stability’: the whole point of this movement, it seems to me, is its fluidity—its lack of solid ground (all very appropriate for a portrait of Venice). However, as discussed further below, there is at least a relative degree of stability in the section beginning at b. 76, if only because the harmony is relatively static. Keller sees this as a re-surfacing and continuation of the development section (clearly bb. 40–56) because of the texture, which finally erupts with the vigour of bb. 52ff at b. 84. It is presumably here, therefore, that Keller hears the integration of contrasts occurring.

The degree to which these observations add up to a convincing demonstration of sonata form may well depend on how individual readers respond to Keller’s particular conception of the most celebrated engine of musical argumentation, which he revisited in his 1978 essay ‘The state of the symphony: not only Maxwell Davies’s’. Here he again states that

\begin{quote}
the elementary and elemental contrast in the sonata’s modes of thought is independent of the contrasts between themes and keys: it is the contrast between statements (whether monothematic or polythematic) and developments (whether they concern themselves with the statements or not). In tonal music, therefore, is it the contrast between harmonic stability and harmonic lability (modulation), while in atonal symphonism (such as, say, Schoenberg’s Third and Fourth Quartets) the differentiation is achieved by a variety of means, from which harmony is not excluded, and which encompasses both melodic and textural juxtapositions, as well as contrasts in rhythmic articulation.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Keller’s analysis of the first movement of String Quartet No. 3 might seem convincing on a textural level, with the difficulty of identifying clearly where the second group is recapitulated merely reinforcing his point about ‘the elementary and elemental contrast in the sonata’s modes of thought’ being ‘independent of the contrasts between themes and keys’. And if we regard distillation as characteristic of Britten’s ‘late’ style (the climax of his lifelong goal ‘to tear all the waste away; to achieve perfect clarity of expression’\textsuperscript{54}), the boiling down of sonata form to its essence seems an inevitable consequence. But it is the very dependence on suggestion that this involves that might lead to questioning of Keller’s certainty.

Equally as persuasive, though, is Evans’s view that ‘Rather as in the cello suites, a fluid succession of textural variants is to be more important for this work than an

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. The italics are the author’s own.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 109

\textsuperscript{54} Stated in a 1963 interview: see Kildea, ed., Britten on Music, 227.
embracing argument, tensed by motivic concentration and schematic tonal opposition’. The ‘looser’ structure is demonstrated in the diagram reproduced from Evans as Ex. 11.\textsuperscript{55} Sections are clearly differentiated in character, by texture (duet grouping etc.) and, as always, by harmonic process. By itself, such a diagram, which inevitably presents a synchronic view, can distort as much as clarify and enlighten, so Evans uses his commentary to draw out diachronic aspects. Disagreeing fundamentally with Keller, he sees the central C-section as generating a ‘crisis’, but one that ‘easily blows itself out in a smooth transition back to the earlier swaying rhythm’\textsuperscript{56}. The music does not continue as if nothing had happened, however, and there is much to explore behind the question-mark in Evans’s labelling of the next section as ‘B(?’.

The ‘B’ part of this designation results from Evans’s observation that ‘the violin’s sixth phrases [bb. 20ff] may be recalled by the chordal sixths of violin 2 and cello from 64, but they are more potently octave-transposed to thirds in the first violin’s ethereal dolce phrase from bar 71’.\textsuperscript{57} Ex. 12 demonstrates the latter point.\textsuperscript{58}

Ex. 12

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{ex12.png}
\end{figure}

Meanwhile, the question-mark—which Evans does not elaborate upon—might seem to indicate doubt as to the substance of this observation, and it must be owned that the marked differences in texture and rhythmic profile do not encourage the connections to be made very readily, even if one recognizes, as suggested above, this to be a movement founded on shadows and the elliptical. A particularly good reason for the question-mark is the introduction of a striking new sonority, an added-sixth chord introduced in b. 64 (see Ex. 13). It is not entirely new: the major second, G–A, in the middle of the chord is related easily enough to the sonority that opens the movement and remains prominent throughout,\textsuperscript{59} and the triadic component is not new either since triads amplify the major-second conflict into a conflict between triads a tone apart at the beginning of the central section (bb. 42ff). But it does introduce a slightly more relaxed tone, a momentary ‘vision of tranquillity amid chromatic surroundings’\textsuperscript{60} (after b. 64 the conflicting scale-forms overlaid in violin 1 and viola ensure the return of the customary level of tension). It is

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\textsuperscript{55} From Evans, \textit{The Music of Benjamin Britten}, 342.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 347.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 343.
\textsuperscript{58} The violin melody of b71 is accompanied (at least at first) by double-stopped sixths in the viola, but these are, of course, \textit{minor} sixths.
\textsuperscript{59} From b. 19 it is embodied in the trill.
\textsuperscript{60} Rupprecht, ‘The chamber music’, 255.
intriguing that Britten had at one stage intended to cut bb. 64–75 altogether.\textsuperscript{61} This suggests that the section is ornamental. Yet without it, the movement would seem extraordinarily attenuated, and at least one of the important effects of the Coda would be lost: bb. 77ff, which are derived from Fig.43 in \textit{Death in Venice}, are heard as the ‘outcome’ of the ethereal passage beginning at b. 71 (bb. 71ff are heard as adumbration and 77ff as statement because of the relative stability and ‘normal’ register of 77ff).

The Coda is the section that most fully epitomizes the first movement (Keller is surely right about this, even if one is disinclined to agree with his reasoning). It is masterly in its balancing of summation, apotheosis, and closure, if the latter is the correct word for something that seems in some ways more akin to dissolution, or even evaporation. ‘Apotheosis’ and ‘summation’ might also seem too strong for this shadowy

\textsuperscript{61} See Colin Matthews, ‘Working Notes’, in Blyth, \textit{Remembering Britten}, 173-81: ‘Ben originally considered cutting these twelve bars, on the grounds that the movement was too long […] Ben was, however, rather reluctant to make this cut and, when the finale proved to be much longer than he had expected, he was ready, without much prompting, to restore the passage so that the first movement would “balance” the finale’ (p.177).
world, yet it is difficult to know how else to describe the events of both bb.77ff and, in particular, b. 85, which is one of the most extraordinary events in the work. Technically, the melodic line here is linked straightforwardly enough to b. 20 through the rising minor sixth and falling major second, with the whole-tone descent from D flat to G extending the movement’s generating major second; but the magnitude of the gesture seems to point to some extramusical meaning that is ultimately unfathomable.

There is no aspect of the movement for which the epithet ‘elliptical’ is more appropriate than the use of tonality. There are plenty of hints at tonal centres, but rarely are these confirmed, as the opening section (Evans’s ‘A’ and Keller’s first subject) and the Coda demonstrate.

The music is shrouded in ambiguity from the first bar, as Ex. 14 shows. At first, the listener is perhaps more likely to take the lower of the two notes of the initial major second to be hierarchically superior, simply because it starts things off: hence a) in Ex. 14 ii) interprets D as an appoggiatura with a resolution in b. 2 to E natural, suggesting C major (with the chord underlying the resolution being vi) or A minor. However, the lower neighbour-note C sharp suggests a possible V function for D, with the underlying harmony being V4/2 in G minor, as b) shows. The second bar does nothing to support this, however, since the violin 2 E natural works against the G minor possibility. Meanwhile the C-reading receives some support in the remainder of bb. 2 and 3: as Ex. 14 ii) c) shows, the violin 2 line can be interpreted as employing mixture, with a shift from C major to C minor (or rather, C Phrygian). Undermining this is the viola motion to B flat. If this pitch was to be heard unequivocally as hierarchically inferior to the C—as a colouring Mixolydian seventh, for instance—a C framework would be on the way to being established; but the ambiguity associated with the major second in b. 1 mitigates this, even though the C is again (as in b. 1) initiated on the downbeat (it seems to me that the viola’s move to B flat during b. 2 is crucial in maintaining the ambiguity: a recomposition in the manner of Ex. 14 iii) would surely destroy it). With the second major-second a motion is established which culminates in the G/A of b. 6: see Ex. 14 iv). The C–B flat–A flat–G motion in the viola (paralleled at the major second by violin 2) again suggests a G minor/C ambiguity, with the underlying progression being iv–i or I–V. Once more, however, there is little immediate support for either of these possibilities. It is true that, when the cello and violin 1 enter, at b. 11, they could be held to be outlining a V–I progression in C (if the cello C flat is taken as B natural), but this conflicts with the A flat/B flat maintained by the original duet. Thus the two pairings inhabit separate harmonic worlds, and the rest of the section pointedly avoids any clear tonal signposts: violin 1 and cello unfold a twelve-note aggregate (as mentioned above), while violin 2 and viola trace a motion through that celebrated paternoster of tonality, the diminished seventh (see Ex. 14 iv)). The last element of the latter, the pc A, provides the starting-point for the next section. It is not immediately convincing as a tonic (it actually sounds more like ii of G minor to begin with), but it soon becomes established through the symmetrical melodic movement in bb. 19–23.

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62 Keller is clear that C major ‘starts’ the work: see Keller, Essays on Music, 113.
63 The major - minor shift is a Britten fingerprint of which there are numerous examples, including the main motive of Death in Venice (see its first appearance in the third and fourth bar of Fig. 14).
64 Exactly why it is spelt as C flat is unclear.
Ex. 14 i)

With moderate movement \( \text{\( \text{\textbar} = c. 56 \)} \)

VIOLIN 1

VIOLIN 2

VIOLA

CELLO

Violin 2

Viola

Violin 2

Viola

\( \text{pp dolce} \)

\( \text{pp subito, senza cresc.} \)

\( \text{pp subito, senza cresc.} \)

\( \text{pp dolce} \)
Most of the ensuing points of reference in the movement also revolve around C/G minor, as can be seen in events such as the open C-string pedal in the viola from bb. 36–9, following-on from the hint of C major-minor at b. 34; the G-based chord of b. 54; and the C-based added-sixth chord of bb. 64ff. As is consistently the case, though—and this will hardly be surprising by this stage of our investigation—these putative centres are not clarified, the viola pedal, for example, being much more of a springboard for the ‘development’ section than a point of focus. It is around G minor and C that the Coda revolves. Indeed, the ‘dissolution’ and ‘fragmentation’ of the ending mentioned above in the discussion of form depends largely on the creation of what, in referring to another context in a work by a different composer, Peter Evans has described as a ‘frozen tonal situation’.

Both Rupprecht and Greet make a good deal of what they hear as the emergence—or, as Greet puts it, the crystallization—of E major at b. 71 (see Rupprecht, ‘The chamber music’, 253–8, and Greet, ‘Inconclusive conclusions’, 48.). Yet as Greet himself points out, E ‘seems to be outside the tonal process of the rest of the movement’ (so far as a tonal process is recognizable). Referring to the sketches, Rupprecht notes that the E-based passage (actually, there are two bars, at most, that could be said to be concerned with E: bb. 70 and 71—see Ex. 15) was originally centred on F; from this he infers that the change to E denotes long-term structural significance. This allows Rupprecht to put forward a neater view of the work, but the change could equally well be explained by the need for a momentary brightness (relatively speaking) at this point.

augmented-sixth as a basis for a harmonic ‘break out’ (see their increasingly insistent elaborations in bb. 81–3). Meanwhile the closing chord, itself G-based, is the ‘frozen’ chord *par excellence*: a Stravinsky-like conflation of V9/7 and I in C.

Ex. 15

The treatment of tonality in the second movement, ‘Ostinato’, is not exactly conventional, or always straightforward, either, but ‘anchor points’ are much more clearly defined than in ‘Duets’. The opening (Ex. 16) is described by Evans as superimposing ‘cadences on to E minor, A minor and C major’, though it is surely the latter key, announced in the bass of the texture, that most impinges itself (indeed Evans goes on to say that ‘the resulting chord also appears as a consequent to that which ended

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the first movement', implying a V–I progression across the movement break). There is a shift to IV at b. 17, and the central section (bb. 38–71) is based around B Mixolydian, moving to C sharp minor when the melodic line shifts to lower instruments at b. 48, though the ostinato frequently conflicts. Like the scherzo of String Quartet No. 1, ‘Ostinato’ nicely exemplifies Taruskin’s notion of surrealism; indeed it might be said to trump the earlier work in this regard. Much of the effect comes from the use of mechanism, with the sense of the mechanical that an ostinato almost inevitably imbibes being amplified here by the constructedness of the ostinato material, which is a series of sevenths. The surrealistic aspect comes from the sevenths being octavely-displaced scale fragments with a strong sense of progression (e.g. in b. 5, C: I–V, descending via the Mixolydian 7th, and in bb. 11ff, C: V–I): in other words, there is a dislocation of traditional function through distortion by octave transposition. A lyrical central section offsets the sardonic tone, but on the return of the opening section there is a gradual accretion of ostinati until (by b. 87) the texture is all ostinato. Here we see the paradox of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in music: the music is Apollonian in that it is extremely controlled (highly patterned), but the effect is Dionysian. This is the crisis-point of the movement, in which the quality of the genre that has traditionally been most treasured, the subtle interaction between instruments, appears to break down: all that can be done is to stop and start again. This is indeed what happens, though the music does not
recover its former fluidity, becoming fragmentary before finishing (almost to its own surprise) on V of C.

The use of mechanism in the third movement, ‘Solo’, has entirely the opposite effect: the arpeggios moving slowly but inevitably upwards from the lowest string of the cello to the harmonics of violin 2 generate immense calm and serenity. As Evans’s diagram shows (Ex. 17), the harmonies too are highly patterned, though, as he notes, ‘the effect is far less rigid than the explanation. Not only does the opening set out from C in both the eponymous violin 1 solo and cello arpeggio, but it at first suggests C minor at least as strongly as A flat; and at each tonal level, the first violin’s accidentals similarly create momentary alternative readings’.\(^{68}\) The achievement, or distillation, of pure C major at the end of the movement is the ‘highest’ Apollonian moment in the work, and possibly in Britten’s output, trumping the coda of String Quartet No. 2 (to which Keller draws a parallel\(^ {69}\)) as an embodiment of the idyllic.

Ex. 17

As has often been remarked, the five movements of the work are arranged around ‘Solo’. Thus ‘Burlesque’, which is also a scherzo and trio, balances ‘Ostinato’. It is equally ‘surrealistic’, especially so in the ‘Quasi “Trio”’ section, where the accompaniment produces the most mechanical-sounding music of the work (the quasi barrel organ effect suggests parallels with Schönberg’s String Quartet No. 2 and Bartók’s String Quartet No. 5, as Evans notes\(^ {70}\)). The movement is not obviously related to ‘Ostinato’ thematically, though the scalar tetrachord that begins the main theme and is varied/extended to provide much of the melodic material equates to the ostinato with the octave transpositions ironed out.

Much has been made of the ending of the final movement, ‘Recitative and Passacaglia’, which is reproduced as Ex. 18. Colin Matthews has informed us that Britten wanted the work ‘to end with a question’,\(^ {71}\) and as Whittall has pointed out, ‘with the final D in the bass and a non-cadence above, [the composer] provided perhaps the most perfectly economical example of his dissolving, inconclusive conclusions, in which a last page of pure diatonicism (the E major triad prolonged without actual progressions) is dramatically, determinedly “corrupted”, if not positively contradicted’.\(^ {72}\) Hans Keller has ‘analysed the heavily charged end, or non-end, against the harmonic background of the

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\(^{68}\) Ibid., 345.

\(^{69}\) Keller, Essays on Music, 113.

\(^{70}\) Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 346.

\(^{71}\) Blyth, Remembering Britten, 179.

\(^{72}\) Whittall, The Music of Britten and Tippett, 282.
traditional interrupted cadence, but even if the final chord can somehow be heard as vi with an added minor ninth in the bass, the effect is very far removed from an interrupted

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73 Keller, Essays on Music, 113.
cadence: a degree of poise is achieved with which the latter is utterly at odds. The bass note that is left to die away, D natural, is in literal terms the equivalent of the C natural whose ‘otherness’ initiated the structural span of String Quartet No. 1. In String Quartet No. 3, though, there is little of the ‘irritant’ factor: pace Whittall, D natural is (as the Mixolydian seventh) an extension of E major rather than a conflicting element. As Evans suggests, the D natural prompts various flat-side excursions that pull against the passacaglia—to B flat at b. 91 and towards A flat in b. 100—though these are soon folded back into the prevailing E tonality. The latter is not allowed to settle, however: the rising scale patterns of the coda, and the harmonics, are likely to remind the listener of the end of ‘Solo’, but the prominent, yearning D sharp ensures that the relaxation of b. 56 of that movement, where the soloist finally reaches the tonic, is denied. Rupprecht seems to find a degree of nostalgia in the final gesture:

The eloquence of the Passacaglia’s closing ‘question’ resides in its effect on one’s understanding of the form of the piece as a whole. Evading any definitive signal for ending, the Third Quartet imbues those earlier moments of C major warmth—in ‘Duets’, and, most brilliantly, at the end of ‘Solo’—with a closural significance that is all the more poignant because in some sense retrospective.74

There is, though, none of the wistfulness of the ending of the slow movement of String Quartet No. 1. Nor is the ending so prosaic as to be ‘a way of drawing attention to the arbitrary quality of any halt to the flow of musical time’:75 it is not so much that Britten is problematizing closure, but that the need for it is transcended.

If the cello’s D natural is a tentative evocation of String Quartet No. 1, the passacaglia draws a more certain parallel with the Chacony of String Quartet No. 2, though, as Evans observes, the extra-musical context also points to operatic exemplars: ‘In the serene unfolding of Britten’s last ground-bass movement we shall surely hear, as in the passacaglias of Lucretia and Herring, a threnody, but now it is as much for the composer as for his hero’.76 As in those operas, and in marked contrast to String Quartet No. 2 (with which Lucretia and Herring are near-contemporaries), virtuosity—at least, the kind that makes big demands on the players—is largely eschewed. This is in keeping with the original Divertimento conception of the work, but also reflects the urge to simplicity that is central to Britten’s conception of the Apollonian. Yet, in the enigmatic final progression, the Apollonian embraces the Dionysian, the final three bars’ effect being ultimately impossible to ‘account for’ technically. Britten’s might not be the most ostentatiously modern music examined in this volume, but in this parting gesture his music asserts its quintessentially modern sensibility.77

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74 Rupprecht, ‘The chamber music’, 258.
75 Ibid.
76 Evans, The Music of Benjamin Britten, 347.
77 I would like to express my gratitude to Philip Rupprecht for his comments on a draft of this essay.