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> A child in the dark, seized by fear, reassures himself by singing. He walks and stops to the rhythm of his song. This one is like the outline of a stable and calm centre, stabilising and soothing, in the midst of chaos.
> Deleuze & Guattari (1980: 382)[1]

1 Lullabies are central to the work of Benjamin Britten. From his first compositions as a child to his last operas, lullabies, and their lulling character at the boundaries of the dream and the threat, are a recur-

ring and ambiguous reference. In many Britten operas and songs, lullabies find a place in the double-faced nightly atmosphere, both soothing and menacing. In Britten's world, lullabies are often associated with an imminent disaster: Lucretia asleep before her rape; Billy Budd lulled by the sea before his execution; or Miles and Flora hypnotised by the presence of dangerous ghosts. To perform a lullaby on stage seems to be a paradox, for a lullaby is "originally, a vocal piece designed to lull a child to sleep with repeated formulae; less commonly, it can be used to soothe a fractious or sick child. [It] is usually (though not exclusively) sung solo by women and displays musical characteristics that are often archaic [...]" (Porter 2001). A lullaby is first of all a social interaction in music between two individuals. On one side is a performer (stereotypically a mother or a nurse), and on the other a listener (the child), and their relation has a magical aspect: the song, allied with rocking movements, puts the child into a state of sleep. The child goes through a semi-sleeping phase, a situation which fosters a half-dreamed imagination. Now, what happens when this social activity is transposed into the world of concert art; when the lullaby becomes an artistic object of its own? What happens to the social purpose of it, when projected on stage under the spotlights? In opera, in particular, what status does the lullaby genre have, especially when an actual scene of sleep is depicted? How, finally, do lullabies act like topics (and not just a genre), i.e. "musical styles and genres taken out of their proper context and used in another one"? (Mirka 2014: 2). There are many identifiable 'lullabies' in Britten's music, as summarised in the non-exhaustive following list:

- 1924-25, *Lullaby in E*, juvenilia (Britten 1924a)
- 1925, *Lullaby in Eb*, juvenilia (Britten 1924b)
- 1934-35 *Suite for violin and piano* ('Lullaby')
- 1936 *Two Lullabies* for 2 pianos ('Lullaby' & 'Lullaby for a retired Colonel')
- 1938 A *Cradle Song: Sleep Beauty Bright* for soprano, contralto and piano
- 1941 *Paul Bunyan* ('Lullaby of Dream Shadow', in the original version, then removed)
- 1942 A *Ceremony of Carols* ('Lullaby')
- 1946 *The Rape of Lucretia* (Lucretia asleep)
- 1947-49 A *Charm of Lullabies* for voice and piano
- 1949 *The Little Sweep* (n.10 & 14)
- 1951 *Billy Budd* (Billy's last aria)

- 1954 *The Turn of the Screw* (Flora's song)
- 1960 A *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Fairies' choruses)

2 If the genre seems abundant in Britten's output, it is surprising to see no dedicated study to the subject (other than the scattered analytical comments I will refer to, along the following case studies). This article tries to bridge the gap and to question the implications and particularities of Britten's use of the lullaby. My approach is therefore semiotic and makes a central use of topic analysis. I focus on Britten's twists on the lullaby and its amalgam with other musical topics (what Robert Hatten would call "tropes", see Hatten 2004). Besides, these distortions and fusions are typical of a modernist hand, described by Daniel Albright as a constant "tinkering with the basic material of compositional technique" (Albright 2004: 10). Consequently, I will use the lullaby not just as a genre, but also as a semiotic item (i.e. a topic) which refers to the genre. This allows a better understanding of the semiotic mixes and tropes, as well as to contemplate the ambiguous relations between music and texts or scenic situations. What, then, are the stylistic traits of a lullaby? This article proposes three qualities, observed in the various Britten pieces analysed: (1) a rocking element (as in the French '*berceuse*'); (2) a simple songful tune (as in the English 'lullaby'); and (3) a general lulling quietness. These qualities are found in many other places in Britten's work, even when not referred to as a 'lullaby', as in the *Nocturne*, op. 60, where lullaby motifs permeate the whole work, as it does in an opera like A *Midsummer Night's Dream*. This article investigates the transposition by Benjamin Britten of the lullaby genre into artistic compositions, and the potential evolutions it gives to its meaning. It will appear that Britten always plays with the topical qualities of the lullabies to create multifarious ambiguities: in A *Midsummer Night's Dream* with military sounds; in *The Rape of Lucretia* with an imminent scene of violence; in the *Turn of the Screw* with uncanny presences. This article also reveals that the lullaby is often allied by Britten with instrumental-exercise-like material, with all the conjunct and confronting meanings it creates. Britten's own childhood relation to lullaby is explored in an introductory investigation, followed by a new consideration of a material often ignored: Britten's childhood compositions. Then, through the analysis of different examples, I advocate that Benjamin

Britten is using the lullaby as an ambiguous safe place, a false protection, a denial of violence, and sometimes a form of danger itself.

1. Lullabies in times of war: Edith Britten and her sick child composer

3 "Benjamin Britten's mother was 'determined that he should be a great musician.'" Thus begins the first substantial and thorough biography of Benjamin Britten, written by Humphrey Carpenter in 1992. Carpenter posits Britten's mother, Mrs. Edith Britten, as a stifling and dominant presence. Two anecdotes, often quoted in the subsequent body of publications and commentaries on Britten's life, perpetuated the cliché. They come from the remarks of a childhood friend of Britten: Basil Reeve. The first anecdote is the story of the four Bs. The young Benjamin, according to his mother, should be the next composer after Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. The second anecdote takes a more symbolic and dubious twist: the voice of his partner, Peter Pears, appeared to be surprisingly similar to Edith's own voice. Reeves, followed by Donald Mitchell or David Matthews, goes as far a linking the presence of a dominant mother to Britten's sexual development (Mitchell 1991: 11-14 ; Matthews 2013: 6). To explain Britten's homosexuality by the presence of a dominant mother now appears ridiculous. Moreover, the relationship between Britten and his mother might be romanticised and exaggerated, especially because the recollections of Mrs. Britten are mostly based on children memories (of Basil Reeve and of Beth Britten). The accumulated comments on her domineering attitude might be biased by the hackneyed trope of the genius' mother. Some caution would be necessary on the matter. The 'four Bs' anecdote, for example, has to be understood in a family context where puns with initials seemed more than common:

> In the household in which the young Britten grew up, the letter B was indeed significant. All four of the Britten siblings had initials of two Bs: Barbara Britten, Bobby Britten, Beth Britten and Benjamin Britten. In his early works, Britten occasionally used the pitch B to represent a person's initial. [...] When writing *Billy Budd* (having just scrawled "BB" on the first page of the manuscript draft [...]) can he

> really have failed to notice that his title character shared his own initials? (Cooke 2013: 122-3)

4 Another crucial element of Britten's childhood, which might give insight to the form taken by Mrs. Britten's care, is that Britten was a sick child. He almost died of pneumonia when three months old, and pneumonia, in the 1910s, was a particularly dangerous disease for young children (16.4% of child deaths between 1-4 years old in 1915 Britain).[2] From Edith Britten's point of view, the survival of her youngest son was constantly at stake. Ben was a child who had to be taken care of, which explains perhaps some of the overbearing motherly presence perceived by Ben's siblings and friends. Beth (Ben's sister) recalls: "The doctor told my father that he would never be able to lead a normal life, he must be treated with great care, cushioned from any sort of strain or effort" (Britten 1986: 30-31). Britten was a sick child. Fevers and various diseases would frequently follow him all along his life (Bridcut 2013: 151-154).

> He did not sleep well, and Edith often had to sing him to sleep. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of this archetypal maternal practice to Britten's psyche and to his later artistic development. [...] The image of sleep as a refuge is something that Britten returns to again and again in his music. (Matthews 2013: 3-4)

5 It is no wonder if the genre of the lullaby is used in profusion in all Britten's work when childhood is evoked, as it is so strongly linked to his first years as a sick child: "Britten's earliest musical memory was of [his mother] singing him to sleep" (Oliver 1996: 17). Next to his mother, Anny Walker, called 'Nanny', was another crucial character of the house to lull the children to sleep. But, sleeping, in the years to come, could instantly turn into nightmare, as during bombing raids on Lowestoft in the First World War:

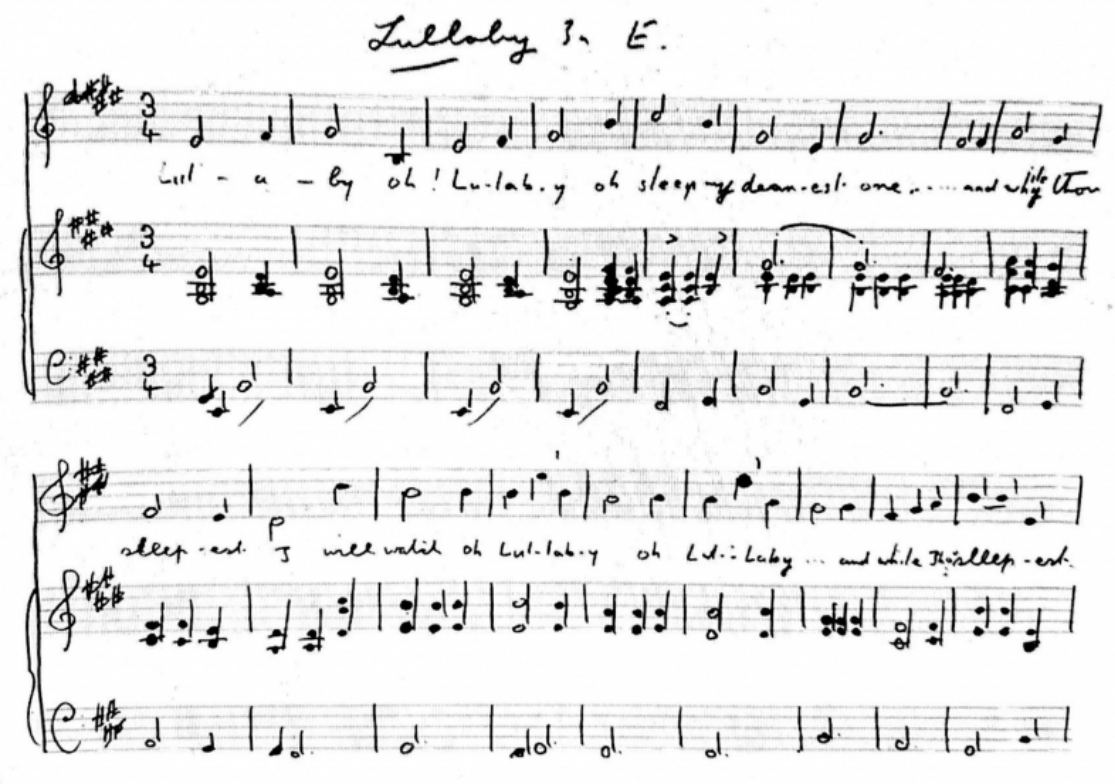
> We were all at home for the bombardment which happened in the early hours of April 26th 1916. We were all hustled down to the cellar, then Nanny marshalled the maids and shot upstairs to see what was going outside. Pop [Beth and Ben's dad] told us afterwards that he had trouble making her stay in the cellar. She would keep rushing upstairs and hanging out of the window to see the fun. (Britten 1986: 35).

6 This other recollection of Beth tells how traumatising the Britten family might have found these bombings from the coast of what was still called the 'German Sea'. While their house was spared, one bomb came very close to them and fell "on the field opposite the house" (Britten 1986: 35). Nanny's behaviour conveys at the same time a contrasting, paradoxical attitude to war: the excitement it creates, the impossibility to prevent oneself to go and see the bombs falling even against one's safety, the thrilling sense of danger it expresses. Diseases, bombings, lulling voices, thundering naval attacks: these pains, sounds and noises, has to be taken into consideration has a soundscape particular to this very composer. Of course, no one can tell the actual link of causality between these sleeping experiences and the ambiguous shelter/danger status of Britten's lullabies to come. But one may consider, in the entanglement of a lulling protection and a sense of danger or violence, at least a correlation and a noteworthy echo of Britten's childhood.

2. First lullabies for piano: aesthetics of a child-art

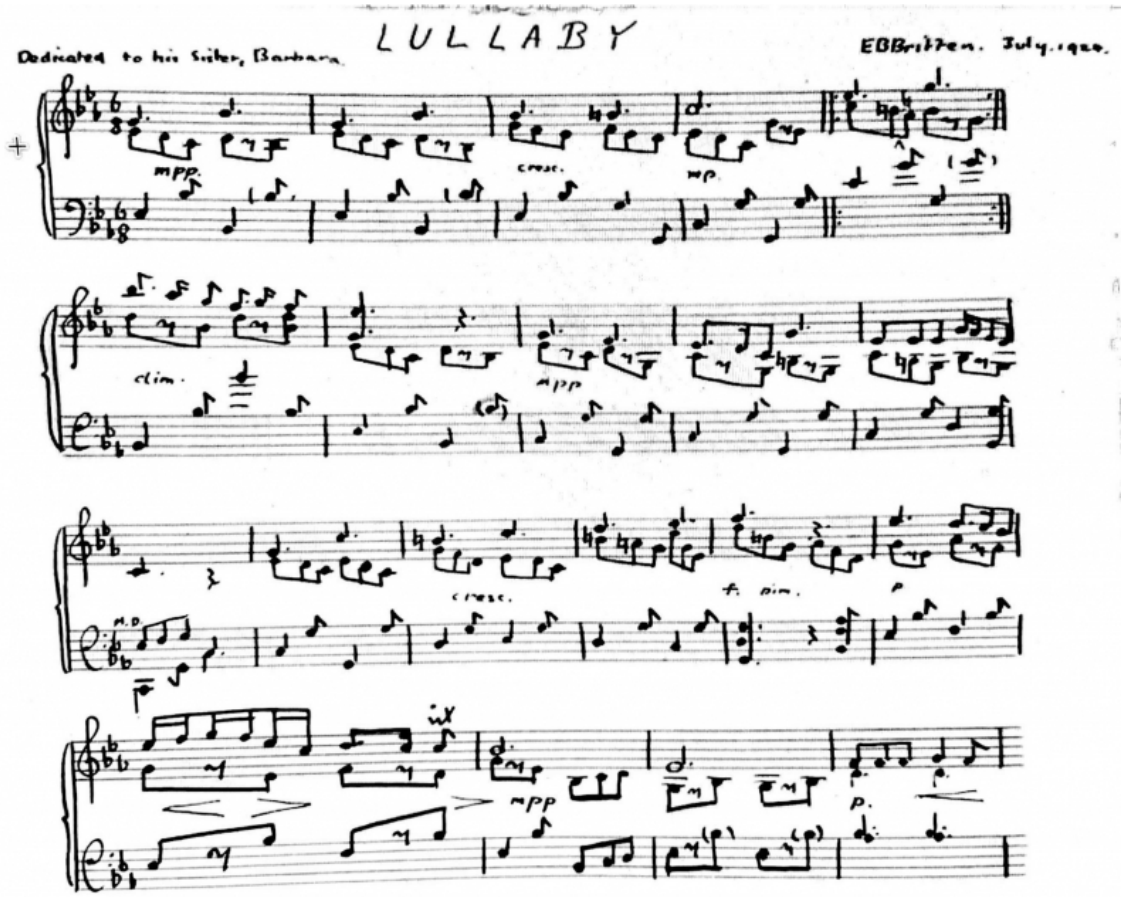
7 Benjamin Britten in one of the rare composers to have left behind a vast archive, now preserved in the Britten Pears Arts in Aldeburgh, containing an impressive amount of juvenilia (around 300 hundred compositions). From this still underexplored treasure, one can assess "the child mind at work" (Walker 2008) and in particular Britten's ease in style imitation.[3] Among the many sonatas, oratorios, symphonies and quartets written by Britten in his childhood are two lullabies, composed when he was eleven years old. The first is referenced as *Lullaby in E*, the second, *Lullaby in Eb*.

Fig. 1: "Lullaby in E", 1924 (Britten 1924a)



8 *Lullaby in E* (fig. 1) is a song for voice and piano. A rocking bass, a simple melody: the piece holds the characteristics of a lullaby. There is a Brahmsian taste to the writing. Indeed, at that stage, Brahms was one of Britten's favourites with Beethoven, but not for long. [4]

Fig. 2: "Lullaby in Eb", 1924 (Britten 1924b)



9 *Lullaby in Eb* (fig. 2) is for piano solo and shares the same features of lullaby writing. The music consists in the superposition of three lines, all rocking together, with the two upper ones presenting fragments of melody along the piece. Where the *Lullaby in E* presents some crossings and mistakes, here the score has been neatly copied out (fig. 1). The socio-musical communication between a lulling mother and a child is metamorphosed into an art piece composed by the child himself. These (almost-)neat manuscripts look as if they were about to be sent to the publisher. The child signed his name, and inscribed the dedication in a third-person account: "dedicated to his sister, Barbara" (fig. 2). Why does an eleven-year-old boy write a lullaby for his twenty-two-year-old sister? She had no child, but trained as a health visitor, which might have provoked the dedication. It is not impossible, but the third person phrasing hints more to an imitation of

the adult figure and posture of the composer. This is quite a paradox, for if Britten tried at eleven years old to step into adult clothes, he will revel in playing the child in his adult compositions. Then, if these lullabies are 'great-composer'-like pieces (i.e., if they try to imitate Brahms piano pieces, and his lullaby style), they are above all training ones. Written as an exercise for an apprentice composer, they take place in the midst of an array of educational activities which cadence the days of our prep-school boy.

10 "Children's compositions are always in danger of being condemned from one of two directions. If they resemble existing works, they can be dismissed as merely derivative; but if they fail to comply with the standards of the day, child composers are often assumed to be incompetent." (Cooper, 2009: 45) Indeed, as Barry Cooper's comments predict, Britten's early juvenilia is often neglected for being too conservative, in comparison to the works he composed under the guidance of Frank Bridge, whom he met later in 1927. Child art, since the pedagogy of Franz Cižek, or the seminal study of Corrado Ricci, gave interest to more and more artists at the turn of the 20th century (Malvern 1995; Ricci 1887). Modernism, in particular, is inspired in great lengths by child imagination (Fineberg 1997; 1998). And at the centre of it is Picasso, who "not only depicted childhood, but attempted to transform it into an instrument of artistic production" (Spies 1994: 11). However, even in Picasso's case, there is an inherent paradox in these child-art imitations: they imitate child art, whereas child art tries to imitate 'great masters':

> Not even my very first drawings could have hung in a show of children's art. They lacked the childish awkwardness, the naïve quality, almost completely... I passed the stage of these wonderful visions very quickly. At this young age I was drawing quite academically, so painstakingly and precisely that it horrifies me to think about it now... (quoted in Spies 1994: 19-20)

11 Britten's case is parallel to Picasso's: it is only when adult that his truly child-like artistry will be revealed. And in Britten's paradoxical shift of aesthetic from childhood seriousness to child-inspired grown-up music, the lullaby takes a central and pivotal place.

3. “Cradle Song”: discipline and mischief of the lullaby

12 A *Charm of Lullabies* is a song cycle for mezzo-soprano and piano composed in 1947-9. The juxtaposition of different poems on the same subject is typical of Britten’s technique of text compilation. According to Kevin Salfen, this anthologising technique entails a reference to Britten’s childhood and classroom mindsets:

> If one entertains John Bridcut’s proposals in *Britten’s Children* that the composer ‘never completed his schooldays’ [...] it becomes possible to understand the anthology’s importance in his creative life as an evergreen fascination with a genre central to his education. Framed thus, the anthology cycle becomes [...] an exploration and an explanation of the link between the young reader that Britten remembered and the adult composer he understood himself to be. More tangibly, the importance of various subgenres – gift book, reader, tome – for Britten’s anthology cycles situates these compositions in classrooms and in a bygone marketplace for poetry that the young composer physically inhabited. (Salfen 2014: 83)

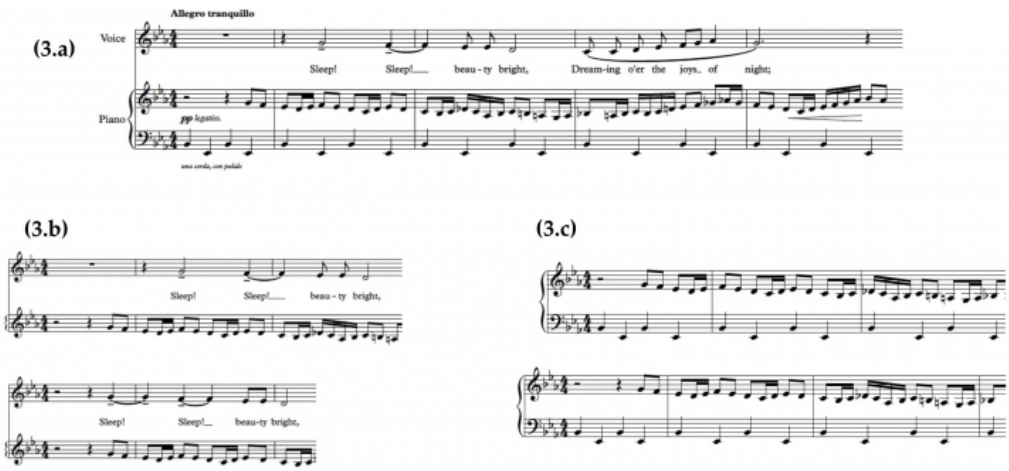
13 Britten’s selection is in fact taken straight out of an existing poetical anthology of the genre published in 1930 and called *A Book of Lullabies* (Budd & Partridge 1930).

> “Cradle Song” (William Blake)
>
> *Sleep*, *sleep*, beauty bright,
> Dreaming in the joys of night;
> Sleep, sleep; in thy sleep
> Little ***sorrows*** sit and ***weep***.
>
> **Sweet babe**, in thy face
> *Soft* desires I can trace,
> Secret joys and secret smiles,
> Little pretty infant wiles.
>
> As thy **softest limbs** I feel
> **Smiles** as of the morning steal

> O'er thy cheek, and o'er thy breast
> Where thy little heart doth *rest*.
>
> O the <u>cunning wiles</u> that creep
> In thy little heart asleep!
> When thy little heart doth wake,
> Then the ***dreadful lightings*** break.
>
> From thy cheek & from thy eye
> O'er the youthful harvest nigh
> Infant wiles & infant smiles
> **Heaven** & Earth of **peace**<u>beguiles</u>.

14 The lexical field used in the poem reveals four main themes: the sleep (indicated in the text *in italics*), the softness of the child (**in bold**), his cunning aspect (<u>underlined</u>) as well as a sorrowful mood (***bold italics***). On top of it, different oppositions are at stake: asleep or awake; the night and the day; the light of the day and the lightness of the child's smile; the innocent and the mischievous. Central to those lexical fields and oppositions is the face of the child, and in particular his eyes and his smile. There is a certain amount of mischief in childhood which William Blake captures with subtlety in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* from which "Cradle Song" had almost been part of. [5]

Fig. 3: "Cradle Songs", *A Charm of Lullabies*. (a) five first bars. (b) two versions of the voice/r.h. relation (Britten on top, 'correction' under). (c) two version of the piano part (Britten on top, 'correction' under)



15 The beginning of the song (fig. 3a) presents the traditional aspects of the lullaby which have been mentioned above: a rocking element (left hand of the piano, with an oscillating bass line in Eb major); a 'simple' tune at the voice; a general quiet atmosphere ('*pp*', '*tranquillo*'). However, the right hand displays a motif which pushes further the boundaries of the lullaby. It is made of sequential repetitions and five notes displacements. These repetitive patterns evoke Baroque-figure writing or, combined with the piano-playing gestural simplicity of the left-hand, to the piano exercise. Indeed, these sequences exemplify training-like elements. Firstly, in the repetition as a way of automatisation and consolidation of a technique by imitation. Secondly, in the use of displacements on the keyboard as a way to adapt the difficulty practised to many fingering situations and explore the possibilities of the instrument (compare for example with Graham Griffiths' analysis of Stravinsky's neoclassicism in terms of piano fingering techniques, in Griffiths 2013). The beginning of the right hand motif is fragmented, repeated, automatized and cleared of all other form of complexity than the skill developed by the exercise. It looks simple because there is only one thing to master. It belongs to a variation-driven educational genre: the study. Moreover, this didactic exercise calls to mind a household atmosphere, made of dedicated practice and motherly attention. Then, what does it mean to have a piano exercise inserted in the middle of a lullaby? There is of course a common reference to childhood in the exercise and the lullaby. Conversely, the effort made during the piano practicing is in contrast with the general situation of falling asleep. Besides, if the child is playing exercises on the piano, hearing those during a lullaby implies that the child is perhaps playing himself the piano which is rocking him. Is there a nostalgia of childhood sounds associated consciously or subconsciously to the lullaby from an adult perspective? There is at least a paradoxical echo with the cunning aspect expressed in the text which does not match the bodily discipline and the seriousness implied by an educational situation. As it appears, the juxtaposition of this exercise-like motif in the middle of the lullaby, not only opens various possibilities of meanings between the lullaby and the piano exercises, but also presents unresolved contradictions. Nothing in the surrounding elements helps to elucidate this relation (some text, composer's indication, logical relation between topics). It seems that there is a play, not only with the genre of the lullaby, but with the kind of confusing

meaning and ambivalent situations the juxtaposition of different topics creates.

16 This confusion is reinforced by other kinds of dissonance which are emanating from some 'mistakes' of writing. Child-art has been evoked earlier on, as well as errors and crossing-outs in Britten's child-composition sketches. In modern music, dissonance is a central aspect. However, if "Cradle Song" uses topics of music education and exercises, dissonances start to refer to 'wrong' notes because their topic is associated with trial-and-error practices. The concept of 'wrong note' is linked to Stravinsky's neoclassical output (see for example Joseph N. Straus' analyses, in Straus 1990, especially chapter 3). This notion, which cannot be conflated with a simple study of dissonance, emerges when recognisable styles or tropes are played with and distorted by composers. In Britten's music, this notion is still almost unexplored, apart from a recent and insightful semiotic analysis by Nicholas McKay on Miles' uncanny Mozart-like piano-playing scene in *The Turn of the Screw* (McKay 2020). If neo-classic situations allow one to consider these derivations, a piano-exercise topic, mixed with modernist dissonances, gives the same opportunity. "Cradle song" plays indeed with 'erroneous' relations between the three melodic lines. Firstly, the bass sounds like it is played the wrong way round, as if a child sight-read the notes correctly but confused the ascending gesture with a falling one. Fig. 3c juxtaposes two versions of the first bar of the piano: at the top, Britten's 'erroneous' version is given; and under it a 'correct' version where the bass is inverted and gives traditional counterpoint relations (6 - 5 - 8 which could have been harmonised with a cadential fourth and sixth chord). Similarly, between the right hand of the piano and the melody, there are many dissonances of seconds. In fig. 3b, two versions are again presented: at the top, Britten's one with the second dissonances between the two voices; and under it, a re-synchronised one which solves the dissonances. This last example shows equally the similarity between the piano exercise (r.h.) and the simple song of the lullaby (at the voice). As it appears, the two parts are in fact the same: the right hand anticipates the voice part and adorns it. There is a hidden canon between the piano-exercise of the child and the motherly tune. Moreover, the tune sung by the mezzo-soprano is derived from the child's exercises. The exercise genre is metamorphosed into a lullaby,

casting doubt on the agencies at hand. It is not clear anymore which one of the mother or the child is lulling the other.

17 The simple presence of the exercise opens possibilities for an emphasis of the dichotomies and ambivalences of the text, of Blake's mischievous child with a cunning smile. There is a sweet dissonance, both melodic and topic, between the lulling voice of the mother and the assiduous child playing the piano with 'wrong' notes. It expresses a whole web of paradoxes, where Britten uses the domestic aspect of the lullaby and of the piano-exercise to merge two apparently divergent musical genres in one entity.

4. Toy soldiers: lullaby, fairyland and military in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

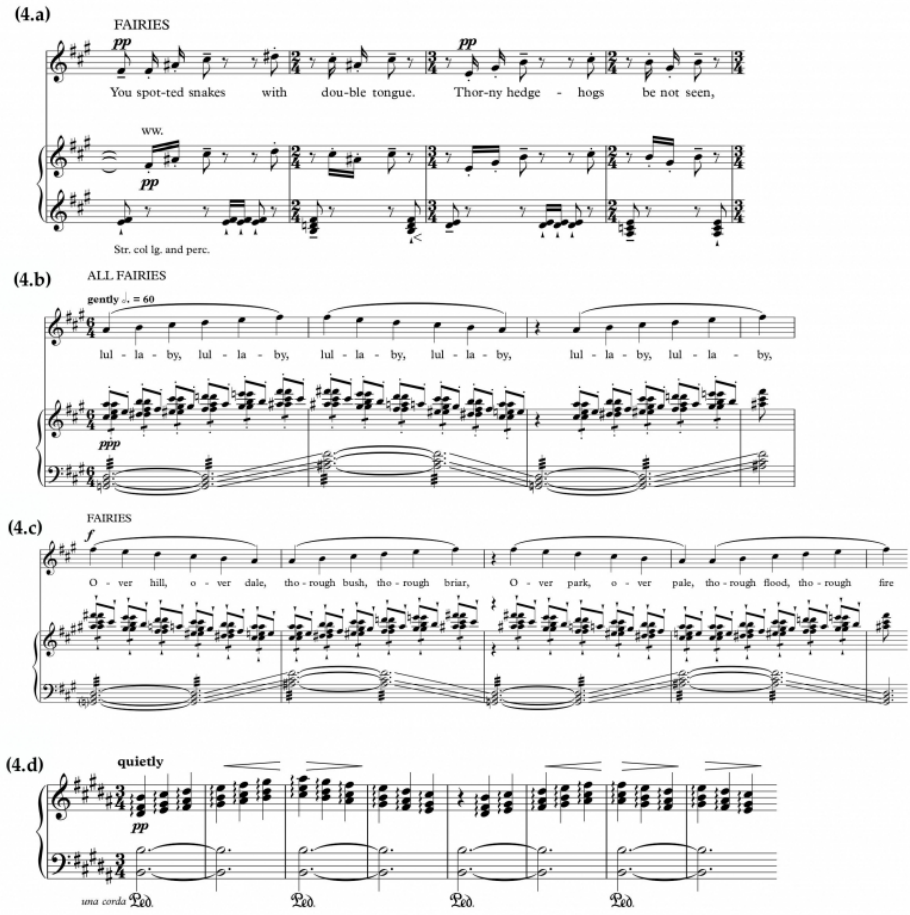
18 Also compiled in the Budd and Patridge anthology of Lullabies Britten owned, is "You spotted snakes", from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Budd & Patridge 1930: 52). The text is not included in *A Charm of Lullabies* but reappears in Britten's 1960 operatic version of Shakespeare's play. Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can easily be considered as a masterpiece of the lullaby genre. Themes, figures, rhythms, voice lines are constantly intertwined in rocking, lulling motifs, in a world of whimsical mirrors and magical inversion:

> The symmetry of Act I is emphasized by [...] the enclosure of the entire act between two symmetrically corresponding arias sung by Tytania's fairy henchmen. The first of these ('Over hill, over dale') contains a scalic pattern which appropriately returns in inversion as the 'lullaby' refrain of the second ('You spotted snakes'). (Cooke 1999: 136-137)

19 I propose here to examine these two fairy choruses: "Over hill, over dale" which opens the opera, and "You spotted snakes" which accompanies Queen Tytania's bedtime ceremony.

Fig 4: (a) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "You spotted snakes", beginning. (b) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "You spotted snakes", lullaby of the middle section. (c) *A*

***Midsummer Night's Dream*, "Over hill, over dale". (d) *Five Waltztes* (sic), n. 3 (1925)**



20 In "You spotted snakes" (fig. 4a), the music combines two opposing genres, the march and the lullaby, and in that way exposes the central paradox in Britten's choice of depiction of Shakespeare's fairies: both royal guards and magical creatures. Military trumpets with dactylic rhythms signal the heraldic character of the Queen's guard. The false relation between D and D# gives a playful flavour. The tune sung by the fairies is like a trumpet call too. Besides, the text is unrealistically fragmented, expressing the rigidity and mechanical aspect of the boy soldiers. The tune is nothing but lyrical; in non-sequiturs, and deprived of its humanness. The sentence is suspended by silences ("Thorny hedge…hogs") and the irregular meter breaks the fluidity of the rhythm. Moreover, the tune is constructed on a sequential melodic composition. The two first bars of fig. 4a are transposed strictly one tone lower on the two following ones. The motif then

carries on the rigid whole-tone sequence but is broken into an ascending version of the arpeggio, followed on mirrored motifs. This melodic construction evokes automatisation and mechanism, at the boundaries of tonality. The lines seem to create 'mistaken' behaviours in accordance to what should be expected in F# Major. The orchestration focuses on wooden sounds with the use of woodblocks and strings *col legno*. Pseudo-human machineries, wooden puppets with military tones: the song seems to assimilate the fairy guards to toy-soldiers. The use of 'wrong notes' links here together the strangeness of the fairy-world (with Purcellian false relations as a way to create a sensation of otherness) and the toy-like aspect of the boys, behaving awkwardly like humans without feeling natural in the role. Why do the fairies suddenly behave like puppets? I see two possible meanings. Firstly, the fairies play at war, they play to be machine-like soldiers, wooden toys protecting the Queen. Secondly, it expresses how they pragmatically *are* puppets in the plot, for the sentinel will be enchanted by Oberon's magic and turned away from its duties, leaving the sleeping queen unattended and vulnerable.

21 The second part of "You spotted snakes" (fig. 4b) is the lullaby itself, the same one heard in "Over hill over dale" at the beginning of the opera (fig. 4c). The orchestration is also caught between a world of dreams (harps, celesta, triangle, etc.) and a world of earthly militarism (snare drums, trumpets and trombone, woodwinds). Here are found the fundamental elements of a lullaby. Firstly: the rocking at the bass between two chords (the result of the 12-tone organisation of the overture). Secondly: a simple melody, descending and ascending (similar to the vocal line in "Cradle Song"). However, Britten plays in fig. 4c with the soothing aspect of a lullaby: it is *forte* when it should be *piano*; it is slow but made agitated with the addition of tremolos and quavers. Calm and excited, this music is ambiguous towards the lullaby. The genre is enriched by topics of fantasy and fairy-ness (tremolos, whimsical orchestration, glissandi), but also by military topics (see the orchestration, see the strength of the dynamics of the chorus sung by the boys). This lullaby is extended in two directions which seem to be opposite: a fairy world and a military world. These worlds resonate with polysemy in the following verse: "we do *wander* everywhere" (my italics). 'Wandering' echoes ambivalently the clear and organised march of soldiers (the guards) and the meandering fairy ways,

bodiless and ethereal. Through the lullaby is expressed the topic contradiction of the boy fairies: the magical Queen's guards, serious and whimsical by turns. To sing their Queen asleep is their duty. These child-adults are commanded to perform lullabies, which inverts the stereotypical mother-child relation of the genre. The sheltering household is transformed into a toy-like military world. Indeed, Britten's playful attitude to the musical genre collapses once more different topics into one. He accommodates the genre of the lullaby in order to explore contradictory meanings of the scenic situation.

22 Even more strikingly, the melodic line of the 'lullaby' recalls a theme in the third of the 5 *Walztes* (sic) composed when Britten was 10 to 13 years old and published by Faber Music in 1970 (fig. 4d).[6] The two melodies (compare fig. 4b-c and 4d) have a lot in common: the rhythm, the melodic line, the rest at the beginning of the second phrase which shifts the tune; the parallel chords which harmonise the melody. Surprisingly, the lullaby was then a waltz. Similar rhythms (often triple metre), rocking elements (the rocked body of the child, and the swaying of the dancer), a tuneful aspect: Britten plays with the boundaries between the two genres. Moreover, the scalic aspect of both melodies also refers to the music-exercise and seems to be taken from a textbook. This didactic context fosters, as in "Cradle song", the pseudo 'wrong' notes present in the melody. Also, the phrase shift provoked by the crotchet rest sounds like the chorus entered too late (while cunningly giving the trebles time to breathe, cf. fig. 4b and 4c). It puts the text at odds with the metre (even if this one is fleeting) and gives wrong textual accentuations. This kind of shift in accentuation is used by Stravinsky in two of Britten's favourite pieces: *Symphony of the Psalms*, or *Oedipus Rex*.

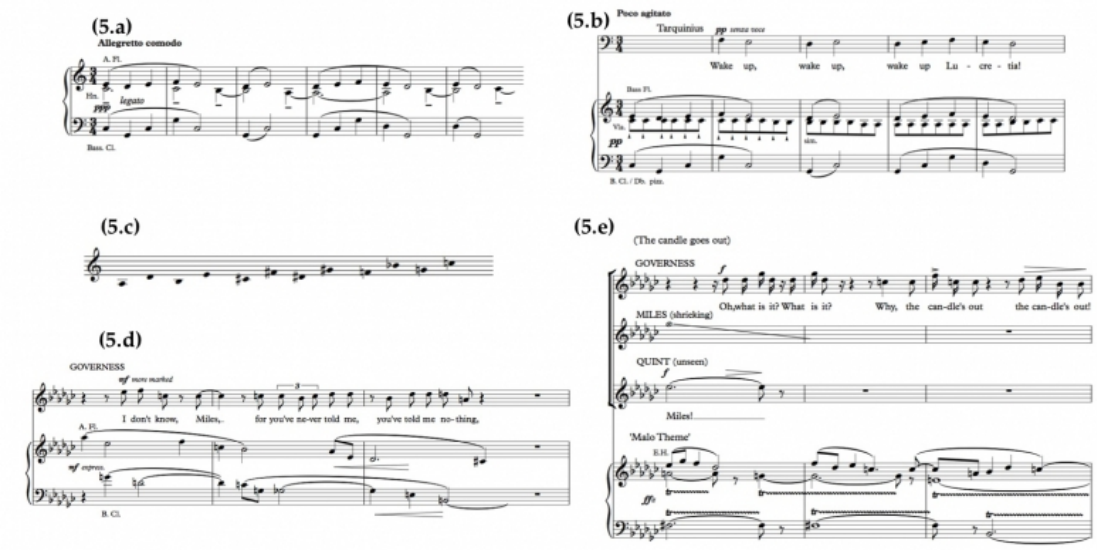
23 Britten composed a lullaby enriched by fairy music on one side, and military sounds on the other. It appeared that the melody of this lullaby reuses (consciously or not) the characteristics of a waltz composed by Britten at eleven years old. This lullaby, in its characteristics and its behaviour (its 'mistakes'), has something which refers again to music education and exercise-like material. The analysis of topics in Britten's music shows refined combinations of intricate genres and references endlessly intertwined. This gives to the lullaby genre a symbolic complexity when considered in this web of connotations. The childlike, the military, the waltz, the fairyland, the 'wrong' notes:

all contribute to a rich and paradoxical hermeneutic potential of Britten's lullaby. To the childlike references to play is echoed another interpretational game between the composer and the audience.

5. Lucretia and Miles: shadows by candlelight

24 Dreams and scenes of sleep (and the lullabies musically associated) are also present in more sombre operas by Britten. This is the case with *The Rape of Lucretia*. Before the dreadful moment of Lucretia's rape by Prince Tarquinius, Britten creates a quiet, comforting atmosphere describing Lucretia to sleep, unaware of the upcoming danger. While Lucretia is still asleep, the lullaby is sung by the Female Chorus which, on the Greek model, comments on the action on stage but takes no part in it. This lullaby is an historical comment, with hindsight, on what happened, about which it is too late to do anything. It shares at the same time the will to warn Lucretia, but also the desire to let her sleep, ultimate denial of the violence of the rape conveyed by the lullaby itself. This is the first time Britten chooses the combination of an alto flute and a bass clarinet to describe a nocturnal atmosphere (the duo reappears in the night scene of *Albert Herring* or in the *Spring Symphony*, describing the 'windless nights of June' in Auden's poem in Part II). "Both instruments have a curiously hollow timbre (partly because we tend to hear them against the brighter norm of the standard instruments), and the muted horn used here shares something of the same drained quality." (Evans 1979: 126) Those two frail sounds only accentuate the fragility of the situation and Lucretia's vulnerability. The music is of an extreme simplicity (fig. 5a). Three rocking lines make a quiet swaying counterpoint. In this sense, it recalls the *Lullaby in Eb* Britten wrote for his sister as a child (cf. fig. 2). To the three-voice counterpoint, the Female chorus adds a fourth line, doubled by the pure sound of harp harmonics. The ensemble gives a C major impression (more pan-diatonic than a clear functional harmony). The loose aspect of this 'C major' erupts from the independent logics of the counterpoint lines. The upper line for example has a particularly frail aspect, with its simple oscillation made of three notes.

Fig. 5: (a & b) *The Rape of Lucretia*, Lullaby, act 2 scene 1. (c) The 'screw theme'. (d) *The Turn of the Screw*, 'The Bedroom'. (e) *The Turn of the Screw*, 'The Bedroom', when the candle goes off.



25 This elementary motive resonates with the simplicity of the candle which burns next to Lucretia's bed. It works in small undulations, truncations, and inversions. Unfortunately, the apparent frailness hides a more threatening shadow; it is the tune on which Tarquinius will sing 'wake up Lucretia'. "This leads into an agitated version of the lullaby, with Tarquinius transforming the sleepy alto flute tune into an urgent 'wake up, wake up, Lucretia' against which the Female Chorus contradicts him in its line from the lullaby." (Howard 1969: 38) The simple tune is an urge to abandon sleep and dreams. It calls Lucretia to wake up in the midst of the terrors of reality. The lullaby becomes then more and more an ambivalent instrument of Tarquinius' agency. Lucretia's lullaby is his battlefield: "Only as he urges Lucretia to wake does his music make sinister advances to the lullaby genre, and the violence of the rape itself is anticipated by the way the lullaby's music yields to that of Tarquinius's arietta." (Whittall 1999: 95-112).

26 Reharsal 24 of the score manifests the paradox of Lucretia's lullaby. Two characters sing Lucretia asleep. One is Tarquinius, about to rape

her, and telling her to "wake up" with the lullaby motif. The lullaby is at this point of the opera more agitated indeed, with repeated notes in the viola (fig 5b). The second exhortation comes from the Female Chorus, a 'ghost' which is exterior to the actual action and is present only by theatrical convention to explain to the audience what is happening on stage. But, even its exhortation seems contradictory: "No! sleep and outrace Tarquinius' horse, and be with your Lord Collatinus". It is at the same time an encouragement to stay asleep, and to wake up and run to her husband. A kind of denial seems to be present in the scene: the lullaby, the Female Chorus' lulling tone, and her ambiguous entreaty, give the impression she wants to protect Lucretia of the imminent disaster by *not* warning her of the situation. Lucretia is trapped between those two ghosts, whose contrapuntal shadows are projected on her bedrooms' walls by candlelight. For shadows only aim to destroy the light to find their own peace, as hinted by Tarquinius startling comment: "To wake Lucretia with a kiss / Would put Tarquinius asleep awhile".

27 This situation recalls a scene from another opera by Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*. In the *Screw*, the ghostly presences of Mr. Quint and Miss Jessel haunt Bly manor and the two children, Miles and Flora. The Governess, newcomer and now in charge of the children's upbringing, chooses to endorse a heroic posture when she discovers the existence of the ghosts. But, the story, as it goes on, casts suspicion on the Governess's sanity and implies that the ghosts she sees might only reside in her own imagination, and out of her disturbing obsession on the children's innocence. In 'The Bedroom', fourth scene of the second act, the Governess comes to question Miles in his own room at night. The children stay evasive, but the ghost Mr. Quint musically appears through the eerie sound of the glockenspiel to which he is associated. [7] As in Lucretia's case, Miles' bedroom is surrounded by two threatening presences: Quint and the Governess (and again, one is not noticed by the other).

> When the duel – in Miles' mind – between Quint and the Governess threatens to become intolerable, the candle goes out; the Governess sings, 'O what is it?' to her earlier 'who is it?' phrase, and Miles replies as assertively as he does at the end of Act I [...]: 'Twas I who blew it, dear.' (Howard 1969: 144)

28 As in Lucretia's sleeping scene, the candle acts as a symbolic element. Tarquinius, who has a strange poetical move before the rape (which is parallel to Mr. Quint, the ghost-poet),[8] focuses on the image of the candle to express his desire towards Lucretia: "Within this frail crucible of light / Like a chrysalis contained / Within its silk oblivion / [to candle:] How lucky is this little light, / It knows her nakedness, / And when it's extinguished / It envelops her as darkness, / Then lies with her at night." (Herbert 1989: 124)

29 The candle encapsulates many aspects of Lucretia's lullaby. Its slow and slight oscillations are rhetorically figured in the musical counterpoint. It is also the burning flame of Taquinius' desire. The flame, in Tarquinius' lines, refers equivocally to Tarquinius and Lucretia at the same time. Indeed, the candle acts like a symbol of Lucretia's soul, whose life ends symbolically from the moment she is raped, from the moment Tarquinius cuts the candle with his knife. Even if it is Lucretia who finally kills herself, it is Tarquinius' knife which symbolically stabbed her that night. In Miles' case, those symbols are moreover confused, as it is unclear who blew the candle out. Miles claims to have done it. He self-interiorises the guilt: "Twas I who blew it" (sang on the music which accompanied the anti-climatic "I'm bad, aren't I?" of the end of Act I). When the candle is blown out, a *glissando* on the harp strikes as a gust of wind. This *glissando* is the same which accompanied earlier the sombre Yeats quotation sung by the ghosts, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned", again very ambiguous for it can mean either that innocence (Miles) is drowned (dead), or on the contrary that the ceremonial corruption of Miles has failed.

30 The symbolic goes even further, for it is the Governess' own candle which is blown out, the Gothic-story-like candle with which she came, the light Miles saw under his door, the desiring soul he himself might have blown out. The music which accompanies Miles' distress is made, as in Lucretia's case, of the contrapuntal shadows of an alto flute and a bass clarinet (fig. 5d) which convey a nocturnal a ghostly quality. The heterophonic duet between the two instruments is mostly made of fourth intervals. Yet, in *The Turn of the Screw*, the whole opera is constructed on the 'screw' theme, a dodecaphonic fourth interval succession (fig. 5c). All vocal lines of the *Screw* are polluted by the shape of the 'screw theme', all characters' utterances give

the impression they answer to those melodic threads like puppets, as analysed by Philip Rupprecht (2001: 170-171):

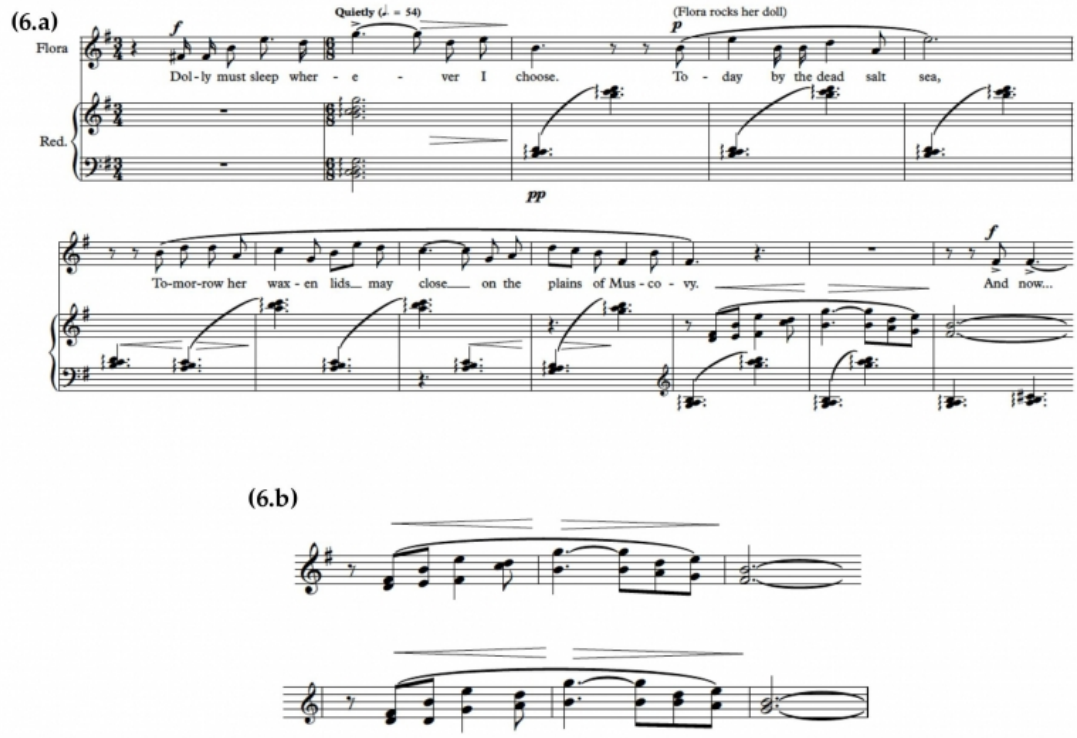
> The Governess, the ghosts, and the children are all enveloped by the theme's characteristic shape, but the references are subliminal [...]. In such fleeting forms, the Screw theme, in and of itself, is not a menace. Its rising fourths and fifths are simply a saturating influence at all points in the drama.

31 The quiet and rocking atmosphere of this creeping duet is perhaps not enough to identify it fully as a lullaby. However, another motif, "Malo", takes a lullaby quality in this scene. Miles sings his song "Malo", a simple and swaying tune, as if he wanted to reassure himself in the dark. "Malo" was not a lullaby to start with, but acts like one in this new context. It was in act 1 a child-composition, a mnemonic song composed by Miles to memorise his Latin. In 'The Bedroom', this song (first a child-art genre), *becomes* a lullaby. The ease with which this metamorphose is operated can be explained by the song's formal characteristics, already close to the ones of a lullaby: a simple melody, rocking figures, and quiet mode of utterance. The pragmatic shift implied by the context tropes "Malo" into a lullaby, a child's bedtime song. This song appears in the orchestra, at the apex of tension, when the candle is out (fig. 5c). "Malo" is an ambiguous song itself, which plays on the meanings of the Latin word and makes of Miles a bad child and a victim at the same time. And yet, it is Miles' own song which seems to be the only reassuring presence at that traumatising moment. But, did Miles really invented it, or is it from ghostly inspiration? Or, even more, is it an educational exercise inspired by the Governess, who says, after first hearing it in Act 1: "what a funny song, did I teach you that?". As with the candle, "Malo", as a lullaby, is a double-faced and untrustworthy element. It is at the same time a psychological reassurance and a smoke screen which diverts one's intention from the danger to only weaken the victim even more by hiding the dangerous shadows. The candle tries perhaps to reveal the shadows hidden in those lulling arms. For it is only by candlelight that shadows appear.

6. Uncanny dolls: Flora's lullaby in *The Turn of the Screw*

32 There is another moment in *The Turn of the Screw* where Flora, Miles' sister, sings a lullaby to her doll. After being accompanied to the lake by the Governess, she now sits and sings. "Dolly must sleep wherever you choose" cues the Governess, with a melodic line still infused with screw-like fourth intervals, always creeping in the shadows, even of a calm and serene break by the lake. Flora takes the song over, on the same tune (fig. 7a).

Fig. 6: Flora's lullaby, *The Turn of the Screw*, Act 1 Scene 7. (a) first bars. (b) Britten's and "corrected" version of the orchestral comment



33 Is this an improvisation by Flora? Or a song that both her and the Governess know? Has it been taught by the Governess herself? As in Miles' song "Malo", the authorship of the song is doubtful. It is even more questioned when is discovered that Miss Jessel (the second ghost of the story and mirror of the dreadful Mr. Quint) was probably

hidden in the lake the whole time of the song. Is Flora enchanted by Miss Jessel? Or perhaps does she sing out of fear, like Miles on his bed, to reassure herself?

34 As the candle was a central and ambiguous object which revealed many shadows around Lucretia and Miles, Flora's doll acts in a same polysemous way. It is the Winnicottian 'transitional object' (Winnicott 1953) which offers security and reassurance, object she paradoxically comforts herself through her lullaby, mimicking a mother's care**.** Besides**,** the doll symbolically reveals how much Flora is a doll herself in that situation, under the pressure of the adults and ghosts (the Governess and Miss Jessel). But, as always in the *Screw*, the reverse might also be true: when Flora lulls her doll, does she not lull the Governess herself out of the suspicion of the presence of Miss Jessel? At the same time, she can be perceived as mesmerising the audience with a beautiful song and presenting herself as an innocent creature. Or else, she could be conjuring the ghost through her malicious song. 'Who is the doll?' seems to be the fundamental question of the scene. It could be Flora, the Governess, Miss Jessel, or even the spectator.

35 The lullaby shares the traditional musical elements analysed in the previous pieces. As it can be observed in fig. 6a, a rocking figure is present in the orchestra, made clashing seconds and harmonic glittering sounds. This oscillation is ambivalent for it evokes at once the rocking of the doll and watery gestures. Moreover, the accompaniment of the song slowly metamorphoses into Miss Jessel's dreadful motif when the lullaby ends. This simple transition might imply a true correlation. Besides, as with the bedroom shadows, the omnipresence of the screw theme asks a central question, observed by Tzetan Todorov: "[T]he secret in Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and powerful force which set the whole present machinery of the narrative in motion." (quoted in Rupprecht 2001: 171) Moreover, secret keeping, according to Christopher Chowrimootoo, is like a game: "One might even think of the opera's formal patterns and connections as a kind of Gothic game – a Radcliffean secret, in which underlying meaning and logic is constantly toyed with, and just as constantly undermined." (Chowrimootoo 2018: 108). Mixed with the fourth-interval writing, the diatonic tone also evokes musical exercises for children.

Again, it resonates with the Jamesian atmosphere described by Philip Rupprecht (2001: 167):

> In fashioning children's songs as naïve diatonic music that interacts with a far more complex-sounding orchestral backdrop, Britten finds an aural equivalent for the double-sidedness of Jamesian screens, curtains, and tapestries. We hear childhood simplicity, and we hear too a mendacious undertow that speaks of corruption.

36 The rocking accompaniment looks like it is an improvisation on the white keys of a keyboard. With its clusters, it reminds one of a child experimenting on their household piano. Which brings us back to the notion of 'wrong' note, once again central to the lullaby. These didactic 'errors' take on even more sinister undertones in a ghostly context. Something 'uncanny' is at play. The concept, first develop by Freud, expresses a sudden fear of the presence of a supernatural element, and a panicked challenge of the rationality of the world. The uncanny is a doubt, not a certainty. It is situated where an object is both familiar and alien, like the doll is to Flora. It develops in a world of ambiguities and ambivalences, with double-faced objects and polysemous symbols. For Freud, when fiction plays with the boundaries of the real and the supernatural, the uncanny finds a powerful place. And this scene, with its diatonic colours, pretends indeed to be realistic. Therefore, 'wrong' notes produce in *The Turn of the Screw* a startling and uncanny atmosphere, and the 4^{th} intervals and the Screw-driven vocal utterances are central to it. They pervade also in the orchestral line. The following orchestral comment for example (fig. 6b) shows the uncanny effect of 'wrong notes' implied by 4^{th} relations (Britten's 'wrong' version is above; a more traditional uncanny-free G major counterpoint is proposed at the bottom). Similarly, the introductory chord installs a disturbed G major, with added C, and summarises many topic ambiguities of this piece: the accompaniment of a lullaby, with watery references, written like a simple diatonic piece with uncanny undertones given by dissonances and 4^{th} and 5^{th} relations. In Lucretia's and Miles' case, the lullaby manifested itself as a protection while not being one (putting its *protégés* into danger). Similarly, the apparent innocence of Flora's games only accentuates a terrifying situation. The lullaby (like the lake) hides terrors which might emerge at any moment.

Conclusion

37 The lullaby, connected in Britten's childhood to the intersection of motherly protection, trauma and violence, is observed in his later work in various ambiguous ways: confronting body discipline and state of sleep; as a polysemous uncanny channel; as a warning and denial. In Britten's works, the lullaby flirts with protection and danger as well as it distorts the mother-child stereotypical relation of the lullaby, blurred by adult-like children figures and childlike-adult ones. Britten himself relished in this double-faced aspect as he never stopped promoting his own child-adult identity, with the late publication of juvenilia or through his playful aesthetic. For, ultimately, Britten plays with music materials, topics, and meaning to put the listener in a state of uncertainty and insecurity. And he does so with a smile, both innocent and cruel.

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1 "Un enfant dans le noir, saisi par la peur, se rassure en chantonnant. Il marche, s'arrête au gré de sa chanson. Celle-ci est comme l'esquisse d'un centre stable et calme, stabilisant et calmant, au sein du chaos." (my translation).

2 "Causes of Deaths over 100 years", Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom, 18 September 2017 (www.ons.gov.uk). Antisera were discovered in the 1920s (with limited effectiveness), sulphonamides in the 1930s and penicillin only in the early 1940s (Mackenbach, 2020: 177).

3 Beethoven and Mozart to start with, but also Victorian or Edwardian music he must have been familiar with: sung by his mother on the harp, heard during the choir rehearsals, enjoyed when walking pass the brass band of brigadiers on the Lowestoft South Pier, or even, and perhaps most of all, through the pedagogical pieces for piano training he must have encountered as a child (the gramophone entered the Britten family only from 1930).

4 "Once I adored them. Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen I knew every note of Beethoven and Brahms. [...] But I think in a sense I never forgave them for having led me astray in my own particular musical thinking and natural inclinations." (Britten, quoted in Kildea, 2003: 228).

5 The song was intended as a mirrored contrast to the "Cradle Song" of *Songs of Innocence*, but was not part of the final publication. The poem can be found in Blake's notebooks and sketches. Besides, the same text has been

used by Britten in 1938 for a soprano, contralto and piano piece (A *Cradle Song*: *Sleep, Beauty Bright*).

6 Britten's misspelling has been kept by the publisher Faber Music, along with this comment by Britten "In 1925 came 10 Walztes, including a Petite Valse – it seems sad that my French spelling was better than my English. Several of them were written before that, and since the composer was a very ordinary little boy, they are all pretty juvenile (here was no Mozart, I fear). But perhaps they may be useful for the young or inexperienced to practise; certainly my publisher and I hope so." Here again, Britten seems proud of his childhood mistakes.

7 He first was accompanied by the celesta, but both instruments share the same ethereal sound, contrary to the low-pitched and earthly sounds of Miss Jessel (a clever inversion of gender expectations).

8 See the scene 'At Night' of the *Screw*, when Mr. Quint enchants Miles with the following mysterious metaphorical verses: "I'm all things strange and bold / The riderless horse, snorting, stamping on the hard sea sand / The hero highwayman plundering the land / I am King Midas with gold in his hands".

English

Britten's playful aesthetic puts the child at the centre of many of his works. The lullaby is a genre which is therefore omnipresent. Through some case studies (A *Charm of Lullabies*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Turn of the Screw*, A *Midsummer Night's Dream*), this article considers the ways Britten tests the semiotic boundaries of the lullaby to create many ambiguous situations. With the transposition of a social and musical activity (to lull a child to sleep) on stage, Britten's work blurs the mother-child relation by many inversions, and in particular makes of the child an ambivalent adult-like figure. The lullaby becomes paradoxically a protection and a luring danger. The article also reconsiders Britten's own relation with his mother as well as it analyses the child-art and aesthetical implications of his juvenilia.

Français

L'esthétique ludique de Britten place l'enfant au centre d'un grand nombre de ses œuvres. La berceuse est un genre qui est donc omniprésent. À travers quelques études de cas (A *Charm of Lullabies*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Turn of the Screw*, A *Midsummer Night's Dream*), cet article examine la manière dont Britten joue à tester les frontières sémiotiques de la berceuse pour créer de nombreuses situations ambiguës. Avec la transposition sur scène d'une activité socio-musicale (endormir un enfant), l'œuvre de Britten

brouille la relation mère-enfant par de nombreuses inversions, et fait notamment de l'enfant une figure ambivalente de type adulte. La berceuse devient, de manière paradoxale, une protection et un danger attirant. L'article reconsidère également la relation de Britten avec sa mère et analyse l'art enfantin et les implications esthétiques de ses œuvres d'enfance.

Mots-clés
Britten (Benjamin), berceuse, œuvres de jeunesse, mère-enfant, topos

Keywords
Britten (Benjamin), lullaby, juvenilia, mother-child, topics

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