

- *Dramatic entry music - first statement of the theme*
- Long heralded as a piece educational on many levels, Benjamin Britten's work *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* continues to inspire and instruct people with any level of musical ability today. Orchestras frequently use the piece in concerts for youth or to make a program more accessible to everyone.
- While the piece is aurally pleasing to most listeners and achieves its primary goal of instructing on the names of the instruments and their sounds, subtle layers of complexity provide interest for those more advanced in musical study.
- The piece originated in an educational film titled *Instruments of the Orchestra*<sup>1</sup>
- Following WWII, initiatives to better the British people included introducing public secondary schools, health and food support for underprivileged children, and *widespread democratization of high art*, with the goal of nourishing a moral and productive populace.<sup>2</sup>
- To this effect, the BBC, the primary radio station of the time, maintained relatively high percentages of classical music on the air. They created such programs as orchestral concerts and music talks for schools, preceded with introductions of each instrument and their sound for recognition during the piece of music.<sup>3</sup>
- With technologies developing to allow sound to accompany film, a logical next step included visual depictions of the instruments accompanying a composition purpose-made to showcase the individual instruments<sup>4</sup>
- Pressure was put on the British government to continue funding educational films after WWII, but on aspects of culture less focused upon in school; beyond vocational training and towards "rational recreation" and "enlightened leisure." The first to be produced was

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Keller, Milein Cosman, Christopher Wintle, A. M. Garnham, Ines Schlenker, and Kate Hopkins. *Britten: essays, letters and opera guides* (London: Plumbago Books, 2013), 7:

*Discovering Music, Britten: Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (Op. 34)*. Directed by Charles Hazlewood (BBC, May 2014), accessed January 22, 2018. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01zfpk0>:

Betsy Schwarm, "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed January 22, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Kate Guthrie, "Democratizing Art: Music Education in Postwar Britain," *The Musical Quarterly*, Volume 97, Issue 4 (December 2014): 575–615, <https://doi-org.proxyiuub.uits.iu.edu/10.1093/musqtl/gdv001>

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 580, 597:

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Keller, Milein Cosman, Christopher Wintle, A. M. Garnham, Ines Schlenker, and Kate Hopkins. *Britten: essays, letters and opera guides* (London: Plumbago Books, 2013), 7:

Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 577.

*Instruments of the Orchestra*, with music commissioned specially for the film, written by Benjamin Britten.<sup>5</sup>

- Britten chose to use Henry Purcell's Rondo theme from his Abdelazer Suite as a basis for the work and, though some thought this was an easy way out of composing, his choice to reference a British composer was praised by others as a demonstration of his skill in the art of variation, and a link as being the greatest British composer since Purcell.<sup>6</sup>
  - Here is Purcell's original theme: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVivtti-n-w>
- Pamphlets given to the schools in addition to the film played on this post-war nationalist narrative in a biography of Britten, and aided discussion with students on topics such as how the different instruments work, and a history of theme and variations form.<sup>7</sup>
- While the goal for the film was to educate in schools, the producers were able to reach the wider public as well through a contract with MGM showing the film in theatres over 700 times across the nation in the first year. Britten also created a concert-hall adaptation of the work, titled "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra," adding optional scripted commentary written by Eric Crozier, as another means of education and to draw more people to classical concerts.<sup>8</sup>
- The concert version was actually premiered first, and, while the music was well received, the name caused consternation among critics. Some thought the name frivolous and preferred the secondary one - Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Henry Purcell, while others appreciated both a composer willing to write less serious music and his mixture of education and entertainment. Britten himself was adamant in the educational intention of this piece, and for that to remain obvious.<sup>9</sup>
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- Although the primary intent of the piece was to instruct on the instruments of the orchestra, many factors (quote) "[allow] listeners to engage with the music on a variety of

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<sup>5</sup> Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 578, 589"

<sup>6</sup> Britannica, *Ibid.*:

"The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell)." Norton Interactive Listening Guide. 2015. Accessed January 22, 2018. [https://www.norton.com/college/music/ilg/ENJ\\_12/BrittenYoungPersonsGuide.html](https://www.norton.com/college/music/ilg/ENJ_12/BrittenYoungPersonsGuide.html):

Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 600.

<sup>7</sup> Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 599

<sup>8</sup> Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 598-9:

Keller, *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>9</sup> Keller, *Ibid.*, 7:

Britannica, *Ibid.*:

Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 599:

BBC, *Ibid.*

levels, depending on their individual experience and knowledge,” (end quote) as Kate Guthrie discusses in her article *Democratizing Art: Music Education in Post-War Britain*.<sup>10</sup>

- Six original statements of the theme allow a listener to become well acquainted with it, and each of the instrument families (woodwinds, brass, strings, and percussion) before thirteen variations demonstrate individual instrument characters, as is a strength in many of Britten’s compositions.<sup>11</sup>
- From the BBC’s documentary on the work, (quote) “The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra is much more than the sum of its parts; what is undeniably elegant, seemingly simple and direct, belies astonishing understanding and facility. Britten was a master orchestrator, and his complete understanding of just what instruments can and can’t do led to nothing less than a virtuoso orchestral showpiece.”<sup>12</sup> (end quote)
  - Some variations introduce other elements, for example, the violin variation is in the form of a polonaise, supported by rhythms in the low brass.
  - **MUSIC:** part of violin theme
  - Some instruments play off of their individual histories
    - The French horn, for example, has its origins in hunting horn calls.
      - Their variation is based on accented figures and the interval of fourth, and starts with one, then two, then four horns like hunters finding each other in the woods.
      - **MUSIC:** part of French horn theme
    - The trumpet has been used in militaries for centuries, for signaling and to cut through the roar of battle.
      - This variation employs their ease of staccato and the addition of snare drum adds to the martial feeling. By passing off the melody and growing louder and softer, the music seems to represent the movement of armies on a battlefield.
      - **MUSIC:** part of trumpet theme
    - The variation for the trombones and tuba references their traditions in ceremonial and church settings, using a rich, noble, and blended, almost choral, sound. **MUSIC:** part of trombone/tuba theme
  - Other instruments dispel stereotypes, most notably the bass and bassoon

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<sup>10</sup> Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 603

Hans Keller, Milein Cosman, Christopher Wintle, A. M. Garnham, Ines Schlenker, and Kate Hopkins. *Britten: essays, letters and opera guides* (London: Plumbago Books, 2013), 1-8

<sup>11</sup> "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell)." Norton Interactive Listening Guide. 2015. Accessed January 22, 2018. [https://www.norton.com/college/music/ilg/ENJ\\_12/BrittenYoungPersonsGuide.html](https://www.norton.com/college/music/ilg/ENJ_12/BrittenYoungPersonsGuide.html):

Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 580.

Keller, *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>12</sup> BBC, *Ibid.*

- The bassoon is not just comedic, but has a wide range of timbres that can help to blend the sounds of other instruments or contrast against an accompaniment
- In most music, the double bass is, well the bass for other instruments, but not seen as agile with quick notes. Here, its melody starts in a softly lumbering manner, **MUSIC**: part of bass theme
- then speeds up with a three octave range display at end - finishing on the G above middle C! **MUSIC**: bass scale
- For advanced listeners, the theme and variations form means more than just a parade of instruments, but also an increase in complexity throughout the piece, venturing into distantly related keys which have 4 or 5 notes different in the scale out of 7, and a final fugue layering all the instruments<sup>13</sup>
- Hans Keller, in his book *Britten: essays, letters and opera guides*, states that (quote) “The composition is not only brilliant and witty, but also - beautiful. Needless to say, it is among the best music that has ever been written for the cinema, and one may add that it is not only a young person’s guide to the orchestra, but also... a young composer’s guide to orchestration.”<sup>14</sup> (end quote)
- As such, we can look at Britten’s use of accompaniment for each variation as a means of instruction towards instrumentation and styling that work well together, under the categories: matching, contrasting, aiding, and switching roles.
  - Matching
    - During the first variation, the triangle and high tremolos in the strings help to match the brilliance of the flute, **MUSIC**: part of flute theme
    - while in the harp variation, pianissimo cymbal scrapes and strings tremoloing low in their ranges add to the shimmering, magical sense of the harp without covering it. **MUSIC**: part of harp theme
  - Contrasting
    - The timbre of the oboe is easily able to cut through even a thick string texture, **MUSIC**: part of oboe theme
    - while the clarinet’s more mellow sound is juxtaposed against simple and playful chords in the tuba and low strings, so as not to hide the clarinet’s wide range **MUSIC**: part of clarinet theme
  - Aiding
    - While the bassoon can be forceful, its non-directional nature puts it at a slight disadvantage in a march-like setting. The snare drum uses no snares and the strings play low in their ranges so as not to cover the upper harmonics of the bassoon
    - Most percussion is non-pitched, making carrying a melody challenging, but this is solved by accompaniment from other orchestral instruments,

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Kildea, *Benjamin Britten: a life in the twentieth century* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 35; Guthrie, *Ibid.*, 580-586.

<sup>14</sup> Keller, *Ibid.*, 7

such as harmonics in the violins making the triangle seem somewhat pitched **MUSIC:** triangle part of percussion theme

- Switching roles
  - The cello, trombones, and tuba most often play supporting roles, so who supports and accompanies them? In the cello variation, the horns function as the bass, and the clarinet accompanies low in its range, while in the trombone and tuba variation, others finally play the offbeats(!). **MUSIC:** part of trombone/tuba theme
- It is not uncommon to end a set of variations with a fugue, but Britten takes it to the next level by using 13 instruments, each entering in the order of the variations.
- The piccolo starts with a variation of the theme, then the flute comes in a fifth lower with the same variation, a fifth down for the oboe, then clarinet, then bassoon. Let's listen to a few of these entrances **MUSIC:** part of fugue
- The violin can't start a fifth lower than the bassoon, so instead it restarts higher in its range, breaking the pattern of descending fifths. The second violins come in before the first violins end in a technique called stretto, and they are *also* not a fifth lower, but only a second.
- As each instrument enters, Britten continues to shift between key centers to allow for each instrument's range, but he also changes the fugue subject in earlier instrument families towards accompaniment and emphasis to make space for the new arrivals, for example the harp. **MUSIC:** harp section of fugue
- When Purcell's grand theme arrives again, it is played triumphantly in the brass at half tempo while the winds and strings continue to play the layers of variations underneath.
- These many layers of instruments are playing against each other in polyrhythm, with two against three beats in the same amount of time, adding yet a further layer of complexity.<sup>15</sup>
- While I encourage everyone to listen to this piece in its entirety, let's listen to this final statement of Purcell's grand theme, with special attention to the theme in the brass against the variations in winds and strings.
- **MUSIC:** final statement of the theme
- With Britten's complex and detailed Theme and Variations form, his ventures into various keys and styles within each theme, and his careful treatment of accompanying instruments throughout, not only is this a guide to young listeners, but also young composers, and it is accessible to people of a wide range of musical ability, or lack thereof.<sup>16</sup>
- Henry Purcell's original theme is transformed into variations for each instrument, showcasing differing tones and registers before putting the pieces together in a fugue. An optional narration introduces each section, connecting names with instruments, the

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<sup>15</sup> Kildea, *Ibid.*, 35

<sup>16</sup> Keller, *Ibid.*, 7.

form of 'theme and variations' provides further interest and levels of understanding, and the powerful melody often raises goosebumps! With origins in education and sustained appreciation since its premiere, this piece continues to instruct listeners of all ages on varied musical topics.

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