

BALINESE MUSIC: FROM SHEER EXOTICISM TO ESSENTIAL INSTRUMENT OF DRAMATIC AND ARTISTIC REFLECTION IN THE WORKS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN

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SUMMARY. The works of Benjamin Britten, one of the leading figures in 20th century British composition, reflect a subtle yet sustained engagement with the musical traditions of the Far East. Although Benjamin Britten cannot be considered an ethnomusicologist in the strict sense, he nonetheless adopted a receptive and intellectually engaged attitude toward Asian cultural traditions, particularly those of Indonesia. The present study investigates the impact of Balinese musical structures on the compositional syntax of Benjamin Britten, examining the ways in which these structures move beyond the framework of Western exoticism to become elements of a genuine transcultural syntax. Through detailed analysis of the technical and expressive mechanisms employed by the composer, this research seeks to demonstrate how such influences are integrated at both structural and aesthetic levels. Particular attention is devoted to the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, a composition in which the influence of Balinese music in general – and of the gamelan in particular – is among the most explicit and readily discernible. These musical influences contribute to the construction of a ritualized dramaturgy in which time is perceived cyclically, and emotional expression is mediated through a symbolic, almost liturgical distance. The semantic and hermeneutic dimensions of the work reveal distinctive features, demonstrating that in *The Prince of the Pagodas* Benjamin Britten transforms his experience of Balinese music into a Western orchestral idiom. He employs repetitiveness, stratified texture, and rhythmic vitality of the gamelan not as mere imitation, but as a means of innovating and reshaping his own compositional language.

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Thus, music, conceived as a complex symbolic idiom, may function as a meditation on the human condition, on intercultural interaction, and on the transformative potential of artistic creation.

Keywords: Benjamin Britten, Balinese music, gamelan, musical syntax, exoticism, cultural hybridity, transculturality

1. Introduction

Music composition in the 20th century represented, on the one hand, a natural evolution toward modernism and the avant-garde, while on the other hand it constituted an opportune moment for the rearticulation of the fundamental principles of classical musical composition. Music became increasingly focused on timbre, texture, and temporal structure, breaking free from the traditional constraints of classical tonality and formal organization. The entire period was characterized by stylistic pluralism and radical experimentation, as composers explored new idioms, harmonic and rhythmic systems, often drawing inspiration from non-European musical traditions as significant sources of aesthetic renewal.

The influence of exoticism manifested in numerous works, such as *Lakmé* (1883) by Léo Delibes or *Le roi de Lahore* (1877) by Jules Massenet, both operas being set in India. In contrast, *Le Cid* (1885) by Jules Massenet evokes a different type of exoticism, the composer drawing on historical and legendary material associated with medieval Spain. The encounter of Claude Debussy, a central figure of musical Impressionism, with the Javanese gamelan at the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, had a significant influence on his compositional idiom. For example, in *Pagodes* (1903), Debussy developed a distinctive compositional style through the creative fusion of Impressionist harmonic language with pentatonic modal structures, the orchestral treatment of timbre aimed at evoking Asian instrumental sonorities, and the polyrhythmic superpositions suggestive of the gamelan ensemble.

An equally important figure of the French compositional school, Olivier Messiaen proposed an original conception of the musical language, reflecting the influence of Christian spirituality, the study of non-European rhythmic systems, and the composer's exploration of sonic color. Olivier Messiaen's interest in the Indian *tāla*, a cyclical rhythmic system, led him to employ complex rhythmic configurations frequently characterized by asymmetry and irregularity, including additive rhythmic patterns, non-retrogradable rhythms, and rhythmic augmentation. Through these procedures, musical time is conceived not as a linear succession, but as a suspended, eternal reality. For

example, in the composition *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* (1941), Messiaen devices a spiritual conception regarding time, in which music becomes a vehicle for transcending conventional temporal perception, reflecting the theological idea of Divine eternity.

In contrast, in the oeuvre of the stylistically protean Igor Stravinsky, one encounters an exceptional diversity of sources of inspiration, reflected in the radical stylistic transformations that characterize his career, ranging from the archaic and ritualistic influences of Eastern European folklore to Western musical traditions and the modern compositional techniques of the 20th century. Each of these stylistic orientations is reinterpreted within a highly personal musical idiom, marked by objectivity, formal clarity, and rhythmic innovation. In *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), Igor Stravinsky elevates rhythm to the level of primary structural principle, while the musical discourse acquires an archaic, almost primordial dimension, evoking the concept of *ritual* found in many non-Western cultural traditions. Although the compositional sources are not directly Asian, the extra-European principles of cyclical temporality and collective sonic construction are clearly present.⁴

In this context also stands Benjamin Britten, a controversial musical personality who cultivated a renewed approach to traditional music composition, revitalizing classical forms while demonstrating remarkable inventiveness in the treatment of thematic material, rhythm, and orchestral color, as well as exceptional skill in the relationship between text and melody.⁵

The present study investigates the impact of Balinese musical structures on the compositional syntax of Benjamin Britten, examining the manner in which these structures transcend the confines of Western exoticism and evolve into a genuine transcultural musical syntax. The originality of this research lies in the observation that, in most musicological studies, Balinese influence is primarily approached through the lens of exoticism, often being interpreted as a source of timbral color and sonic atmosphere intended to evoke cultural otherness. In this context, elements associated with the gamelan – such as metallic sonorities, modal configurations, or repetitive rhythmic patterns – are frequently regarded as decorative surface features of the musical discourse, without fundamentally altering the internal logic of the composition. However, such an approach risks underestimating the profound impact of Balinese musical thought on Western composition in the case of Benjamin Britten. In Britten's works, Balinese influences should be understood beyond the category

⁴ Iliuț, Vasile. *De la Wagner la Contemporani (From Wagner to Contemporary Composers)*, vol. IV. București: Ed. Muzicală, 1998.

⁵ Constantinescu, Grigore; Boga, Irina. *O călătorie în istoria muzicii (A Journey Through the History of Music)*. Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, R.A. București, 2008.

of exoticism, functioning instead as an alternative syntactic framework that shapes the organization of musical temporality, the interaction between sound layers, and the structural role of repetition.

Analytical and comparative methods have been employed to support the argument that Balinese musical elements are transformed from external models into constitutive components of a new formal and temporal conception, integrated within a personal compositional system. The case study focuses on the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, in which Balinese musical influences contribute to the construction of a ritualized dramaturgy characterized by cyclical temporality and by the mediation of emotional expression through a symbolic, almost liturgical distance.

2. Edward Benjamin Britten - Musical Oeuvre

Edward Benjamin Britten was not just a composer, but also conductor, performer (piano and viola), and singer. In the first part of his life, he had a rich activity as composer of chamber music, symphonic works, and film music, while the last three decades of his life were dominated by the genre of opera. Britten's symphonic output is remarkable for the diversity of genres explored by the composer, ranging from symphonic variations to instrumental concertos for violin and piano, as well as his symphonic works. This generic versatility represents a defining feature of his overall compositional activity.

A large part of his chamber compositional output belongs to his early creative period: *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *Curlew River* (1964). Other works, composed during later stages of his career, such as the three *String Quartets* (Op. 25, Op. 36, Op. 96), the *Sonata for cello and piano* Op. 65, or the three *Suites for cello* (Op. 72, Op. 80, Op. 87) are distinguished by their stylistic refinement and represent significant stages in the evolution of the composer's musical language.

The *Sonata for Cello and Piano*, Op. 65, composed in 1961, was dedicated to the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and incorporates, alongside varied musical textures, subtle exotic sonorities that evoke the gamelan style associated with Indonesian musical traditions. Benjamin Britten also dedicated three *Suites for solo cello* (1964) and the *Symphony for Cello* (1963) to the same performer, the latter often regarded as illustrating the concept of absolute or "pure" music, in the sense discussed by Hanslick in his aesthetic writings.⁶

⁶ Arved, Ashby. *Britten as Symphonist* in: Mervyn, Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*, chapter 11. Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 263.

Benjamin Britten's creativity and compositional complexity reach culmination in *War Requiem*, Op. 66, one of the most sensitive, impressive, and eloquent musical evocations of the funerary ritual.

The *Piano Concerto*, Op. 13 (1938), structured in four movements briefly evokes the late Romantic sonorities of nineteenth-century musical language. However, this stylistic correspondence gradually dissolves with the development of the first thematic group, whose metamorphosis unfolds through agile, subdivided rhythmic patterns embedded within an intensely chromatic melodic line.

In the following year, Britten composed the *Violin Concerto*, Op. 15 (1939), regarded as a stylistic landmark based on the exploration of dissonance within diatonic contexts and on the exploitation of diverse timbral colors.⁷

In 1940 he composed *Diversions for Piano Left Hand and Orchestra*, Op. 21, written for Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right hand during the First World War, and the *Scottish Ballad for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, Op. 26.⁸

The materialization of orchestral emancipation becomes much more evident in the *Sinfonia da Requiem*, Op. 20, a work that Eric Roseberry described as a "*concerto without title for orchestra*."⁹

Highly valued from an interpretative perspective is *Les Illuminations*, Op. 18 (1939), a cycle for voice and string orchestra on texts by Arthur Rimbaud, in which Benjamin Britten translates poetic visionary imagery into an expressive musical language characterized by tension, dramatic intensity, and a modal–chromatic harmonic framework. A similarly subtle treatment of the relationship between text and music is found in *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, Op. 22 (1940), written for tenor and piano, a work of confessional character that explores the inner emotional and introspective dimension through expansive vocal writing and dense chromatic harmony.

Structured in four movements, *Spring Symphony*, Op. 44 (1949) does not adhere to the traditional symphonic model, particularly through the secondary role assigned to the orchestral ensemble. The work was composed for three solo voices (soprano, alto, and tenor), mixed chorus, boys' chorus, and symphony orchestra, thereby redefining the conventional hierarchy between orchestral and vocal forces.

⁷ Evans, Peter. *The Music of Benjamin Britten*. Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 47.

⁸ Evans, Peter. *Britten (Edward) Benjamin*, in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, London, vol. 3, 1992, pp. 293-208.

⁹ Roseberry, Eric. *The Concertos and Early Orchestral Scores: Aspects of Style and Aesthetic* in: Cooke, Mervyn. *The Cambridge Companion to Britten*, Cambridge University Press, U.K., 1999, p. 269.

Dramatic genre holds a central position in Benjamin Britten's compositional output. After an initial attempt with the opera *Paul Bunyan*, Op. 17 – a work later withdrawn – the composer achieved international recognition with *Peter Grimes* (1945), an opera that definitively established his position within the musical landscape of the period following his return to England after a period of self-imposed exile in the United States.

Subsequently, Benjamin Britten explored the chamber opera genre, characterized by greater intimacy and heightened interpretative refinement. Representative works include *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), *Albert Herring* (1947), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), as well as a series of English operatic parables inspired by biblical narratives, including *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).

In 1946, *English Opera Group* was established, a project in which Benjamin Britten served simultaneously as conductor, composer, and artistic director. The aim of the initiative was to provide a performance platform both for his own works, and for compositions by younger colleagues. Representative examples include the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), based on texts adapted together with Peter Pears after William Shakespeare, as well as a series of biblical parables, namely *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *The Prodigal Son* (1968).

The encounter between Japanese theatrical aesthetics and Balinese gamelan sonorities is reflected in the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, in which intercultural musical elements are integrated into the composer's stylistic language.¹⁰

3. The Contact with Asian Music

In order to understand the originality of Benjamin Britten's engagement with Asian musical influences, it is essential to examine the context in which he first became acquainted with these cultures. The composer's interest in Far Eastern musical traditions developed gradually and was nurtured through various sources, the most significant of which was his friendship with the Canadian composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee during the Second World War, a period when Britten was living in the United States.

Settled in Bali in the 1930s, Colin McPhee was among the first Western musicians to undertake an in-depth study of Balinese gamelan music, documenting and transcribing its repertoire while also seeking to understand its internal structural principles and ritual significance.

¹⁰ Elliot, Graham. *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2006.

According to McPhee, Balinese gamelan music does not pursue thematic development or a progressive, goal-oriented direction, as is characteristic of European musical culture. Rather, it is grounded in repetition, the superposition of sonic layers, and cyclical structural organization, within which each instrument fulfills a specific function in the collective ensemble texture.¹¹ The collaboration between Benjamin Britten and Colin McPhee led, in 1941, to a recording of works for two pianos entitled *Balinese Ceremonial Music*, clearly inspired by gamelan structures and sonorities.

Another significant encounter with Asian musical traditions occurred during the tour that began in November 1955, undertaken by Benjamin Britten, the tenor Peter Pears, and several close collaborators. The ensemble gave concerts in a number of countries, including Austria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Through this extended journey, the artists were able to engage directly with a wide range of non-European musical cultures, encountering diverse performance practices and aesthetic conceptions of musical time, texture, and ritual function.¹²

During his stay in Bali, Benjamin Britten was deeply fascinated by local musical practices. He visited temples, studied specific musical styles and instrumental ensembles, and attended numerous ceremonies, dances, and ritual theatrical performances, drafting sketches and transcriptions. These cultural encounters had a direct impact on the composition of the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1956). The musical idiom of this work is characterized by the frequent use of pentatonic scales and complex, distinctive textures incorporating multiple tonalities. The orchestration prominently features percussion instruments associated with Asian musical traditions – such as gongs, xylophone, and vibraphone – integrated into a refined Western symphonic framework.

The experience in Bali was followed by a two-week stay in Japan, where Benjamin Britten gave concerts and enthusiastically immersed himself in the study of Japanese culture. He was profoundly impressed by the aesthetics of *Noh* theatre¹³ and by the sonorities of Gagaku, elements

¹¹ McPhee, Colin. *Music in Bali: A study in form and instrumental organization in Balinese orchestral music*. In: *Ethnomusicology*, 11(3), Yale University Press, 1966, p. 412.

¹² Mervyn, Cooke. *Britten and The Far East: Asian Influences in the music of Benjamin Britten*. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1998, pp. 45-50.

¹³ *Noh* is an ancient Japanese performing art that combines singing, music, dance, acting, as well as the use of masks and costumes. The playwright and actor Zeami Motokiyo refined this art form, creating a unique synthesis of dramatic action, dance, and poetic expression.

that he would later incorporate into his first church parable, *Curlew River* (1964).

Musicologist Mervyn Cooke argues that Benjamin Britten's contact with Bali between 1955 and 1956 did not mark the beginning of his interest in Asian music but rather represented a stage in the development of latent tendencies already present in his compositional language. According to this interpretation, Britten's travels did not generate a new aesthetic orientation; instead, they functioned as confirmation and practical stimulation of previously formed intellectual and artistic curiosities.¹⁴

The works composed between 1939 and 1956 contain numerous melodic configurations which coincide with two Balinese pentatonic scales – *pelog* and *selisir*. A suitable example appears in *Les Illuminations*, more precisely in the song *Beling Beauteous*, which exhibits a series of traits that anticipate the aesthetic of the Balinese gamelan (See: E.g. 1).

The accompaniment is constructed on a hemitonic pentatonic scale in the fifth mode, favouring descending fourth and seventh parallelisms that evoke the homophonic and directional texture of metallophones within the gamelan ensemble, as employed by Benjamin Britten in his intercultural stylistic synthesis. Despite the fact that Balinese musical scales are generally anhemitonic, the sonic material in the presented example may be associated with such scalar structures due to the evocative manner in which Benjamin Britten suggests the specific sonic atmosphere, adapting intercultural allusions to a Western harmonic idiom characteristic of his compositional period. Furthermore, a stratified rhythmic distribution may be observed: the solo instrument follows a binary rhythmic pattern, while the accompaniment is organized in ternary rhythm, creating a polyrhythmic configuration that recalls the *Kotekan*.¹⁵ This timbral and structural prefiguration becomes significant in the context of the works composed after 1956, in which these rules are developed at a large scale.

¹⁴ Mervyn, Cooke. *Op. cit.*, 1998.

¹⁵ Vitale, Wayne. *Kotekan. The technique of interlocking parts in Balinese music*, in: *Balungan*, Volume IV, No.2, a Publication of the American Gamelan Institute, Hanover, 1990, p. 2-14.

E.g. 1

The solo instrument uses a binary rhythm, while the rest of the instruments are based on a ternary rhythm.

Pentatonic scale – position 5

A tendency toward parallel fourths and sevenths in descending motion

Benjamin Britten: *Les Illuminations*, op.18
Beling Beauteous (excerpt)

4. Case Study: The Ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*

In September 1954 Britten met choreographer John Cranko to discuss a new project initially called *The Green Serpent*. For this project, the choreographer had devised a preliminary scenario based on a combination of elements taken from *King Lear*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and an Oriental tale published by Madame d'Aulnoy under the title *Serpentin Vert*. The subject appealed to the composer, but at the same time it gave him some trouble, since he had to musically illustrate the story of the princess Belle Rose from China, the Middle Kingdom. After her father, the emperor, decides to leave his kingdom to her malevolent sister, Belle Épine, Belle

Rose is carried away by a quartet of magical flying frogs to the distant Land of the Pagodas, where she falls in love with the Prince of the Pagodas (who first appears as a massive salamander).

Britten postponed the deadline for submitting his score twice, during which time he was away on a concert tour around the world and came into contact with Balinese music and the sound of the gamelan. Intrigued by the sonic possibilities offered by the variety of percussion instruments – such as mallet instruments, gongs, and drums – used in the gamelan, Britten captured the sounds from the performances he attended in numerous sketches, which were later put to use. Without imitating the traditional instruments, the sounds and rhythms of the gamelan were reinterpreted and integrated into an ensemble of Western instruments that included gong, xylophone, vibraphone, bells, flute, and string instruments, in order to reproduce the layered textures and complementary rhythmic alternation (“interlocking”) characteristic of Balinese music.

The collaboration with John Cranko, the choreographer of the ballet, was a successful one. The two worked closely together and agreed on everything related to movement, form, and meaning. Nevertheless, the ballet was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm at its premiere, which took place in 1957 at the Royal Opera House.¹⁶ Many critics at the time were puzzled by the lack of a clear narrative thread and by the fact that the music did not follow the typical European model based on thematic development and dramatic progression. However, what many failed to understand then was that Britten had deliberately proposed a different type of musical logic, one inspired by music from Bali, where time is not linear but circular, and transformation does not occur through abrupt evolution but through repetition, gradual accumulation, and subtle variations.

The score brings together numerous elements already encountered in Britten's earlier works. One of its defining features is polyphonic layering: it appears already in the *Prelude*, where the theme of the Prince-Salamander is superimposed in varied rhythmic formulas. Another recurring element is the use of pentatonic scales (see E.g. 2), present both in the motifs representing the Emperor and in the trumpet fanfares, constructed in a carefully elaborated manner that evokes the interlocking techniques characteristic of Balinese music. Added to these, are independent themes built on pentatonic structures. From a timbral point of view, techniques already established in Britten's early works are revisited, more precisely the use of percussion instruments – gongs, cymbals, and bells – the role of which is to articulate the sonic discourse based on rhythmic layering and repetition.

¹⁶ Cooke, Mervyn. *Op. cit.*, 1998, pp. 97-99.

E.g. 2

a) **Pentatonic scale**

Contrary motion

The tenuto-staccato alternation between the two trumpets

b)

E anhemitonic major pentatonic scale

Confirmation of the tonic

The use of modern rhythmic-melodic development techniques (repetition, inversion, insertion of rests, complementary rhythm)

The complementarity of accents on beats 1 and 2 creates the impression of a continuous, well-defined flow, referencing the *kotekan* technique.

Benjamin Britten: *The Prince of Pagodas*
Pentatonic structures in the Third Act

Other fundamental principles of gamelan music adopted by the composer include rhythmic ostinato, cyclic structure, and the technique of fragmenting and alternately distributing a melodic line among several voices (similar to Western *hocket*) – which he reinterpreted in a personal musical style adapted for the Western orchestra.

Drawing a parallel with *Tabuh-Tabuhan* by Colin McPhee, which had already been an attempt to transpose gamelan sonorities into a Western context, we observe that Britten proves to be more inventive, managing to create similar effects without resorting to authentic Balinese instruments. For example, the colotomic gongs are suggested through orchestral gongs and low string notes; instruments such as the kempli or gangsa are substituted with combinations of percussion, harp, xylophone, piccolo, and vibraphone; and the cengceng are replaced by small clashing cymbals.¹⁷

Even when a gamelan sonority is not immediately recognizable, certain chords and pentatonic constructions reveal the composer's intention to incorporate the *selisir scale*. The Balinese scale (*selisir*), identical to the one the composer had also encountered in recordings of the Peliatan ensemble that he listened to carefully after his journey to Bali, can also be found in *the Concerto for Two Pianos* composed by Francis Poulenc, which Britten performed together with him in 1945 and again in 1955 in London.

Another fitting example of the Balinese contribution appears in the *third act*, where musical elements inspired by Balinese gamelan are revisited but used in a unique way, through a succession of quartal chords –

¹⁷ Mervyn, Cooke. Op. cit., 1998, pp. 104-105.

a type of writing that does not create tonal tension but gives the music a distinctly Asian sonority. The repetition of these structures does not lead to stagnation; rather, it suspends the directional perception of time, creating the impression of a continuous present, characteristic of ritual music.

At the same time, through gradual accumulation, timbral densification, and rhythmic intensification, the atmosphere progressively becomes more charged, generating a latent tension that is not resolved through thematic development but through subtle transformations of the repetitive material.

In the low register, the bass ostinato line appears in a *crescendo* each time, responding to the indication written above it, “*The salamander comes to her rescue.*” The dual nature of the Prince is also symbolically suggested through the polyvalence created by the imitative use of the notes C–C# (see E.g. 3). Furthermore, throughout the work, Britten uses for the first time two differently tuned gongs, which create an ostinato pattern that clearly recalls the *wadon* and *lanang* gongs from Bali.¹⁸ In the same section, other gamelan-inspired elements can also be found: vibraphone and xylophone solos, dense chords, and rapid passages in the percussion.

E.g. 3

BIPOLAR CHORDS (THE DUALITY OF THE CHARACTER) The Salamander comes to her rescue.
ppp, wv.

OSTINATO BASS REPETITION

CHORDS ON THE STRUCTURE OF SELISIR SCALE

Benjamin Britten: *The Prince of Pagodas* Pentatonic structures in the Third Act

¹⁸ Sudirana, I. Wayan. *Improvisation in Balinese Music: An Analytical Study of Three Different Types of Drumming in the Balinese Gamelan Gong Kebyar*. In: *Journal of Music Science, Technology, and Industry*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.31091/jomsti.v1i1.502>

5. Semantic and Hermeneutic Dimensions in *The Prince of the Pagodas*

The semantic dimension is organized around certain reference points that Britten transforms into sound signals with a precise function. One of the first elements is *cyclicity*, suggested by ostinato constructions and the insistent repetition of motifs that return periodically. These do not seem to follow a progressive or culminating logic, moving away from the classical or Romantic phrase. Repetition leads to a stabilization of the texture, where the listener's attention shifts from formal development to timbral details and subtle variations between iterations. Instead of creating the expectation of a climax, these ostinatos give rise to a sonic space that functions almost like a ritual framework, where what matters is not the outcome but the maintenance of a continuous presence.

Another representative pattern is the indirect presence of the phenomenon *ombak*, that “arises in a paired tuning system in which corresponding unisons of two instruments (or instrumental groups) are tuned to slightly different frequencies, one higher and one lower, to produce beats...”¹⁹

The composer musically transposes the idea of a wave, undulating movement, and trembling through timbral layering and rapid tempo in the percussion instruments, as well as through the use of pentatonic scales in the other instruments. From a semantic perspective, this becomes an expression of fragile identity, fluidity, and perpetual transformation. This symbolic value is particularly relevant when considered in relation to the composer's interest in the idea of otherness and the condition of the different. Despite this approach, the characters are constructed around easily recognizable sonic timbres. The Emperor is characterized by solemn fanfares, in which the pentatonic motifs are taken up by the brass with expressive grandeur, becoming emblems of authority. The Prince-Salamander, on the other hand, is accompanied by unstable, slippery melodic lines. For this reason, the character acquires the outline of a meaningful identity, even though it is changeable and ambiguous.

Looking at the work as a whole, silence takes on a special significance. For example, orchestral pauses do not serve merely a formal role; they can refer to the sacred function of silence specific to the region, where the absence of sound signifies fullness and a space for energy accumulation. Through such details, a universe rich in meaning is carefully constructed, and each sonic element points to one of the principles of time, identity, and sacredness.

¹⁹ Sethares, W. A., & Vitale, W. *Ombak and Octave Stretching in Balinese Gamelan*. In: *Journal of Mathematics and Music*, 16(1), 1–17, 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17459737.2020.1812128>

From a dramaturgical perspective, the work clearly differs from Western models in the way musical and stage material is organized. In this case, the orchestra surpasses its classical role as accompaniment and becomes a collective actor, directly participating in stage action. A striking example is the scene of the King of the South. The massive orchestration and dance support each other, existing in perfect concord, where the choreographic gesture and the sonic gesture reflect one another. The rhythmic ostinatos in the orchestra transform into a backdrop for the expansive movements of the dancers, and the resulting effect is that of collective energy. In contrast, episodes associated with the Prince-Salamander follow a completely different dramaturgy: they do not lead to resolution but suspend the action through calm, introspective fragments with reduced sonority. This alternation between grandeur and contemplation represents nothing less than the central mechanism of the construction of the entire narrative discourse. Building on the idea mentioned earlier, musical and stage dramaturgy become inseparable, and the work acquires the character of a complete theatrical opera, in which the audience no longer merely witnesses a story.²⁰

A hermeneutic reading of the ballet reveals possibilities for reflection regarding the cultural encounter between the two continents. Britten uses Balinese elements as principles of sonic organization that, in turn, transform the very structure of Western music. Thus, the work can be interpreted as a meditation on the dialogue between civilizations. Musical elements overlap, producing a result that belongs neither exclusively to the West nor to the East.

Another central idea is the rhetoric of otherness as a foundation and as a new, hybrid language, with ambiguity being regarded as a positive value. Using the characters as reference points, the music suggests that identity is defined through the awareness and valorization of differences. Hermeneutically, this process reflects a modern conception that identity requires time to take shape, remaining in constant evolution.

At the same time, the work can be read as a reflection on power. More concretely, the Old Emperor loses his stability through rhythmic and harmonic distortions, suggesting that absolute authority is vulnerable. In contrast, the Prince-Salamander becomes a pole of meaning, embodying the capacity for metamorphosis and the real strength of fragility. The inversion of roles functions hermeneutically as a commentary on traditional hierarchies and as an argument for another form of power based on adaptability. Music and stage action become the means through which a dynamic flow of meanings is generated within the opera.

²⁰ Mervyn, Cooke. Op. cit., 1998.

On an intertextual level, a parallel can be drawn with another work typical of French Impressionism, namely Debussy's *Pagodes*, a solo piano piece from the *Estampes* cycle. The title refers to Asian pagodas, suggesting the scenic image and aesthetic contour of the music, without indicating a direct influence. On the contrary, in *The Prince of the Pagodas* the composer surpasses mere imitation by using gamelan-inspired sonic elements as principles of rhythmic and structural organization, giving the work its own coherent form.

Thus, *The Prince of the Pagodas* represents not only the first authentic success in combining Western and Balinese musical language but also serves as a starting point for the refinement that would bring this synthesis to maturity in Britten's late works. Through openness to another culture, Benjamin Britten positions himself within a horizon of thought in which art becomes a shared territory of humanity. His work remains a landmark of British modernism, as well as an exemplary model of aesthetic and spiritual dialogue between East and West.

Conclusions

For Britten, as for other composers of the twentieth century, contact with extra-European musical cultures did not lead to imitation, but to a personal synthesis in which structural principles are adapted to a modern Western language. Thus, interest in extra-European music functioned in the twentieth century as a catalyst for musical modernity. By confronting other sound systems and different conceptions of time and form, Western composers were able to transcend the limits of the Romantic tradition and create a plural, open, and innovative artistic language.

The compositional trajectory of Benjamin Britten, as exemplified in the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*, represents the most fitting example of a Western composer's capacity to interact creatively with extra-European cultural heritage, transforming Asian influences into his own foundations. As previously stated, the work marks a turning point in the British composer's output, being the first in which Asian influences no longer appear merely as latent reminiscences but as structural, dramaturgical, and symbolic norms.

Through analytical and comparative methods, research has highlighted how these principles are transformed from external models into elements creatively integrated into Britten's own musical language, becoming constitutive parts of a new formal and temporal thinking.

Britten was particularly drawn to the layered organization of texture, ostinato rhythm, the cyclical conception of time, and the resonant metallic sonority of the gamelan – elements that revealed natural affinities with his own

style. Unlike the superficial exoticism practiced by other Western composers, Britten integrated these principles into a personal language, adapting them to the European orchestra without resorting to authentic instruments.

The use of cyclical rhythmic structures, polyrhythms, and pentatonic scales constitutes frameworks that generate and shape the architecture of the entire ballet and the psychological evolution of the characters. This musical example shows how the composer succeeds in combining his experience in Bali with the expressive power of music, using accumulations of tension, controlled dissonances, and timbral contrasts to create emotionally compelling moments. Thus, choreography and music exist in a relationship of interdependence, making it evident that music can convey complex ideas and emotions without words.

From a semiotic perspective, a dense network of musical, visual, and choreographic signs is evident. From the introduction of the kingdom and the initial dramatic tension to the denouement, which symbolizes narrative balance, each musical element acts as a sign, a meaningful code within the choreography and scenography. Moreover, by integrating Asian elements into European musical thought, new timbral and rhythmic resources are explored, creating a space in which art becomes a universal model.

The composition stands out within British modernism, but at the same time it is an example of openness to global cultural influences, resulting in a musical, dramatic, and clearly meaningful structure. Music, viewed as a complex symbolic language, can reflect on the human condition, cultural interaction, and the transformative potential of art. It is safe to affirm that the ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas* transcends the conventional boundaries of ballet and constitutes an ongoing dialogue – between music and philosophy, between tradition and innovation.

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