AQA GCSE AoS4: Malcolm Arnold and Benjamin Britten

KS4

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Introduction

For the second strand in AoS4 of its GCSE specification, AQA has brought together four influential and very different British composers from the 20th and 21st centuries: Malcolm Arnold, Benjamin Britten, Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener. Students are expected to listen to unfamiliar music by these composers, and to be able to describe musical elements in it, as well as the musical contexts and musical language.

In this resource, we'll take a look at the first two of those composers – Malcolm Arnold and Benjamin Britten (we'll return to consider Peter Maxwell Davies and John Tavener in a future resource). We'll set the context with a brief look at the composers' lives, before looking at two representative works by each in more detail, with suggestions for activities and further listening.

Malcolm Arnold

Biography

Born on 21 October 1921 in Northampton (where there's now an Academy school named in honour of him), Malcolm Arnold reputedly took up the trumpet aged 12 after seeing jazz musician Louis Armstrong play live. He studied trumpet at London's Royal College of Music, as well as composition with Gordon Jacob, and later joined the London Philharmonic Orchestra, where he became principal trumpeter in 1943. Five years later, however, he left the LPO to become a full-time composer.

During the middle years of the 20th century, Arnold arguably ranked alongside Benjamin Britten (see below) as Britain's most popular and in-demand composer. He created music across a broad spread of genres: as well as a cycle of nine symphonies, he was a prolific concerto composer, often writing with specific soloists in mind (he composed a Guitar Concerto for Julian Bream, a Cello Concerto for Julian Lloyd Webber, clarinet concertos for Frederick Thurston and Benny Goodman, and even a Harmonica Concerto for Larry Adler, among many other similar works). He also wrote much chamber music and choral works, as well as a significant number of pieces for brass band and wind band. He even collaborated with founding member of heavy rock band Deep Purple Jon Lord on the latter's *Concerto for Group and Orchestra*, conducting the premiere with Deep Purple and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1969 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=a45ZL2fhX-M**).

Arnold's music is often immediate and accessible, tonal and tuneful – and as such, it can sometimes seem rather out of its time, although Arnold acknowledged Bartók as a formative influence, alongside Mahler, Berlioz and jazz. It was nonetheless very popular with audiences and musicians (if not always with critics), and Arnold's years as a trumpeter often meant that fellow orchestral musicians felt he was one of their own, writing idiomatically and characterfully for their instruments.

He was also a prominent figure in film music, scoring more than 100 movies throughout his career. He won the 1957 Oscar for best music for his score for David Lean's war epic *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=O95tNM1KwPI**), and had previously scored Lean's *The Sound Barrier* (1952) and *Hobson's Choice* (1954). He also wrote the music for the popular series of St Trinian's school movies in the 1950s and 1960s (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaLpHunwkYc**).

Issues in Arnold's personal life, however, arguably came to overshadow his musical achievements in his later years. Problems with alcohol dependence and mental health led to several periods in hospital, and cast a shadow over his achievements that his supporters have found it somewhat challenging to address. For the last 22 years of his life, he lived with carer Anthony Day, and his public reputation began to recover in the 1980s and 1990s: he returned to the BBC Proms in 1991, on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Arnold died in 2006, having officially retired from composing in 1991.

Malcolm Arnold

English Dances, Set 2

Arnold wrote two sets of *English Dances* – Set 1 in 1950, and Set 2 the following year. (He'd also write sets of *Scottish Dances*, *Cornish Dances*, *Irish Dances* and *Welsh Dances* over later decades.) Set 1 was commissioned by Arnold's publisher with the aim of producing something similar (in style and popularity) to Dvořák's famous *Slavonic Dances*, and it proved so popular that he wrote a second set the following year. Both sets of *English Dances* consist of four short movements based on melodies that Arnold wrote himself – they're clearly inspired by English folk music, but they don't draw directly on any traditional material. Many different arrangements of the *English Dances* have been made, for several solo instruments with piano, as well as for piano duet and brass band.

Listen to Set 2 of Arnold's *English Dances* here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnaxZCdMiO4**

The four movements of Set 2 are:

- **Allegro non troppo:** the first dance opens with a catchy tune passed between members of the woodwind family (it's whistled in the brass band version), answered by a contrasting melody, and followed by a slower, more imposing second main theme for horn and strings.
- **Con brio:** the second dance is very short, and contrasts a jig-like melody with a more military-sounding middle section complete with snare drum, which continues to play until the end of the piece.
- **Grazioso:** the third dance is the Set's slow movement, a quiet, gentle piece with a sinuous melody set against a gently rocking accompaniment.
- **Giubiloso:** Arnold rounds off his Set with a lively, dashing opening theme, then another military-style episode complete with snare drum and trumpet fanfares.

Listening activity: Arnold's *English Dances*, Set 2

Once your students are familiar with Set 2 of Arnold's *English Dances*, quiz them with these listening questions:

1. In the first dance, how many times is the opening melody heard? Which are the main instruments that play it in each case?
2. Arnold is known for his colourful orchestrations, and percussion instruments add a lot of colour and character to these *English Dances*. Can you name any of the percussion instruments you hear across the four *Dances*?
3. What time signature is the second dance in?
4. Is the third dance in 2, 3 or 4 time?
5. Which instrument plays the main melody at the start of the third dance?
6. Is the third dance in the major or minor? The harmonies don't make it immediately obvious. Hint: listen to the end of the piece.
7. Arnold's opening theme in the fourth dance (**https://youtu.be/HnaxZCdMiO4?t=425**) returns later in the same piece (**https://youtu.be/HnaxZCdMiO4?t=499**). How is it different when it returns?
8. Arnold's *English Dances* are often described as 'light' music – what do you think that means? What elements of the music (its melodies, harmonies, orchestration, rhythms, for example), do you think might back up that definition?

Answers:

1. 1 piccolo; 2 piccolo; 3 bassoon; 4 piccolo; 5 trombones; 6 horns; 7 piccolo; 8 piccolo (plus celesta, then celesta on its own).
2. Choose from: timpani, glockenspiel, side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam tam, tambourine and tubular bells.
3. 6/8
4. 3
5. Oboe
6. Minor
7. It's slower (augmented), and it's embedded within a richer orchestral texture.
8. No right or wrong answer here: more of a discussion point for you and your students.

A Grand, Grand Overture

Arnold wrote his humorous (and intentionally overblown) *A Grand, Grand Overture* in 1956 as a send-up of some of the rather staid or over-the-top conventions of classical music. Not least among his comic elements is the piece's scoring – Arnold wrote it for a large symphony orchestra, plus organ, and the addition of three vacuum cleaners, floor polisher and four rifles (which are used to 'kill' the noisy vacuum cleaners and floor polisher at two points in the score). It was written as the curtain-raiser for the tongue-in-cheek Hoffnung Music Festival, organised by musical humorist and cartoonist Gerard Hoffnung, held at London's Royal Festival Hall on 13 November 1956.

Listen to a recording of the piece with a score here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uiRKLw8Avw**) – or alternatively, this video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWP3twivYAc**) of a performance by the National Children's Orchestra gives a better sense of the theatricality of the piece.

But despite its musical jokes and high-jinks, *A Grand, Grand Overture* follows a fairly traditional sonata form. Here's a brief analysis of the piece:

Bars	Section	Description
1-29	Introduction	▶ The quiet introduction ends with the vacuum cleaners and floor polisher starting up, then being 'killed' by the rifles.
30-73	First subject	▶ The first subject is based around a raucous, jazzy theme in the woodwind and trumpets, which could almost be from one of Arnold comedy film scores. ▶ It's followed by a subsidiary theme (from bar 49), syncopated and cartoonish, and based around just two notes, before a return of the jazzy opening theme.
74-138	Second subject	▶ The second subject is based around a far slower, more lyrical melody first heard in a flute and oboe duet, accompanied by strings, before the violins and violas themselves take up the melody (from bar 94). ▶ There's a brief interruption by a return of the first subject's two-note, syncopated theme (bars 110-117), before the second subject is restated as a kind of duet between strings and horns. A long, drawn-out cadence (bars 133-137), complete with trombone glissandos, leads into the development section.
138-280	Development	▶ The development section opens with what seems like new material, with repeated chords passed between sections of the orchestra (maybe a tongue-in-cheek reference to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*?), and a slowed-down version of the two-note subsidiary melody. ▶ There's a return of the first subject's jazzy opening theme in a piccolo and bassoon duet, then in an oboe and clarinet duet. ▶ Then Arnold returns to the quieter music of the introduction, complete with a reappearance from the vacuum cleaners and floor polisher, which now accompany the more lyrical second subject in the first violins, and even a return of the repeated-chord idea from the start of the development.
281-376	Recapitulation	▶ The recapitulation section throws us straight back into the Overture's opening music with a raucous, circus-style version of the first subject's two-note subsidiary theme from the woodwind, horns and strings, quickly followed by a return from the first subject's main theme (bar 289). ▶ The subsidiary theme returns again at bar 304, and here Arnold makes explicit its links with the slowed-down version he used in the development section (which returns as its melodic tailpiece, bars 304-310). ▶ Bars 310-342 serve as a preposterously long, drawn-out build-up – we presume to a return of the lyrical second subject, but instead Arnold pulls the rug from under us with a quiet version of the first subject's two-note subsidiary theme on just flute and clarinet (bars 342-349). ▶ Arnold then returns to the first subject's main theme (bars 350-364), now reduced to fanfare-like figures, rising ever higher in anticipation of the return of the second subject (bars 365-377), now far slower and grander, played across the full orchestra plus organ. ▶ The second subject's final cadence here moves from G not to the tonic C, but sideways to A flat, preparing us for the coda.
377-429	Coda	▶ The coda's first gesture is the unexpected reappearance of the vacuum cleaners and floor polisher, which are again 'killed' by the four rifles. ▶ This leads to an (intentionally) over-long, over-extended send-up of a traditional fast-moving, energetic coda, delaying the piece's final resolution to an exaggerated degree, complete with repeated bars (bars 384-407), which might make us wonder whether the piece is ever really going to end at all. ▶ The Overture's final, grandiose, Mahlerian peroration (bars 408-415) involves organ, chiming tubular bells, tam tam and cymbals.

Discussion and listening activity: humour in music

A Grand, Grand Overture is a somewhat rare example of comedy conveyed through music – not through comic word setting in a song, for example, but humour embedded into the fabric of the music itself. Discuss with your students:

- What musical elements in *A Grand, Grand Overture* are intended to make it funny? (And do they always work?)
- In what ways is the piece a send-up of traditional classical music? What is it sending up?

You might like to compare Arnold's *A Grand, Grand Overture* with these other examples of humorous pieces of music.

- **Saint-Saëns: The Carnival of the Animals** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SjagpXeNhM**). There's plenty of humour in Saint-Saëns's 14-movement suite from 1886, from braying donkeys to pianists themselves being treated as if they were animals in a zoo. But let's focus on the elephant (**https://youtu.be/7SjagpXeNhM?t=396**): what makes this particular piece funny?
- **Haydn: String Quartet in E flat, Op. 33 No. 2 'Joke'** (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpeQKGoV8cw**). Haydn seems to bring the finale of his 'Joke' Quartet to an end not once but on four separate occasions, the last time even notating the pause or silence to last for three whole bars (bars 167-169). What makes this particular piece funny? How does it play with listeners' expectations?

Further listening

A lot of Arnold's music is immediate, accessible and easy on the ear – and equally pleasing to play. His nine symphonies, however, show a far more serious side to the composer – perhaps reflecting the difficulties he experienced in his personal life, or at least demonstrating a more modernist, uncompromising side to his musical creativity.

Symphony No. 5

Listen to a recording of Arnold's Symphony No. 5 here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvtkF2rwdDw**), and follow it on a score here (**https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/symphony_no5_7034**). Arnold wrote his Fifth Symphony in 1961, in remembrance of four friends who had died young: humorist Gerard Hoffnung (founder of the Hoffnung Music Festival, for which Arnold wrote *A Grand, Grand Overture*), clarinettist Frederick Thurston, choreographer David Paltenghi and horn player Dennis Brain. It's a densely argued, ambitious piece that brings in references to 1950s and 1960s pop music and jazz in its third movement scherzo and a sentimental tune in its slow second movement. It's at times dissonant and challenging, quite jarring in its collisions of musical stylyes, and ultimately quite tragic.

Symphony No. 9

Listen to a recording of Arnold's Symphony No. 9 here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqrtGGgFAKM**), and follow it on a score here (**https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/symphony_no9_7454**). Arnold's Ninth Symphony, completed as recently as 1986, has a rather tortuous history. Originally commissioned by BBC Manchester, it was only finished several years behind schedule, then effectively rejected because it was so different in style and tone from Arnold's earlier music. It only received its premiere – from the BBC Philharmonic conducted by Charles Groves – in 1992. Its music is often intentionally sparse and thinly scored, with unisons for several instruments playing together, and it's sometimes very repetitive. The Symphony ends with a long, austere slow movement that's unremittingly bleak and intense.

Benjamin Britten

Biography

Benjamin Britten is one of the most important and influential figures in 20th-century British music, and wrote across virtually every genre of music, including several era-defining operas, orchestral works, chamber pieces and, especially, a wealth of vocal and choral music.

Born into a middle-class family in Lowestoft, Suffolk, in 1913, he remained in the east of England for most of his life, later living in Snape (whose Maltings he converted into a concert hall in 1967) and from 1957 until his death in 1976 in Aldeburgh, where he shared the famous Red House with his musical and personal partner, tenor Peter Pears, for whom he wrote many works throughout his career.

His musical talent was spotted early on by fellow composer Frank Bridge, who taught the teenage Britten privately, and Britten later studied at London's Royal College of Music. He developed an early friendship with the poet WH Auden when they both collaborated on early productions by the GPO Film Music (including the famous 1936 film *Night Mail*, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EZxJ9Bkoeg**). Britten was a lifelong pacifist and, having met Pears in 1937, left Britain for North America with his partner in April 1939, concerned about the looming war in Europe and unable to reconcile his convictions with the imminent conflict. While on the other side of the Atlantic, Britten expanded his artistic awareness, encountering Balinese gamelan through Canadian composer Colin McPhee (it would go on to influence several of his later works, most directly the 1957 ballet score *The Prince of the Pagodas*, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0so4O92hIk4&t=3735s**). On an Asian tour in 1956, Britten would also encounter Japanese Noh theatre, which he would go on to emulate in his 1964 'church parable' *Curlew River* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGgUoutMMzQ**).

After his return to Britain in 1942, the premiere of his opera *Peter Grimes* in 1945 catapulted Britten to international fame, and also set a new, confident tone for English-language opera that still continues today. He had several further operatic successes in later years, including *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), and even wrote one of the first operas conceived specially for television: *Owen Wingrave* (1970) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm9VA8CYnbg**) was commissioned by none other than David Attenborough when he was Controller of BBC2. Britten's final opera, *Death in Venice* (1973) (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIm4jDmnKMQ**), is also one of his most personal creations, echoing *Peter Grimes*'s themes of an individual set against a hostile society and the corruption of innocence.

Britten devoted much effort to writing music for children and young people, resulting in not only *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (which we'll consider in more detail below), but also the stage works *Noye's Fludde* and *Let's Make an Opera*, among many other pieces. He founded the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948, an event that continues to this day.

Following a debilitating bout of pneumonia when he was only three months old, Britten was dogged by ill health throughout his life. After a heart operation in 1973, he suffered a stroke, and realised he was dying at the time of his 63rd birthday in November 1976, which became a farewell to family and friends. He died of heart failure on 4 December 1976.

The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra

There was once a time when any child whose parents had an interest in classical music would get to know Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (along with Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*) at quite an early age. That's almost certainly no longer the case – but a number of your students may well already be somewhat familiar with the piece.

It was commissioned as a film soundtrack, to a specially produced short movie *Instruments of the Orchestra*, released on 29 November 1946, with the explicit aim of introducing children to the instruments of the classical symphony orchestra, and featuring a recording of the piece from the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Malcolm Sargent.

It's significant, too, that a piece intended to have such an explicitly educational purpose can have such a powerful impact when heard in the context of a concert – and for adults and children alike. Its alternative title is *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell*, and it's sometimes said that the piece uses the 'Young Person's Guide' title when performed with explanatory narration, and the 'Variations and Fugue' when performed without (though that's not strictly the case). The theme Britten selected as the basis for the piece is the swaggering Rondeau dance tune from Purcell's incidental music to the play *Adbelazer* by Aphra Behn (hear the original here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVivtti-n-w**).

Listen to Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, with a full score, here: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgxQVxgacSI**. The timings in the table below are taken from this video.

The piece's structure couldn't be simpler. *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* begins with a statement of the Purcell theme for the full orchestra, followed by versions for each of the orchestra's constituent families, then variations for each of the ensemble's individual instruments, before a fugue bringing the instruments back together, and a final restatement of the Purcell theme. The sections and subsections indicated below refer to Britten's own breakdown of the piece in the published score:

Section	Subsection	Timing	Description
Theme	Theme A (full orchestra)	0:07	▶ Purcell's original theme, given a loud, confident, stirring arrangement by Britten across the full orchestra. ▶ A two-bar 'tailpiece' leads into the woodwind statement.
	Theme B (woodwind)	0:32	▶ A quieter version of Purcell's theme, now in the major, for the woodwind alone. ▶ Britten begins to deviate from Purcell's original even this early on in the piece: from the second bar on this theme statement, he composes new material based on the theme's opening, rather than following Purcell exactly. ▶ Now a three-bar 'tailpiece' leads into the brass statement
	Theme C (brass)	0:55	▶ Another loud, confident statement of Purcell's original theme for the brass, though actually recomposed by Britten using material from the theme's opening, rather than following Purcell exactly. ▶ Another two-bar 'tailpiece' leads into the string statement.
	Theme D (strings)	1:17	▶ Britten's string statement of the Purcell theme moves even further away from the original Rondeau theme, though it's clearly based on its elements. ▶ A roll on the bass drum leads into the percussion statement.
	Theme E (percussion)	1:36	▶ Britten divides up the theme between tuned and untuned percussion: timpani provide the first three pitches, followed by its distinctive subsequent rhythms rapped out on snare drum and cymbals (plus tambourine and triangle).
	Theme F (full orchestra)	1:53	▶ Repeat of the opening orchestral statement of Purcell's theme. ▶ It's followed by a six-bar transition for flutes, harp and tremolo violins leading to the flutes' variation.

Variations	Variation A (flutes and piccolo)	2:18	▶ A quick, light and airy variation for flutes and piccolo.
	Variation B (oboes)	2:47	▶ The oboes' variation is far slower and more thoughtful, also more chromatic, showing off the instruments' singing tone.
	Variation C (clarinets)	3:50	▶ There's a definite sense of playfulness to the clarinets' variation, which shows off the instruments' agility as well as their ability to carry a lyrical melody.
	Variation D (bassoons)	4:29	▶ The bassoons' variation opens with spiky, military-style music, before again showcasing the instruments' melodic abilities. ▶ Horns join the bassoons and strings that have been playing to lead into the violins' own variation.
	Variation E (violins)	5:26	▶ The first and second violins join together to deliver a dashing, assertive variation, with accompaniment from the horns and brass.
	Variation F (violas)	6:01	▶ The pace drops considerably for the violas' more romantic, yearning, chromatic melody, accompanied by staccato harmonies from the woodwind and brass.
	Variation G (cellos)	7:02	▶ The romantic mood continues in the cellos' variation, and their melody slowly descends from the top to the bottom of their range, before rising again.
	Variation H (double basses)	8:16	▶ Perhaps going against stereotype, Britten shows off the double basses' agility and melodic abilities, in a variation pitched near the top of the instruments' range. ▶ A four-bar transition passage leads into the harp variation.
	Variation I (harp)	9:21	▶ Britten shows off many of the harp's playing techniques in his brief variation: playing chords, melodies, and sweeping glissandos.
	Variation J (horns)	10:08	▶ Fanfare-like motifs and slower-moving chordal ideas are combined in the horns' slow variation.
	Variation K (trumpets)	10:59	▶ There are more fanfares in the trumpets' fast-moving variation, with an ever-present snare drum providing the pulse. ▶ A four-bar transition for strings leads into the variation for trombones and tuba.
	Variation L (trombones and tuba)	11:31	▶ There's a sense of heroism or even hymn-like seriousness to the trombones' variation, as they deliver a noble, slow-moving melody, passed later to the tuba. ▶ There's a brief canon between trombones and tuba near the end of the variation, leading to some clashing notes. ▶ Clarinets and bassoons lead into the percussion variation, and the speed drops almost to a standstill.
	Variation M (percussion)	12:33	▶ The percussion section's variation is virtually a short rondo in its own right, with a melodic idea for the timpani that recurs between episodes for bass drum and cymbals; tambourine and triangle; snare drum and wood block; xylophone; castanets and tam tam; and finally whip, before all the percussion instruments join back together. ▶ Accompaniment comes from a jaunty, rhythmic 6/8 figure in the strings. ▶ A transition leads the ear into the orchestra's highest registers with xylophone, triangle and first violins, in preparation for the piccolo launching the concluding fugue section.

Fugue	Fugue opening	14:26	▶ Britten's fugue – using a subject based on the original Purcell theme – takes us back 'down' the orchestral instruments family by family, with entries from piccolo, flutes, oboes and bassoons; then first violins, second violins, violas, cellos and double basses; then harp; then horns, trumpets, trombones and tuba; and finally percussion. ▶ Britten's woodwind enter in conventional fugal style a 5th apart (piccolo on F sharp, flutes on B, oboes on E, clarinets on A and bassoons on D), but he's less strict with the entries of his subsequent instruments.
	Theme	16:24	▶ The original Purcell theme returns (now in the major) to finish the piece, emerging out of the fugal texture on horns, trumpets and trombones, with cellos and double basses supplying its bassline. ▶ Britten changes the time signature here from the very clear 2/4 of the fugue to 3/4, with the result that there almost seem to be two pulses happening at once: a quicker one for the continuing fugal texture, and a slower one for the Purcell theme.

Discussion and listening activity: theme and variations form

Theme and variations is a simple musical form whose history stretches back centuries. Simply put, it takes with a particular musical theme (often, though not always, a harmonised melody) and then repeats it in varied forms a number of times for the rest of the piece.

Composers may simply vary the opening theme's melodic shape, its harmony or its rhythm, or they may extract and recombine elements of it in new ways, turn it upside down or back to front, or transfigure it almost beyond all recognition. The result can sound like an extended journey that views its opening musical idea from almost all possible angles, only to arrive back where it started from with a new sense of insight (try Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=naDaTogQgUg**, for one such journey). Or it can be hard to immediately discern any connections between the apparent 'variations' and the music's opening idea (try Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=iL1XzH6gpAY**, whose main theme isn't stated until bar 34 in the cellos).

Once your students have listened to Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, discuss the following with them:

- Which musical elements (ie melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, texture, orchestration, etc) does Britten alter in his variation on Purcell's melody for flutes, and his variation for oboes?
- Which instrument's variation do you think seems closest or most similar to Purcell's original melody?
- Which instrument's (or instruments') variation do you think seems furthest away, or most different? Are there any variations where you're struggling to see how they connect with the original Purcell melody?

To take things further, listen to another famous piece of music in theme and variations form: the fourth movement from Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet (**https://youtu.be/RMr4pDGooKE?t=1471**). Here, the composer uses the melody he'd taken from one of his own songs (called 'The Trout', hence the Quintet's nickname) as the basis for a set of six variations (the sixth, marked 'Allegretto' in the score, surely counts as a separate variation or even a restatement of the original theme). Now discuss the following with your students:

- How does Schubert go about varying his original melody in his variations? Which variations strike you as furthest away from the original?
- How would you compare the ways in which Schubert varies his melody with the techniques that Britten uses? Which composer stays closer to their original melody? Which composer is freer in the way they change their original theme? Why do you think that might be? How do the different ways they go about varying their themes reflect the musical styles of the times they were living in?

Hymn to St Cecilia

Vocal music was central to Britten's output throughout his career, whether in the form of opera, solo songs or choral music. He completed his choral *Hymn to St Cecilia* on 2 April 1942, on board the passenger ship that was carrying him and Pears from the USA back to Britain (the score is marked as having been finished 'at sea'). It was actually the second time that Britten had written the piece: the original score had been confiscated by New York customs inspectors, who were fearful that it contained some kind of secret code being smuggled from the USA to war-torn Europe.

And in some ways, the customs officials weren't wrong, although rather than divulging any wartime secrets, it's a code that has far more to do with Britten himself. St Cecilia is the patron saint of music, and her feast day falls on 22 November, which also happened to be the day that Britten himself was born in 1913. (Perhaps it was written in the stars that he should go on to become such a prolific and successful musician.) So in many ways, Britten's *Hymn to St Cecilia* is as much a piece about himself as it is about the Saint – a fact emphasised by the text, specially written by poet and close friend of Britten WH Auden, which seems more of a reflection on Britten's character and outlook than a portrait of the legendary Saint.

There's a recording of the piece complete with score here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBFr5xCIwvw**). The work is in three contrasting sections, each followed by a varied version of a recurring refrain:

Section	Timing	Description
Section 1 ('In a garden shady')	0:00	▶ The sopranos and altos sing a lilting, hymn-like chordal melody over a repeating bassline shared by the tenors and basses. ▶ Auden's text imagines St Cecilia in a garden by the sea (also, not coincidentally, one of Britten's own favourite locations). ▶ Listen out for word-painting on the word 'organ', set to wide, slowly moving harmonies, and later 'flickered', set to harmonies that alternate appropriately between two chords.
Refrain 1 ('Blessed Cecilia')	2:26	▶ Britten's first statement of the piece's recurring refrain is almost entirely monophonic, sung in bare octaves. ▶ The only exception is on the word 'translated', where first sopranos and tenors move to a G sharp while the other voices remain on an E – another example of Britten's word-painting. ▶ There are many similarities between the refrain and the music of section 1, in terms of its harmonies and melodic shapes (very similar to both the melody and bassline of the previous section), so much so that it almost sounds like an extension of the earlier section, which is surely intentional.
Section 2 ('I cannot grow')	3:11	▶ Fast-moving and contrapuntal, section 2 stands in complete contrast to the music that's gone before it. ▶ There are similarities, however, between the bassline here (shared between altos and basses) and the bassline in section 1. ▶ Auden's text here is apparently about a precocious child who's reluctant to grow up – possibly a reference to the way he viewed Britten's artistic sophistication but emotional immaturity.
Refrain 2 ('Blessed Cecilia')	4:36	▶ The recurring refrain returns, now richly harmonised across all the voices, and in two distinct layers: second sopranos, altos and basses in one layer, and first sopranos and tenor in the other. ▶ Britten repeats the earlier word-painting on the word 'translated', whose rise to a G sharp now adds a dissonance to the underlying A major harmony.

Section 3 ('O ear whose creatures')	5:26	▶ The piece's third main section is also its longest, and is itself divided into two contrasting types of material in a ternary ABA form. ▶ It opens with solemn, somewhat austere, slow-moving music built over a recurring descending scalic figure sung by the basses. ▶ This is followed by far more lyrical music with a melody for a solo soprano ('O dear white children', 6:55). ▶ The return of the basses' repeating descending figure ('O cry created', 8:40) interrupts the more lyrical music and marks a return to the more serious and austere music of the earlier section. ▶ The returning austere music itself pauses for voices to imitate musical instruments (something of a tradition in hymns to the patron saint of music): first violin, then timpani, flute and trumpet. ▶ Auden's text seems most directly addressed to Britten in this section, encouraging the composer to embrace the loss of innocence that comes with the transition to adulthood.
Refrain 3 ('Blessed Cecilia')	10:45	▶ Britten closes the piece with a brief return for his recurring refrain. ▶ The music of this recurrence is closest to that of section 1, with an almost note-for-note repeat of the earlier section's repeating bassline. ▶ Britten retains his word-painting on the word 'translated', now less noticeable since the G sharp occurs within an E major harmony.

Listening activity: *Hymn to St Cecilia*

Discuss these points with your students:

- Britten sets out to imitate musical instruments with voices in section 3 of his *Hymn to St Cecilia*. How does he go about doing this? What aspects of the instruments' sounds is he aiming to mimic? How successful do you think he's been?
- How would you describe the textures that Britten creates in sections 1, 2 and 3? How are they different from each other? Are there any similarities between them?

Further listening

Britten's output offers a wealth of possibilities for further listening. Here are just two options:

Peter Grimes

Depending on whether you see *Paul Bunyan* as an opera, an operetta or even something like a musical, *Peter Grimes* stands as either the composer's first or second true opera. It's the work that put him on the international opera map: it was hugely successful at its premiere in June 1945 (it was described as opera impresario Lord Harewood as 'the first genuinely successful British opera, Gilbert and Sullivan apart, since Purcell'), and continues to receive productions around the world today. It encapsulates, too, issues that would thread their way through many of Britten's works: the question of an outsider navigating their relationship with a hostile society, and of the loss of innocence. This (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=5992BcToIWM**) is a video recording of the New York Metropolitan Opera's production from 2008 (the opera itself begins at 3:53). If almost three hours of opera feels too much for your students, consider introducing them to *Peter Grimes*'s stormy, intense music through the orchestral *Four Sea Interludes* that Britten extracted from the score, also in 1945 (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht9mQE6XoCo**).

War Requiem

Britten wrote his *War Requiem* in 1961 and 1962, for the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral, following the destruction of the city's original 14th-century building in bombing raids during World War Two. As such, it's a work that reflects the composer's deeply held pacifist beliefs, and one in which he employed the novel structure of contrasting sections from the Latin Requiem Mass for the dead with settings of powerful anti-war verse by poet Wilfrid Owen, who was killed in action during the First World War. Britten brings together huge performing forces for the work – soprano, tenor and baritone soloists, a chorus and boys' chorus, organ, symphony orchestra and chamber orchestra – and a live performance can be something of an overwhelming experience. This (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsSMCq7pl_k**) is the classic recording of the piece that Britten himself conducted in 1963. Again, the *War Requiem*'s 100-minute duration might feel too long for your students, in which case you might consider introducing them to the piece through the hair-raisingly violent 'Dies irae' (**https://youtu.be/rsSMCq7pl_k?t=566**) or the brighter 'Sanctus' (**https://youtu.be/rsSMCq7pl_k?t=2682**), which is full of unusual orchestral and choral effects (its opening sounds are clearly influenced by Britten's interest in Balinese gamelan). Experimental British film director Derek Jarman even made a powerful movie of Britten's *War Requiem* in 1989, setting images to the composer's complete performance of the score (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOVIjKvOcE4**).