



Fancie

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)
Treble Voices
Boosey & Hawkes 19352

Analysis

Broad Description/Type

Unison choral song with piano

Background Information



- Written originally for solo voice and piano in 1961
- Published first in *Classical Songs for Children* (1964) as a setting of the same Shakespeare text by three living composers (Britten, Poulenc, and Kodály)
- Dedicated to Marion Harewood, music editor, children's piano pedagogue, and founder of Leeds Piano Competition
- Revised version (with 3-part ending) published in 1965
- Britten loved children and children's choirs, and wrote many pieces for treble voices
- Britten was very knowledgeable about literature, and skilled at setting classic English poetry.

Text

By William Shakespeare (c. 1564-1616) from *The Merchant of Venice*

- Words are lyrics to a song in the scene where Bassanio must choose between three small caskets, one of which contains a portrait of Portia, whom he hopes to marry. Portia sings the song while he considers which casket to choose: gold, silver, or lead. The song is a cleverly disguised set of clues to help him (e.g. "led, bred, nourished" all rhyme with "lead").
- "Fancie" (modern "fancy") had three meanings to Elizabethans: 1) desire, attraction, or infatuation, 2) something ornamented or decorative, very appealing to the eyes, 3) imagination or fantasy.

Elements of Music

Form

Through-composed *based on text*

Structure supports *ambiguity* of text: a series of vague harmonic areas (E minor-ish, D minor-ish, C minor-ish, E minor/major-ish, F# major, G# minor, G minor-ish) give way to a confident G major ending.


A 1-21 Scherzo like, light texture

B 23-42 "Warmer," different articulation, ends with same minor second as A section

C 43-69 Bell tones

Rhythm

Continuous eighth notes give a scherzo-like, fantastic quality.

Rhythmic motif  introduced in first measure and unifies entire piece.

Augmented to  in final bell section (between piano and voice)

Melody

Tuneful but unpredictable and fanciful. Imaginative use of surprise semi-tones keep the listener guessing. Dramatic octave displacement on "replie" and "Ile begin it" create humorous false "drama."

Many phrases built on rhythmic motif, which is coupled with either repeated notes (“tell me”) or semitones (“Replie”). Rising scales followed by descending scales (growth/death?). Irony in final death knell which is joyful rising G major scale.

- Harmony** Very unstable tonal centers until final G major. Vague minor tonality feeling. Lots of seventh chords keep the tonality vague. Mostly unison melody expands to ringing G major harmony in “finale.”
- Timbre** Middle range of piano and unison voices keeps the color light and bright. Octave displacements on “Replie” and “Ile begin it” create sudden color shifts (hard to sing) which are comical. The final bell tones are scored for maximum treble voice “ring” and combined with ringing piano “bells” and a “fring” ending.
- Texture** Piano provides light, nervous urgency and energy. Unison voices puts emphasis on text which is declaimed very directly and dramatically. Gradual expansion of unison voices to G major chords opens up texture for a ringing “finale” feeling.
- Expression** Soft dynamics with fast tempo create fantastical feeling. Staccato articulations in A section contrast with warmer, legato in B section, followed by dramatic accents in 35-40. Articulations closely tied to affect of the text as it unfolds.

Additional Considerations

Shakespeare text= British accent?

Heart

The heart of *Fancie* is the pressing urgency of its insistent rhythmic motif coupled with accidentals and shifting, uncertain tonal centers which together pose an ambiguous question.

Introducing the Piece

Pass out copy of poem separately. Share 3 Elizabethan definitions of fancie. Invite students to speculate on which meaning Shakespeare intends.

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Skill Outcome

Students will read, hear, and sing half and whole steps, and recognize their function in creating tonal centers.

Strategies

1. Solfege patterns that emphasize half/whole steps. Use hand signs.
2. Add a Note: 8-10 students add a note to an evolving melody. Choir echos. Discuss the power of DO to bring a melody to an end. Tendencies of RE and TI.
3. Human solfege scale: review where half/whole steps are. Move DO. (He’s the boss on Music Street). Repeat with letter name human scale (like keyboard).
4. Students draw keyboard. Learn half/whole step relationships.
5. Ear training: play half/whole steps, sing on solfege and la-la. Students show with open or closed fingers.
6. Teach concept of *accidental* and *chromatic*. Teach students to recognize accidentals and what they do to help change tonal center.
7. Learn to write G major scale on staff paper.

8. Sing different sections of *Fancie* with solfège and notice shifting tonal center.
9. Use “Magic Modulation” handsigns to demonstrate how any note can become DO. Teach concept of *modulation*.

Assessment

1. Students create human scale. Describe half/whole steps.
2. Ear-training quiz on half/whole steps.
3. Half/whole step quiz sheet.
4. Collect student octavos to check for half and whole step markings.
5. Learn to write G major scale on staff paper.

Knowledge Outcome

Students will recognize the *motif* as a compositional device.

Strategies

1. Discuss *motif* as a decorative, organizing device in interior décor.
2. Sing familiar songs “Yesterday” and “Happy Birthday” with motif emphasized.
3. Listen to Beethoven 5th Symphony (Mvt. 1) and recognize use of motif.
4. Have students find the motif in *Fancie*. Discuss how and where it is used.

Assessment

1. Have students create a recurring motif in: a poem, a group composition, a short, improvised composition.
2. Students bring in an example of the use of motif in something visual (3 points), verbal (5 points), or musical (10 points). If motif is extended or altered (and they can describe it, they get 15 points. For a musical example, they must either sing and describe motif or play recording and point out use of motif.

Affective Outcome

Students will explore the idea of ambiguity—that things can often be open to several interpretations or meanings, and that things may not always be what they seem to be at first.

Strategies

1. Study poem and compare 3 definitions of “fancie.” How can several meanings of the word “fancie” work in the same poem? What other words in the poem are **ambiguous**?
2. Have students defend their opinion on 3x5 card of question: heart or head?
3. Share story from *Merchant of Venice* of Portia and Bassanio and three caskets. Discuss how “fancie” has multiple, ambiguous meanings.
4. Discuss Billy Collins poem “Introduction to Poetry” and the use of the word “them.” Who is it? Why isn’t he more specific? Compare to phone book (and how precise and specific it must be.)
5. Look at old lady/young lady optical illusion and talk about two “meanings” that can co-exist and both can be correct.
6. Discuss the ambiguity of tonal centers in *Fancie* and why Britten used this device.

Assessment

1. Journal activity: students describe something they feel ambiguous about in an essay of 150-300 words.
2. Students find and bring in a poem or other piece of writing (e.g. news story) that can be interpreted with ambiguity.



Music Selection

Britten is a significant composer—probably among the one or two most significant British composers of the 20th century. The text by Shakespeare is an icon of great poetry, often quoted, and from a major dramatic work. The piece is short (only 55 seconds) and easy enough for young singers, yet is a gem of imagination, craftsmanship, and subtle compositional devices that are sophisticated yet accessible.