Peter McGrail, "Daniel and Genre Confusion: The Strange Case of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 3, no. 1 (2013): 41–56.

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www.relegere.org
ISSN 1179–7231

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception 3, no. 1 (2013): 41–56

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Daniel and Genre Confusion

The Strange Case of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*

This article explores an opera by Benjamin Britten, designed especially for a church setting. It does so through the lens of musicology and of ritual. It argues that there is here a blurring of the border between ritual more generally, especially the Noh form, and Christian liturgical drama. The presentation of a specific setting of biblical material through the medium of musical performance focuses interpretation of text on the impact of sound and sight on an audience whose perspective is already shaped by encountering the performance within a church building. The paper concludes that watching and believing are not necessarily separate actions.

A special atmosphere arises from the presentation in church. It is remarkably compelling. It is as if centuries of church ritual are infused into the particular dramatization."[1] Thus musicologist and critic Arthur Jacobs

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[1] Arthur Jacobs, "The Burning Fiery Furnace," in "Annual Festival Issue," *Opera* (Autumn 1966): 33–35.

described the disorientating experience of the June 1966 premiere production of Benjamin Britten's (1913–1976) one-act opera *The Burning Fiery Furnace* in the medieval parish church at Orford, Suffolk. The complex layering process that Britten and his librettist William Plomer (1903–1973) had employed to embed a biblical story inside a presentation of a medieval mystery play, the ritual character of many of the opera's elements, and, indeed, its designation as a "Parable for Church Performance" all appear to have provoked for Jacobs a sense of dislocation and the blurring of boundaries between secular entertainment and religious ritual. Other commentators have found the opera less than convincing: "How serious, really," asks Robin Holloway, "is the tone of this elaborate medievalizing? Do the spectators also dress up, in fancy, to become illiterate peasants receiving a 'sermon in sounds'? No answer; the musicians process out, taking their noises with them, leaving their audience too much in the dark."[2]

Britten and Plomer's little opera, with its minimal staging, stripped-down orchestra, and all-male cast raises questions about the range of responses to biblical narrative that are called into play when those narratives are encountered in a shared, communal setting that is not the convention-laden realm of Christian liturgy but the equally convention-rich realm of the theatre. The individual who enters into either of these realms is invited to negotiate a distancing from the everyday, to suspend, to a degree, regular patterns of perception, to engage with a temporary re-configuration of reality, to assume a particular identity (audience/congregation), and to comply with (or, at times not) normative patterns of behaviour associated with that identity. Yet the communal engagement with the scriptural story differs between the two realms. That difference is evident between, on the one hand, the experience of a congregation standing in an Anglican church to hear, for example, the story of the beheading of John the Baptist as it is solemnly proclaimed by a robed deacon flanked by acolytes and, on the other, that of an audience sitting in a darkened opera house for one of the various operatic versions of the same story.[3] However, in its original church setting and through its use of ritual patterns, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* brings the two forms much closer together. In doing so, it brings into relief the potential effects on audience

[2] Robin Holloway, "The Church Parables (II): Limits and Renewals," in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 223.

[3] Peter McGrail, "Eroticism, Death and Redemption: The Operatic Construct of the Biblical Femme Fatale," in *Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art, and Film*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 404–27.

response of removing a biblical story from its expected ritual context.

The aim of this paper is not principally that of investigating the range of readings that can be brought to this opera. Rather, it is concerned to analyse the structural processes by which Britten, Plomer and the premiere's director Colin Graham (1931–2007) contrived to draw their audience through multiple planes of reality, and blurred the categories of theatrical and religious performance of scripture.[4] In that sense, what is offered here is a ritual—rather than hermeneutical—analysis of the enactment of a biblical story.

Origins of the Opera

The Burning Fiery Furnace is the second of three Britten-Plomer collaborations linked by a shared conceptual origin, by a common overall structure and by a similar use of vocal and instrumental resources. The first was *Curlew River* (1964) and *The Prodigal Son* (1968) completed the sequence. Whilst all three were originally performed at Orford Church and share the designation of "Church Parables," only the second and third treat scriptural themes, and the third alone draws on a subject that is, strictly speaking, a parable.[5] Visually and aurally, the opening impact of each of the trio reinforces the Christian association: robed monks process to plainchant onto the stage erected in the medieval church, their "Abbot" announces that they have come to perform a "mystery." Yet what unfolds has it origins in a very different form of highly ritualized theatre: ultimately, the conceptual origin of the Church Parables is not the English town mystery play but the Japanese Noh, which embodies a very different religious world (or, more correctly, worlds) from the Christian.[6]

[4] This task is facilitated by the inclusion of the original production notes in the published score: Benjamin Britten, *The Burning Fiery Furnace: Second Parable for Church Performance, Op 77.*, Libretto by William Plomer, German Translation by Ludwig Landgraf, Production Notes by Colin Graham, 2nd ed. (1966; London: Faber & Faber, 1983). Graham's role was more than that of producer of a previously completed work: Mervyn Cooke notes that Graham was brought into the creative process at an early stage in a "a clear acknowledgment of the role he had played in shaping the dramatic style of the parable genre" (Mervyn Cooke, "From Nō to Nebuchadnezzar," in *On Mahler and Britten: Essays in Honour of Donald Mitchell on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Philip Reed (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995), 136).

[5] Mervyn Cooke, *Britten and the Far East* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 209.

[6] Noh inhabits a complex syncretistic religious world. Not only does it contain both Buddhist and Shinto elements, but even its Buddhism cannot be reduced to either classic Pure Land or Zen forms. See Royall Tyler, "Buddhism in Noh," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 1 (1987): 19–52.

Britten's 1956 encounter in Tokyo with the classic Noh play *Sumida-gawa*[7] provided the creative impetus for the three operas;[8] their generic designation masks a cross-cultural complexity.[9] The ritual elements to be found in all three simultaneously evoke two cultural worlds, borrowing at one and the same time from the Christian tradition and from the formalized Noh theatre. The result is a blurring of boundaries between the different underlying religious worlds at play in the theatrical forms of Noh and medieval mystery—a blurring that is experienced with particular intensity in the two biblical operas. All three works invite their audiences to negotiate a fuzzy limen between two theatrical conventions whilst, in the case of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*, at the same time engaging with a scriptural story that is removed in terms of performance—but not of location—from its usual setting.

Plomer and Britten articulate that negotiation by placing the central action within a double ritual frame of procession and robing/transformation that, while recalling Christian religious practice, evokes the Noh's highly stylised entrances and character transformation. Thus, superficially Christian dramatic and ritual forms are superimposed onto fundamentally Noh-derived theatrical conventions, charting for the audience—should they wish to follow it—a progression from their own world, via the world of the medieval mystery play, into a reading of the biblical story that is stimulated by dramatic conventions drawn from the Noh. Simultaneously, the different frames also serve as a complex sequence of lenses for approaching the core story that, rather than narrowing the field of meaning down, actually expands the breadth of potential readings. Britten and Plomer not only invite multiple readings of the core story in terms of the mystery play/Noh frames,

[7] "Sumida River." Written by Jūrō Motomasa (1395–1431). See Cooke, *Far East*, 130; Mikiko Ishii, "The Noh Theater: Mirror, Mask, and Madness," *Comparative Drama* 28, no. 1 (1994): especially 61–62.

[8] *Curlew River* is a reworking of *Sumidagawa*, transposing the events to medieval England and introducing a Christian tone to the story's end. See Peter F. Alexander, "A Study of the Origins of Britten's 'Curlew River'," *Music and Letters* 69, no. 2 (1988): 229–43; Cooke, *Far East*, especially chapters 5 and 6.

[9] Britten himself explored the hybridity of the genre in his programme notes for the original production of *Curlew River*. Compared to the Noh, he wrote, "Surely the Medieval Drama in England would have had a comparable setting—in an all-male cast of ecclesiastics—a simple austere staging in a church—a very limited instrumental accompaniment—a moral story? And so we came from *Sumida-gawa* to *Curlew River* and a church in the fens, but with the same story and similar characters." Cited in Philip Rupprecht, *Britten's Musical Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221.

but by condensing a simultaneity of perspectives they effectively destabilize a fixed relationship between the story and any single reading, thereby opening a space in which members of the audience can elaborate their own readings.[10]

Ritualising Dislocation: The Framing Elements

In the opening performance, the dislocation that created the opening for multiple readings began before the first note was sung. The first tear in the fabric of normality was made by the physical location within which everything took place. The entrance of the audience into a space primarily designated for the purpose of Christian worship potentially activated in each a resonance or dissonance with his or her personal belief system, experiences, and memories. Such personal engagement with the physical space itself may have been further heightened if the sights and smells of a church interior evoked strong memories of heightened emotional states associated with life-cycle rituals of birth and death that had been the occasion of earlier encounters with a church building. Crossing the physical threshold of the church door for an evening's entertainment might therefore ignite a very broad range of experiences both of dislocation and of association within the audience. Were they there as spectators or as congregation, as believers or critics? Was a neutral position with regard to both location and content entirely possible for those who experienced the piece in its designated setting (as opposed to the other public space of the concert hall or the private realm of the home)? A similar dislocation was also invited of the performers, who were called upon to play the role of medieval Christians performing a mystery play before a group of fellow believers—a point underlined in the stage directions that always refer to the audience as "the congregation."[11]

Once the action has begun, two elements of progressive transformation frame the central story. The first is the processional entrance/exit of the performers; the second is the ritual robing/disrobing of the protagonists. The processional and robing events at the start mark two phases in a movement away from the contemporary setting of the audience to that of the opera's

[10] For example, Clifford Hindley's gay reading of the story as presented in the opera: "Homosexual Self-Affirmation and Self-Oppression in Two Britten Operas," *The Musical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (1992): 143–68; "Britten's Parable Art: A Gay Reading," *History Workshop Journal* 40, no. 1 (1995): 63–90.

[11] For example, stage directions 14 ("the courtiers turn slowly to face the congregation") and 99 ("The Herald enters from the back of the rostrum. He sings straight out to the congregation").

central action—first by establishing the *dramatis personae* as medieval monks who have come into the church to perform a mystery play, second by transforming them into the characters of the central story. The corresponding disrobing and recession at the close of the piece articulate the movement back to the present. Three layers of reality are thus negotiated: the world of the contemporary audience, the medieval world of the church in which they are seated, and the mythic world of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. The sequential transitions through these layers are best understood through an analysis of the forms of procession and ritual robing.

The experience of moving in procession is one of the building blocks of human ritual, articulating the complex systems of relationship between the person, the societal group, and physical space and time. To process is to engage in a corporate act, in which individuals give physical expression to their participation in a common identity and purpose.[12] However, in addition to expressing group cohesion, the procession can also provide a platform for competing social ambitions, both within the processing group and with regard to those outside it. Internally, a procession is not necessarily an experience of undifferentiated societal relationships: it can offer a stage upon which competing interests and ambitions within the group can be expressed.[13] The social hierarchy, by the manner in which its participants are ordered, offers a physical manifestation of their relative status and implied importance. Externally, the communal progression through space expresses a relationship with that space, either in terms of destination, for example in the case of the classical procession of new initiates from Athens to Eleusis,[14] or as a demarcation of ownership, as in the English medieval Rogationtide processions.[15] Its movement through space can furthermore express the inversion of ex-

[12] See, for example, the socially unifying function performed by the *Corpus Domini* Procession in Siena: Machtelt Israëls, "Altars on the Street: The Wool Guild, the Carmelites and the Feast of Corpus Domini in Siena (1356–1456)," *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): 180–200.

[13] Margaret Aziza Pappano and Nicole R. Rice, "'Beginning and Beginning-Again': Processions, Plays, and Civic Politics in York and Chester," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 269–301.

[14] Noel D. Robertson, "The Two Processions to Eleusis and the Program of the Mysteries," *The American Journal of Philology* 119, no. 4 (1998): 547–75.

[15] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 136–39; John R. Stilgoe, "Jack-O'-Lanterns to Surveyors: The Secularization of Landscape Boundaries," *Environmental Review* 1, no. 1 (1976): 14–16, 18–30.

pected rights and privileges, and the invasion of the physical space held by some "other."[16] A procession thus has the ambiguous potential of turning violently in on itself or equally violently outwards on the other: procession can even tumble into riot.[17]

In purely physical terms, therefore, a procession can represent the crossing—or, indeed, transgression—of a threshold between demarcated physical spaces. A procession can also serve as the vehicle for a collective reinforcement of a group's engagement with its core myths—for example, in the traditional Blessed Sacrament processions of the Roman Catholic Church,[18] or the annual Shia[19] festivals. The association of rhythmic movement, communal song or chanting and—when pertinent—movement towards a destination particularly associated with the mythic world of the group all combine to reinforce not only a sense of shared identity within the processing group, but also of unity with the past. In exploring that further, a useful starting point—particularly in the context of the present discussion—is Lévi-Strauss's pairing of music and myth, which he categorises as "languages," which,

> in their different ways, transcend articulate expression, while at the same time—like articulate speech, but unlike painting—requiring a temporal dimension in which to unfold. But this relation to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology needed time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed, are instruments for the obliteration of time.[20]

Eric Hirsch further develops this idea by suggesting that it is certain effects of time, rather than time itself, that are obliterated by mythic performance, that

[16] Carl B. Estabrook, "Ritual, Space, and Authority in Seventeenth-Century English Cathedral Cities," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 4 (2002): 593–620; Gerritdina (Ineke) Justitz, "Reforming Space, Reordering Reality: Naumburg's Herren Gasse in the 1540s," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 3 (2002): 625–48.

[17] An example that unites competing religious, ethnic and territorial claims is the sectarian rioting in Liverpool that was sparked by a Roman Catholic procession on 20 June 1909. See Frank Neal, *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience 1819–1914. Volume 1: An Aspect of Anglo-Irish History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 230–34.

[18] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 243–71.

[19] Peter Chelkowski, "Shia Muslim Processional Performances," *The Drama Review* 29, no. 3 (1985): 18–30.

[20] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 15–16.

is, the orientation of past and present towards a future. Instead, in mythic time, past and future become simultaneously present, and that presence is rendered "conspicuous," that is, perceptible.[21] A procession, therefore, can extend not only through time as understood in linear terms but, insofar as it draws people into engagement with the mythic, it also breaks through the non-physical limen that separates the now from past and future. In that sense, the procession stretches from the present day into mythic time. A procession can thus transit the space between worlds. So the processional forms that open and close a Christian liturgy have the potential of moving beyond purely functional processes, tidy ways of moving the key liturgical players to their respective places. In their hierarchic structure, ordered from participants of lesser significance at the fore to the primary celebrant at the rear, they manifest the hierarchic nature of the Christian assembly in all its complexity. As the processions first move into the place of worship, and then return from it they also mark out a temporal shift from the everyday linear experience of time to mythic time and an encounter with the divine, and then back again.

The procession which opens *The Burning Fiery Furnace* similarly maps the first phase of the transition from the everyday time of the gathered audience into the mythic time of the opera's core story. In the original production, the performers process slowly and according to their "monastic" rank onto the circular stage via a bridge that echoes that of the Noh theatre: "The Company process in pairs: eight chorus Monks, four principal Monks (Ananias, Azarias, Mizael, Nebuchadnezzar) preceded by their Acolytes carrying their robes, the Abbot, preceded likewise by his Acolyte."[22]

However, in a break with both the Noh tradition and the logic of a liturgical procession culminating in its principal participant, the "eight lay-brother instrumentalists" bring up the rear of the procession. The rationale may be found in dramatic impact rather than ritual nicety: the unaccompanied singers are heard before they are seen, and the first sight that the audience has of them is not one of dumb instrumentalists but of a processing choir, voicing the Christian myth as expressed by the Sarum Advent sequence, *Salus aeterna*: "Eternal Salvation, unfailing life of the world/ Everlasting light and our true redemption."[23] The Christian liturgical tone is reinforced by the

[21] Eric Hirsch, "Landscape, Myth and Time," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, nos. 1–2 (2006): 151–65.

[22] Stage direction, no. 1.

[23] J. Wickham Legg, *The Sarum Missal: Edited from Three Early Manuscripts* (Oxford:

opening words by which the "Abbot" addresses the audience, "Good people, in His holy name we come to perform a mystery."[24]

This movement is continued in the second framing event, by which the monks are again transformed through the process of the ritual robing of the protagonists, described in Graham's stage directions:

> CEREMONY. Two monks move to attend each character, who kneels, his acolyte kneeling in front of him. The Attendant Monks remove the cloaks and hoods of their charges who then receive their character robes from the Acolytes. The Monks fold the cloaks and hoods and hand them to the Acolytes.[25]

Graham's title for this unit reinforces the ritual tone of the robing. His directions for the corresponding disrobing at the close of the opera, however, result in a simpler process:

> The Attendants come upstage. The Courtiers move to surround the circle, facing inwards, and hiding the characters from view. During the following passage, the Acolytes, now cloaked and hooded, re-enter to dress the characters in their monks' habits, with the hoods raised.[26]

Ritual vesting—and divesting—has a long tradition in Christian ritual; candidates for baptism were traditionally stripped of their everyday clothing before baptism, and then clothed in white as a sign of their assumption of a new Christian identity.[27] Similarly, ordination ceremonies, in which the candidate undergoes a transformation in ecclesiastical role, may involve the public vesting of the candidate in the robes associated with his particular liturgical office—a visual statement of the shift in identity that has taken place.[28] Graham's clothing "ceremony" and its simpler counterpart at the close of the piece echo such transformations.

Clarendon Press, 1916), 15, 461.

[24] 1, Measures 3–4.

[25] Stage direction, no. 10.

[26] Stage direction, no. 160.

[27] E. C. Whitaker and Maxwell E. Johnson, eds., *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd ed. (London: SPCK, 2003), 7–8, 31–32.

[28] See, for example, International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Rites of the Catholic Church as Revised by Decree of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and Published by Authority of Pope Paul VI*, vol. 2 (New York: Pueblo, 1980), 57, 67.

The Dramatic Core: Content and Structure

The formalised note set by the ritual framing is extended into the performance of the "mystery" itself. The opera compresses together five episodes from Chapters 1–3 of the book of Daniel that focus upon the three young men, Ananias, Azarias, and Mizael. The episodes are: the renaming of the three as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan 1:7); the refusal of the young Israelites to eat food from the king's table (Dan 1:8–17); their promotion to high political office (Dan 2:49); the worship of the golden image (Dan 3:1–19); and the casting of the three into the fiery furnace, together with their miraculous escape (Dan 3:19–30). To these are added sections of the Song of the Three Young Men.[29] Omitted from the opera is the figure of Daniel, who features in the biblical text of the first three episodes. On the other hand, Plomer and Britten created a new character into whom the "Abbot" is transformed. This is the Astrologer, who acts as antagonist to both the three young men and to the King.

In producing the libretto, Plomer concentrated the various biblical segments into a unified dramatic time-frame through the construct of a feast held by Nebuchadnezzer to honour the Jews. The feast opens with the promotion of the young men and the conferment of their new names and closes with the King's confusion at their refusal to share his table. Nebuchadnezzar resolves this crisis by instigating the worship of the image of gold, from which the fiery furnace episode naturally flows. The action thus falls into two broad halves—each of which contains two highly stylized elements that in many settings can assume a ritual flavour. These elements are ceremonial naming and feasting in the first half, and the worship and (attempted) execution in the second.[30] Linking the two halves is a blurring of roles among the performers. Led by the character of the Herald, who performs a role not unlike that of a Master of Ceremonies throughout the piece, the eight instrumentalists leave the space dedicated to them and process through the body of the church in imitation of the "cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dul-

[29] Verses 35–44 are sung while the young men are in the furnace, though the order of verses 36 and 37 is inverted; verses 45, 48, 52, 55, 57, 58, and 66a after they emerge from it.

[30] For execution as ritual, see, for example, H. Byron Earhart, "*Ishikozume* Ritual Execution in Japanese Religion, Especially in *Shugendō*," *Numen* 13, no. 2 (1996): 116–27; Annulla Linders, "The Execution Spectacle and State Legitimacy: The Changing Nature of the American Execution Audience, 1833–1937," *Law and Society Review* 36, no. 3 (2002): 607–56; and Philip Smith, "Executing Executions: Aesthetics, Identity, and the Problematic Narratives of Capital Punishment Ritual," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 2 (1996): 235–61.

cimer and all kinds of music" named in the text (Dan 3:15). This procession certainly thrilled another critic of the original performance as "a Babylonian march of stamping pagan violence around the church."[31] However, its unrestrained exuberance raises the question as to how faithful Plomer and Britten have been to their Noh prototype, to which we now turn.

The Noh Influence

The Noh is a highly stylized theatrical tradition that appears to have evolved from a popular temple-related agricultural ritual theatre into the entertainment of a courtly elite.[32] Two key points may be noted in analysing its relationship to the "Church Parables." The first is that Noh avoids direct emotional expression or conflict—in a sense, the emotion is abstracted from the personal motivations of the character.[33] Noh aims not to present a dramatization of an action, but to explore the inner conflicts of its protagonist.[34] The second flows from the first: Noh's restrained approach is reflected in the small-scale orchestra and cast: interaction is most usually limited to principal and secondary actors known respectively as the *Shite* and the *Waki*, while a seated chorus comment upon the *Shite* and his/her story as it unfolds. By no means are all Noh conventions followed in this work. For example, Britten's instrumental ensemble is considerably larger and more varied than the three drummers and flautist of the traditional Noh orchestra. Similarly, the chorus of monks-become-courtiers plays a more active dramatic role than its Japanese counterpart, and the inclusion in the feasting sequence of a cabaret

[31] John Warrack, "Review: Britten's 'The Burning Fiery Furnace'," *Tempo*, n.s. 78 (1966): 22–23.

[32] Solrun Hoaas, "Noh Masks: The Legacy of Possession," *The Drama Review* 26, no. 4 (1982): 82–86; Ishii, "Noh Theater"; and Lim Beng Choo, "They Came to Party: An Examination of the Social Status of the Medieval Noh Theatre," *Japan Forum* 16, no. 1 (2004): 111–33.

[33] See Kanze Hideo, "Noh: Business and Art. An Interview with Kanze Hideo," *The Drama Review* 15, no. 2 (1971): 185–92: "When you cry in Noh, you put your hand in front of your face, but this is not to show that you are crying. It's to wipe away the tears. The action is completely unadorned—it is the essential action of wiping way tears and nothing more. It doesn't matter how you do it, either … The point is that the act of wiping away one's tears has been selected as the one act central to crying. All other unnecessary gestures have been eliminated." (188); Peter Lamarque, "Expression and the Mask: The Dissolution of Personality in Noh," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 2 (1989): 157–68.

[34] Alexander Alland, "The Construction of Reality and Unreality in Japanese Theatre," *The Drama Review* 23, no. 2 (1979): 3–10.

performance by the boy acolytes arguably owes more to Japan's more extrovert *Kabuki* theatrical tradition than to the Noh.[35] There are, nonetheless, some equivalents, but—unlike *Curlew River*, which comes much closer to the Noh prototype—those equivalences are themselves complex.

At one level of reading, the key protagonist of the piece, possessing the most psychologically complex and most dramatically developed character, is Nebuchadnezzar. Given that the part was created for Britten's lead tenor—and life-long companion—Peter Pears, this is not surprising. This character exemplifies to some extent the central Noh role of the *Shite*, as the Abbot/Astrologer shares some characteristics of the Noh *Waki*, not least in his introductory address. And, as in Noh, Nebuchadnezzar is masked.[36] The masking of the Astrologer on the other hand (and of the child attendants in the feasting sequence), does not follow majority Noh practice.[37]

The interaction with the three young men introduces a second level of reading that is explored at some length by Mervyn Cooke. He notes that Graham regarded Nebuchadnezzar as antagonist to the three young men, who thus formed a composite *Shite*.[38] Cooke comments that the figure of the King is far more developed, and it is he, rather than they, who undergoes a process of transformation. He suggests, therefore, that the young men form a composite *Waki*. The Astrologer, he argues, is best understood in terms of the *Shite-tsuri*, one of the occasional subsidiary roles found in Noh.[39] It may, however, be the case that Cooke is forcing the analogy. Ultimately, the internal emotional development of the characters is far too intimately linked to the circumstances of the on-stage action for this to be anything other than a Western drama. Nonetheless, that at least two potential readings of the central roles is possible, even in terms of the Noh, reinforces the sense that the cumulative effect of the opera's multiple fields of reference is to open up the biblical story to multiple fields of meaning and interpretation.

That opening is further reinforced by the borrowing of Noh acting conventions. Whilst the internal dynamics of both music and drama depart con-

[35] See Cooke, "Nō to Nebuchadnezzar," 141. The effectiveness of this segment of the opera has been a subject of dispute: compare Arthur Jacobs's dismissal of it ("The Burning Fiery Furnace," 35) with the more positive interpretation of Patricia Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten: An Introduction* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1969), 208.

[36] Alland, "Construction of Reality," 6.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Cooke, *Far East*, 199.

[39] Ibid.

siderably from the Noh prototype, in visual terms Britten and his collaborators clearly intended that the audience should nonetheless catch a more persistent note of influence. The Noh's highly stylized theatrical style is echoed in the very precise stage directions of the first production. Graham's production notes stipulate: "the action of the story should be as formalized as a ritual: unlike naturalistic action, emotion should never be expressed with the face or eyes but always by a rehearsed ritualistic movement of the hands, head or body."[40] As Alland has noted, such stylization in the Noh functions as a "distancing mechanism" between the action and the audience. Yet paradoxically, whilst that process accentuates the unreality of the events being portrayed, in doing so it also creates a space in which the audience can engage more intensively with the psychological, emotive aspects of what is presented on-stage: "The major contrast in Noh theatre is between the unreality created by all the distancing mechanisms … and the realism that forces its way through the artifice. Thus essentially Noh theatre is realistic."[41] The combined effect in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* of the multiple performative frames and Noh-inspired performance-style of the central sections is to enhance a sense of the detachment of those central sections from the world of the natural and the everyday. This invites the audience to read what is happening as potentially mythic and universal—each will read it in the light of his or her own experience.

The Music

A similar distancing process can be observed if we examine the music of the piece. The structural role played by the music has already been discussed with regard to the monastic frame, of which the chant *Salus Aeterna* forms a key element. The central instrumental procession, similarly, demarcates the two twinned ritual processes of naming and feast, worship and execution. The music overall is deliberately composed in a manner that enhances the sense of the ritual. As Robin Holloway has suggested, the decision to compose a piece for church performance introduces a series of limitations on the kind of music that would be most effective in that architectural space. The resonance of the space extends the time in which each note is heard well beyond the period marked on the printed score. As dying sounds linger in the air, what appears on the page as a clean musical line is experienced as a complex and

[40] Britten, *Burning Fiery Furnace*, 201.
[41] Alland, "Construction of Reality," 6.

blurred polyphony generated by the building itself. Such spaces, says Holloway, are best served musically by music built around repetition, ostinato, and blocks—avoiding the "warmly expansive." Hence a tendency towards "formalization, observance, ritual."[42]

Britten exploits—indeed, accentuates—such acoustic properties across the piece. This tendency is seen at its best in the two sections that actually depict worship—that is, the worship of the golden idol, and the song of the Three Young Men. The first of these most easily illustrates the principle. It begins with a single vocal line, sliding up and down between the interval of a fourth that is associated throughout the opera with Babylon,[43] or, indeed, with the notion of faith itself.[44] The blurring between notes mirrors and accentuates the blurring caused by the architectural spaces. The net effect has been well described by Holloway: The music of this piece "renders unending time and implies vast space and place, by dissolving the bonds of harmony and rhythms until it seems that music itself will drain away leaving nothing behind."[45] All of which echoes Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the obliterating effects of music on time:

> Because of the internal organization of the musical work, the act of listening to it immobilizes passing time; it catches and enfolds it as one catches and enfolds a cloth flapping in the wind. It follows that by listening to music, and while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality.[46]

Is It Ritual?

Thus *The Burning Fiery Furnace* contains ritual elements on a number of different planes: it is structured in a complex manner around carefully assembled ritual acts; it attempts to import into a Western musical-dramatic form at least the outer trappings of a ritualized oriental theatrical form; and

[42] Holloway, "Church Parables," 217.

[43] Warrack, "Review," 22; Hindley, "Homosexual Self-Affirmation," 80.

[44] Hindley, "Homosexual Self-Affirmation," 160–1. Hindley's point is to distance faith from "integrity" in support of his gay reading of the opera: "The fourth-based themes stand for 'faith' only in the sense of the outward forms of religion and its rituals of worship … but the inner illumination of conscience is what matters, whether by personal affirmation of one's own nature (the three Israelites) or by conversion to the 'truth' (Nebuchadnezzar)."

[45] Holloway, "Church Parables," 217–18.

[46] Lévi-Strauss, *Raw and the Cooked*, 16.

musically not only does it contain chant originally written for Western Christian worship, but its very musical forms mirror the dramatic architecture in tending towards a ritual repetition and stylization. Yet, is what the audience experiences at its performances a ritual event? As cited at the start, one of the critics of the first production certainly felt moved in that direction, and thirty-five years later Philip Rupprecht analysed the Noh-inspired gestures of *Curlew River* in terms that might also be applied to *The Burning Fiery Furnace*:

> Such a fusion of stylized physical acts with verbal or musical utterance is a characteristic of ritual that transcends the specific Japanese source (one need only recall the censing of the altar during the Introit and the kissing of the page following the Gospel reading in the Roman Catholic mass, to accept this near-universal aspect of the ceremonial.) And it is precisely in this fusion of act and utterance that the performance of *Curlew River*, at the level of each single gesture, draws near to a ritual.[47]

Beyond the world of Britten scholarship, the application of the concept of ritual to theatre as a form in its own right became increasingly popular in the decade following the composition of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, especially in that a number of experimental theatre groups claimed the term as a descriptor for their own productions.[48] The implication of that approach was that the audience were not mere spectators, but themselves became agents in the piece, participating in it in a modality analogous to that of worshippers in a religious ceremony. Given the religious theme and the church setting might the same also be said for *The Burning Fiery Furnace*?

The difficulty lies in the term "ritual," which is dangerously slippery but fashionably applicable.[49] Ultimately, it risks degenerating into a category claimed for virtually any kind of formal, repeated, or stylized activity.[50] The consequence of this universality is at least a dilution, or even potentially a

[47] Rupprecht, *Musical Language*, 221–22.

[48] See, for example, Anthony Graham-White, "'Ritual' in Contemporary Theatre and Criticism," *Educational Theatre Journal* 28, no. 3 (1976): 318–24; and J. Ndukaku Amankulor, "The Condition of Ritual in Theatre: An Intercultural Perspective," *Performing Arts Journal* 11, no. 3 (1989): 45–58.

[49] Cf. Graham-White, "Ritual," 321.

[50] For an example, see Dennis W. Rook, "Ritual Behavior and Consumer Symbolism," *Advances in Consumer Research* 11 (1984): 279–83.

complete loss, of specificity.[51] The term becomes of little use as an analytical tool as it loses its precise cutting edge. It is tempting to sharpen the argument by collapsing the concept of ritual into the category of the sacred. Nevertheless, "ritual" is a term that does serve a useful purpose in describing and analyzing secular communitarian events. With regard to the theatre, the situation is further muddied by the necessary recognition that theatre and ritual, even religious rituals, have been strongly intertwined. For example, the complex history of Noh's associations with Japanese religious worlds may be misinterpreted or exaggerated in the West,[52] but a theatrical link between secular and sacred certainly exists there.

However, the relationship between ritual and theatre is best analysed in terms of its complexity, rather than via simple equation. This complexity has most influentially been analysed by Richard Schechner, who understands theatre and ritual to be poles of a continuum within the general category of performance.[53] The difference between the two lies in the intentionality of the performers and—perhaps most crucially—the expectations and intent of those who gather for the event. David E. R. George, in a critique of Western ritual theories of theatre, draws on Shechner to spell out that difference: "a theatre audience differs from a congregation in having no 'we feeling'; it 'watches' and 'appreciates,' rather than 'participating' or 'believing'."[54]

With that in mind, perhaps it is best to distinguish between *The Burning Fiery Furnace* as on the one hand a ritual event and on the other as an event structured around ritual elements and resonances. Perhaps all of that multiple framing is designed ultimately not to create a timeless mythic representation in which the audience could participate, but to isolate them entirely from the content by doubly emphasizing its status as performance.

[51] See David E. R. George, "Ritual Drama: Between Mysticism and Magic," *Asian Theatre Journal* 4, no. 2 (1987): 136.

[52] See Hoaas, "Noh Masks."

[53] Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad," *Educational Theatre Journal* 26, no. 4 (1974): 455–81. See especially 467–71.

[54] George, "Ritual Drama: Between Mysticism and Magic," 129.