

The Burning Fiery Furnace and the Redemption of Religious Kitsch

There was a dramatic silence only broken by the clank of the censer chains as incense was put on and a column of blue smoke began to rise. Then a rather cracked voice intoned, "Let us proceed in peace," but peace was not to be the order of the day, for the tympani began to roll and then with a crash of full organ and orchestra the procession set off singing "Hail thee festival day" in a tumult of sound. I was spellbound by all this and delighted when they came past me so that I could get a proper look at them.¹

—COLIN STEPHENSON, *MERRILY ON HIGH*, 1972

Near the opening of his novelistic memoirs—a chronicle of a long career as an Anglo-Catholic priest—Colin Stephenson looks back at one of the defining moments of his religious life: his first experience of High Mass at St. Bartholomew's, Brighton. Here the stage was set for a lifelong religious aestheticism, an epicurean obsession with monumental processions, intoxicating incense, and kitschy icons. For High Mass at St. Bart's was apparently less a solemn service than an awe-inspiring spectacle. If detractors disparaged the occasion as a "den of iniquity"—or, worse still, the "Sunday opera"—even visiting clergy viewed their own contributions as interludes between the *Gesamtkunstwerk's* main acts. "I preached there not long ago," Fr. Davies reported: "It's not a sermon you have but an interval while the wind performers empty their instruments."² Writing in the wake of Vatican II and related protestant reforms of the liturgy, this aestheticism had come to seem increasingly untenable: "looking back on it now," Stephenson reflected, "one realizes that it had about as much chance of appealing to the average Anglican as the Folies Bergères to the Mothers' Union."³ Yet, for all aestheticism's baggage, it is depicted with deep affection, with an ambivalent sense of mourning for this powerful but increasingly obsolete form of worship.

Premiered at around the same time that Stephenson penned his novel, Britten's *Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966) touched upon much the same ambivalence. The story line, adapted from the *Book of Daniel* by the librettist William Plomer,

revolves around the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and the three Israelites (Ananias, Misael, and Asarias; renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), who were thrown into his furnace for refusing to worship his golden idol. While the story's central message is one of unwavering faith—for God ultimately delivers the young men from the furnace unharmed—Britten's and Plomer's dramatic setting foregrounds its aesthetic implications: the questions it raises about the proper relationship between aestheticism and asceticism, ostentatious worship and austere faith. This chapter will explore this aspect of the church parable's meaning, using the fraught relation between the work and its reception to shed light on how mid-century audiences negotiated the fault lines of contemporary theological aesthetics. If the story line appears straightforwardly to reject religious aestheticism in ways that line up neatly with contemporary trends in liturgy and aesthetics alike, this chapter will offer an alternative perspective, in which Britten's *Fiery Furnace* risked burning down the very boundaries that it staged.

BELLS AND SMELLS

As the tale of King Nebuchadnezzar and his golden statue clarifies, the putative tension between monumentality, sensuality, and luxury in worship, on the one hand, and authentic faith, on the other, has a long and complicated history that goes back to (and even predates) the Bible.⁴ Yet, as Stephenson's novel implies, twentieth-century divisions in the English church had more distinctive roots in the English Reformation, with its puritanical rejection of Catholic religious services. In the eyes of aesthetes like Stephenson, the break with Rome was "a complete disaster [which] deprived the ordinary Englishman of the full practice of the Catholic religion which was his by right."⁵ One of the defining aspects of the Anglican tradition from this point on was opposition to ritualism and aestheticism, practices heavily associated with the Roman liturgy; and so, as Stephenson lamented, "the Church of England got deader and deader and the sacraments fell into disuse," until "a gallant group of men in Oxford decided to change all this and they were subjected to terrible persecution." The heroes of Stephenson's account were of course the mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholics, who cleared a space for Catholic ritualism and aestheticism within the Established Church once again.

Far from extinguishing English antipathy to religious aestheticism, however, the movement arguably fanned its flames, as liberal, evangelical, and puritan branches of the Church of England charged themselves with upholding Protestant principles.⁶ Even in its late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century heyday, when Anglo-Catholic practices entered the Anglican mainstream, such aestheticism was often still coded as "Catholic" in the most derogatory senses of the term. For some Evangelicals, high liturgy signaled moral depravity and sensual indulgence, and was often "associated with 'worldly' activities such as dancing, drinking, gambling and Sabbath-breaking."⁷ Such links were strengthened by a native tradition of

literary aestheticism, stretching from Oscar Wilde to Evelyn Waugh and beyond, which associated high liturgy with moral decadence and class privilege.⁸ Writing in 1968, Anthony Burgess—an English Catholic of a self-consciously puritan stripe—denounced the spirituality of Waugh and other aesthetes as “disturbingly sensuous, even slavering with gulosity, as though God were somehow made manifest in the *haute cuisine*.”⁹ For Burgess and others, such a self-indulgent model of Christianity verged on sacrilege, with the sensual pleasures of worship (“religious good feeling”) replacing genuine faith.¹⁰

In addition, religious aestheticism had strong associations with authoritarian governance and conservative cultural politics. For many, powerfully prescriptive rites were inseparable from dogmatic forms of clericalism and papalism, both of which ran counter to Britain’s constitutional heritage. As one commentator, railing against the Anglo-Catholic liturgy, put it in 1935: “Evangelical Churchmen have no desire that the English should submit to the Pope, or that the Roman Catholic conception of Christianity should be adopted in this country.”¹¹ For T. S. Eliot, flying in the face of the English mainstream, this commitment to hierarchy, authority, and dogma was high liturgy’s most compelling facet, serving as an antidote to modern society’s ills. Railing against liberal visions of spirituality as a personal choice, Eliot cast faith as a corporate affair, requiring absolute subservience to Catholic dogma and ritual.¹² According to him, it was only through obedience and observance that Christian authority and the coherence of English society more broadly could be guaranteed.¹³

If such a corporate vision went against the grain in the 1930s and 1940s, when Eliot penned most of his polemics, it was even more of an irritant by the time Britten’s *Burning Fiery Furnace* was premiered. Particularly as postwar immigration from the Empire and Commonwealth rose, Eliot’s notion of a unified Christian culture seemed increasingly tenuous.¹⁴ The 1960s famously bore witness to an unprecedented cultural revolution targeted at the kind of authoritarian traditions and hierarchies that religious aestheticism seemed to symbolize. While many disavowed religion entirely, others looked elsewhere for decentered models of spirituality.¹⁵ Christian churches and institutions were not immune from these trends.¹⁶ Writing in 1960, John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich and a popular theologian (with whom Britten expressed sympathy), called for services that emphasized liberalism, ecumenicalism, and pluralism: the church as a community of equals instead of a hierarchy.¹⁷ Such reforms, he implied, would leave more “elaborate or heavily ritualistic” forms of worship out in the cold.¹⁸ These changes were matched by even greater revolutions in the Catholic Church, as the Second Vatican Council’s introduction of vernacular texts and music radically re-shaped the Roman liturgy.

This rising tide of theological opposition to aestheticism was paralleled by a much broader trend in twentieth-century aesthetics. One of the driving currents of British modernism was, after all, an explicit rejection of romantic aestheticism.

Even Eliot, who would later embrace liturgical sensuality and sublimity, was instrumental in outlawing these qualities from poetry, considering them effusive, anti-intellectual, emotional, and exaggerated.¹⁹ For T. E. Hulme, another Anglo-Catholic poet and critic, the austere “classicism” of modernist writing was likewise a welcome bulwark against the pseudo-sublimity of late Romanticism: “In the classic,” he wrote approvingly, “it is . . . always perfectly human and never exaggerated: man is always man and never a god.”²⁰ If English theologians viewed aestheticized religion as a compromised and indulgent expression of faith, prominent literary critics apparently found aestheticism’s sacred aspirations equally damaging to art. While Eliot stressed the inadequacy of language to articulate spiritual truths, Hulme insisted: “The instincts that find their right and proper outlet in . . . their own [religious] sphere are spread over, and so mess up, falsify and blur the clear outlines of human experience. It is like pouring a pot of treacle over the dinner table.”²¹ It was here in the aesthetic sphere, in other words, that “high” liturgical aestheticism reversed into its opposite: the lowest of the low. “The original convention which underlies kitsch,” Hermann Broch wrote in 1950, “is exaltation, or rather hypocritical exaltation, since it tries to unite heaven and earth in an absolutely false relationship.”²² For Broch, this conjunction of lowbrow sensuality and metaphysical pretention lay at the root of the twentieth-century kitsch: “the stars, and everything else that is eternal,” he insisted, with echoes of Hulme, “are obliged to come down to earth.”²³

These dismissals were particularly pronounced in the world of opera and theater, where sensuality and spectacle had long reigned supreme. As Adorno suggested in 1955, opera’s characteristic gaudiness and exaggeration stemmed from this quasi-religious sense of overreach: “This original ideological essence of opera, its besetting original sin,” he explained—with a revealing metaphor—“can be observed in decadent extremes, as in the comic affectations of singers who fetishize their voices as if they truly were the gift of God.”²⁴ In his well-known discussion of “holy theatre,” the famed English theater director Peter Brook made a similar point, denouncing romantic opera and ballet for debasing theater by striving toward an excessive, gaudy, and materialistic kind of sublimity:

The tendency for centuries has been to put the actor at a remote distance, on a platform, framed, decorated, lit, painted, in high shoes—so as to help persuade the ignorant that he is holy, that his art is sacred. Did this express reverence? Or was there behind it a fear that something would be exposed if the light were too bright, the meetings too near? Today, we have exposed the sham.²⁵

If Adorno denounced aspirations to metaphysics tout court, Brook sought to revive the theatre’s original “holy” function in the most abstract sense—to allow people to experience the invisible reality behind the world of appearances and to transcend the drabness of everyday life. “It is foolish,” he insisted, “to allow revulsion from bourgeois forms to turn into a revulsion from needs that are common to all men.”²⁶

While Brook avoided specific prescriptions for what an authentic “holy theatre” might look and sound like, the exaggerated and moribund conventions of Romantic theater were clearly anathema to his cause. This often made for a set of anxious, if not seemingly paradoxical, commitments: to transcend the drabness of everyday life without succumbing to escapism; to make the invisible incarnate without material props and effects; to take performers and audiences out of themselves without Wagnerian browbeating; to free up communication by severely restricting actors’ means. Surveying the three figures that apparently got closest to his ritualistic ideal—Cunningham, Grotowski, and Beckett—Brook identified small means, intense work, and rigorous discipline as key ingredients. According to him, this resulted in an asceticism that foreswore the popularity that theater directors and composers had come to expect: “the very purity of their resolve, the high and serious nature of their activity inevitably brings a colour to their choices and a limitation to their field. They are unable to be both esoteric and popular at one and the same time.”²⁷ “There is no crowd in Beckett, no Falstaff,” Brook went on to explain, “These theatres explore life, yet what counts as life is restricted.” If audiences usually reacted to the theater with “stamping and cheering,” the most appropriate response to holy theater was a much more solemn and understated one: silence. “We have largely forgotten silence,” Brook complained, “another form of recognition and appreciation for an experience shared.”²⁸

BRITTEN AND RELIGIOUS AESTHETICISM

As a prominent composer of sacred music, known especially for his dramatic rendering of biblical narratives, Britten was all too aware of the power and pitfalls of religious aestheticism. One might even go as far as to suggest that, having been raised a Christian of a “puritanical” stripe, he had it in his blood.²⁹ As reports from youthful diaries and letters confirm, his low-church background left an indelible impression on him. His first experience of High Anglican Morning Prayer at Gresham’s School in 1928 was met with an ambivalent sense of fascination: “We went to into Chapel to a sort of glorified Morning Prayer. It is a high service, anyhow they sing plainsong, and in the Creed turn to the East and bow and nod etc.”³⁰ Nor had this ambivalence subsided three years later, when he was studying at the Royal College of Music. After attending church at St. Mark’s, North Audley Street, Britten opined: “[V]ery nice service altho’ it is too high for my liking.”³¹ Britten’s simultaneous attraction and repulsion to liturgical aestheticism were even more evident in reactions to the Catholic liturgy. After describing the mutability of her brother’s spiritual sympathies, Beth Welford (née Britten) noted that he was sporadically drawn to the Roman Catholic Church, more for aesthetic than for theological reasons: “I think he felt that their religion seemed more alive than did our Church of England; and he considered their music better.”³² As early as November

1930, Britten wrote enthusiastically of attending High Mass at the Roman Catholic Westminster Cathedral: “The service is very bewildering, but the music superb, & also the choir.”³³

It was not just Britten’s early encounters with liturgy that were shaped by these tensions, but also his understanding of “religious music” in a more general sense. After listening to Wagner’s *Parsifal* and Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* in April 1936, he contrasted the two approaches, invoking a distinction between religious aestheticism and sacred austerity. “Wagner,” he noted, was “attracted to the sensuous side of the subject—the incense, ritual, beauty of sound & emotion, Stravinsky by the moral, psychological side, yet tremendously influenced by the ritual side as well.”³⁴ Closer to Britten’s home, it was Anglo-Catholic hymnody and its choral and even orchestral spin-offs that stood as the English equivalent of Wagner’s brand of religious sensuality. For, as this chapter’s epigraph makes clear, the musical analog of the golden icons was the full textures, propulsive harmonies, march-like rhythms, and stirring melodies of the Victorian and Edwardian hymn. If Nietzsche famously complained that Wagner’s music “has the pressure of a hundred atmospheres,” Britten’s generation often felt similarly about hymnody.³⁵ Writing in 1947, Auden described his experience of the hymn with a mixture of nostalgia and embarrassment, speaking as it did to his narrow and coercive Anglo-Catholic upbringing.³⁶ Yet it was precisely because hymns evoked—even demanded—such a powerfully emotive sense of submission that Auden could not help but look back with embarrassed affection: “It is difficult,” he apologized, in introducing John Betjeman’s poetry, “to write seriously about a man one has sung hymns with.”³⁷

When it came to Britten’s own forays into English church music, the composer proved himself just as ambivalent. As Heather Wiebe has argued, early choral works such as *A Boy Was Born* (1933) and *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942) embodied a relatively new kind of sacred austerity, diverging from the Romantic aestheticism of the English choral tradition, each in different ways: the former with its jarring dissonances, challenging vocal lines, and technical virtuosity; the latter with its pared down textures and modal harmonies.³⁸ This austerity was by no means lost on contemporary critics. While one critic remarked that *A Boy Was Born* “needed some broad tune, something in nature of a chorale, massively harmonized,” Edward Sackville-West championed *A Ceremony of Carols*’s eschewal of sentimentality and aestheticism: “This is not a nineteenth-century Christmas: there is no plum pudding, no jollification.”³⁹

If Britten often seemed to follow what he saw as the Stravinskian path, however, he was not always so abstemious. While a penchant for religious kitsch was already noticeable in *Saint Nicolas’s* (1948) stirring, final hymn—complete with crashing cymbals and rolling timpani—it reached a peak in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with his most popular works of public spirituality. In *Noye’s Fludde* (1958), the monumental hymns and dramatic processions of the cantata from

1948 became louder and more exaggerated, as did their browbeating accompaniment.⁴⁰ Indeed, the hymns included in this setting of the Chester Miracle Play from 1958—“Lord Jesus, Think on Me,” “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” and “The Spacious Firmament on High”—are all sung in stirring unison with full orchestral and percussive accompaniment.

The ritualistic portions of *War Requiem* (1962) were often understood as the culmination of this trend, a pinnacle moment in which Britten “stooped” to a whole new level of monumentality and aestheticism. As Wiebe has pointed out, the composer’s works had “rarely tapped into so blatantly theatrical a mode,” pulling out all the nineteenth-century stops in order to reflect the *Requiem* text’s extremes of violence and consolation.⁴¹ One of the most obvious examples of “sensory overload” comes in the “Dies Irae,” especially when it reappears in the “Libera Me” (see Fig. 113 in the published score). After a gradual buildup—including a dominant pedal, textural expansion, dramatic crescendos, snare drum ostinato, trumpet fanfare, and glissando anticipation—the entire orchestra erupts with a series of musical explosions, symbolizing not only the power of the Almighty but also the detonations of modern warfare. While most critics were effusive, Robin Holloway was not the only one to cast aspersions on the “noisy and banal trumpeting of the Dies Irae” and the “saccharine ‘In Paradisum.’”⁴² It was doubtless these extremes, among other things, that prompted Stravinsky to dismiss the work as a form of religious kitsch—less an embarrassment of riches than a straightforward embarrassment.⁴³ If his principal objection was to the high-minded and coercive rhetoric with which critics lauded the work, he also implied that it had its roots in Britten’s bombastic music.⁴⁴

According to many, it was only against this backdrop that Britten’s subsequent works could be understood—as a step back from the contentious aestheticism and monumentality of his mass for the dead from 1962. While Peter Evans announced a major aesthetic shift in Britten’s post-*Requiem* music, most critics were more specific in declaring a new austerity or asceticism, in his sacred works especially.⁴⁵ In a review of the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965), Colin Mason explained that the cycle “shows to an extreme degree the asceticism which has lately become increasingly marked in [Britten’s] music”:

It well suits the bitter message of the Blake texts, although there is a strong feeling, also, of self-denial on the composer’s part for purely musical reasons. The thrilling harmonic thickening and intensification at “God is Light” in the last song is one of very few examples of his old sensuousness of harmony in a work that makes his Hardy cycle “Winter Words” seem positively optimistic.⁴⁶

If aestheticism was associated with musical indulgence—thick textures, brightly triadic or richly chromatic harmonies, sweeping melodies—asceticism implied disavowal of all these things: “the new emphasis on austerity,” Jeremy Noble noted in 1966, “has shown itself in thin textures, in the virtual abandonment of functional

triadic harmony, and in an increased reliance on primitive technical devices such as ostinato and pedal-point.”⁴⁷

In *Curlew River* (1964), the first of his “Parables for Church Performance,” this asceticism became the basis of a new genre. As the director Colin Graham explained in his production notes, extreme sparsity, economy, concentration, and control were central to its aesthetic and spiritual conception.⁴⁸ Far from eschewing ritual altogether, however, it turned to more ascetic and disciplined forms, from Japanese Noh Theater to medieval Christian monasticism. While *Noye’s Fludde* opened with timpani roaring and congregation bellowing, *Curlew River* began with unaccompanied chant. As the parable continues, this Western asceticism quickly gives way to equally rigid postures and austere music drawn from the East. As Anthony Sheppard has argued, such appropriations were part of a broader turn in modernist dramaturgy away from the illusionism and exaggeration of bourgeois theater.⁴⁹ At the same time, they responded to the ecumenical trends outlined above. By combining Western and Eastern asceticism, *Curlew River* nodded toward the kind of cultural and spiritual diversity that Eliot sought to forestall.⁵⁰ If religious aestheticism’s overwhelming power, sensuality, and indulgence were associated with dogma and authority, asceticism, in its modesty, came to represent spiritual alternatives. One of the reasons that people turned to asceticism throughout this period—in practices from avant-garde theater to Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and beyond—was the promise of a more authentic transcendence: a freer form of spirituality gained, paradoxically, through physical discipline and contemplative self-control.⁵¹ This was not lost on contemporary critics. If several speculated that *Curlew River* had “carried austerity too far,” one defended the church parable in Zen terms: “The intense, spare repetitive nature of the music will probably not make it one of the composer’s more popular creations, but under the best circumstances . . . the work exerts a quiet, hypnotic spell that leaves the sympathetic listener strongly moved.”⁵²

STAGING ASCETICISM

It was in complex and self-conscious response to this backdrop that *The Burning Fiery Furnace* was conceived. If *Curlew River* wore its asceticism on its sleeve, its successor went one step further by elevating style into subject matter—staging a contest between religious asceticism and aestheticism in its story line. On one side of the parable’s central conflict are three young Israelites, whose abstemiousness and austerity testify to the authenticity of their faith. On the other side are the Babylonians, whose self-indulgent worship is associated with fetishism and idolatry, with the most superstitious and authoritarian kinds of established religion. Ultimately, it is the humble and austere faith, in need neither of pomp nor of ceremony, that seems to prevail, with even gaudy King Nebuchadnezzar giving up his golden statue and offering praise to the God of Israel.

Lying close to the narrative surface, then, was an almost Puritan opposition to pleasure, indulgence, and sensuality. While this was perhaps too obvious for most critics to mention, Robin Holloway was eager as ever to highlight the elephant in the room: “In the depiction of Babylonian gold-lust, a tone can be heard that is not so much ascetic as prim and even priggish.”⁵³ In the scene where Nebuchadnezzar puts on a feast, the Israelites’ refusal sets this priggishness in sharp relief:

ANANIAS

Great King! We value deeply
All your gracious favours—

MISAEEL

We feel honoured vastly
To be here at your table—

AZARIAS

Guests at this royal table
Of the great King of Babylon.

ALL THREE

But we beg your Majesty
To excuse our frugality.
We are very small eaters.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Do you live then on air?
When in Babylon, dine.
Dine as the Babylonians dine.

ALL THREE

Sir, pray excuse us.

NEBUCHANDEZZAR

Come now, we cannot have you living only
On your excellent reputations.
Never let it be said
We let our guests go empty.

ASTROLOGER

Why are they not eating?

COURTIERS

They are making excuses.

ASTROLOGER

They are not even drinking.

COURTIERS

Not drinking—they are not even drinking!

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

What, you refuse even to drink with us?
Take care lest you offend us.

AZARIAS

O King, though greatly tempted
By this royal meat and wine—

MISAEEL

So graciously pressed on us—

ANANIAS

Your majesty will understand—

ALL THREE

Partaking is forbidden
By the sacred laws of Israel
[*The three draw apart*]⁵⁴

It was doubtless scenes such as this that had Holloway complaining of “the drab-
best stoicism”: “Make do, knuckle under, hold fast, carry your burden, forgive and
forget, dutifully kill the fatted calf. This is cold comfort at best, and at the worst,
not bread but a stone.”⁵⁵ For Holloway, this was an especially strange message for
an artist to impart. Yet, besides swimming with mid-century theological and aes-
thetic tides, Britten’s stoicism had important precedents. If Britten and others saw
Wagner’s music as an embodiment of Babylonian decadence, *Parsifal*’s narrative
appears to come down on the Israelites’ side. In Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*—
premiered in Britain just one year earlier—there was an even more immediate
forebear; not only was Moses the Israel to Aron’s Babylon, but this dichotomy was
borne out in the opera’s style.

The same was true of Britten’s *Furnace*, as Robin Holloway, among others,
pointed out. Its most obvious manifestation lay on the dramaturgical level, with
its opposition to theatrical luxury and excess: “The movement and production
details,” Graham insisted, echoing the *Curlew River* preface, “should be as spare
and economical as possible, . . . [the] lighting as simple as possible; no attempt
should be made to achieve theatrical effects.”⁵⁶ This objective was evident in such
foundational decisions as the setting in Orford Parish Church. This humble stone
building not only foreswore the decadent décor of more elaborate churches and
bore the literal scars of puritanism, but also signaled rejection of the lavish theaters
and opera houses that Brooks and others loved to hate.⁵⁷ According to some, this
denial was matched in the *mise-en-scène*. While the Babylonian component forced
Britten and Graham to loosen their ban on extravagant scenery, the simple stage
design, paucity of props, and plain monks’ vestments (Fig. 10) nevertheless set an
ascetic baseline. As one critic observed approvingly, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*
begins and ends on a “simple, curtainless platform . . . with the singers, dressed



FIG. 10. The Abbott (Bryan Drake): “We Come to Perform a Mystery” (Orford Parish Church, June 1966). Photographer: Zoe Dominic.

as monks.”⁵⁸ If this commentator glossed over much of what came between, some were more brazen, extending diagnoses of simplicity to the production’s more lavish aspects. After reluctantly conceding that *Curlew River*’s simplicity was tempered by a series of theatrical moments, Edward Greenfield defended the latter as actually quite simple.⁵⁹ Goodwin took an almost identical tack, praising the “simple primary colours” of the costumes and stage props as a rule to which even the giant golden statue and fiery furnace were apparently not exceptions.⁶⁰

Some commentators understood the music in a similar vein. Desmond Shawe-Taylor described it as stylistically of a piece with Britten’s other “austere” works of this period, turning to the “furnace music” (see Ex. 16) to explain why.⁶¹ Part of the reason was doubtless its “difficult” musical surface, as Britten skirts

77 *Allegro ritmico*

The glow of the Furnace is seen.

Neb. Heat the burn-ing fie - ry furn-ace! Heat the furn-ace! Heat the furn - ace!

(sul pont.)
Instr. Vla. *p*

Multiple Whip *pp*

Neb. Make it seven times hot ter, hot ter, hot ter, hot-ter, Than it e - ver was be -

Instr. *pp* *f* *f*

Multiple Whip *pp* *p* *mf*

for.
Instr. *Bb* (nat.) *pp*

EX. 16. *The Burning Fiery Furnace*—“Furnace Music”.

expressionism—chromatic tremolos, awkward leaps and false relations, unusual and exaggerated timbres—to fashion forbidding musical sounds.⁶² While the orchestral whip literally mimics the crackling flames, it might also be read as a metaphor of modernist aesthetics of flagellation, as if experiencing Britten’s music meant feeling the characters’ pain. According to Shawe-Taylor, however, it also meant sharing in their hunger, surviving on Britten’s lean musical fare:

Imagine how almost any other composer might have reveled in the orchestral depiction of the furnace heated “seven times more than it was wont to be heated.” Britten has just two string-players; but with an eerie *sul ponticello* harmonic on his double-bass and a low, husky trill and upward and downward chromatic scales from the viola, he gives us the wicked seething and cracking of the heat.

If this diagnosis of musical abstinence seems strained—leaving out instruments such as piccolo, horn, trombone, organ, and whip—there were more unequivocal examples of asceticism. The most striking come in the prologue and epilogue, when the monks process in to the sounds of the *Salus Aeterna*, an unaccompanied plainchant hymn. As Peter Stadlen pointed out, this “lean, ascetic style” spreads to other parts of the score:

An hour’s music is once again largely derived from a plain-chant melody, the beautiful “*Salus aeterna*.” The technical principle is of course familiar from Renaissance times. But in a sense Britten’s lean, ascetic style remains truer to the spirit of the chant than did the ever more luxuriant polyphony of the 15th and 16th centuries.⁶³

While assertions that the entire score was derived from the opening chant were exaggerated, talk of a “lean, ascetic style” was not wholly without foundation. One potent example directly follows the procession, as the Abbot announces the story to the congregation (see Figs. 1–4 in the published score): here the dry recitative borrows the chant’s melodic and tonal contours, while the light organ and drum accompaniment continue its textural minimalism. In the robing music that follows (see Figs. 5–7 in the published score), Britten’s heterophonic elaboration adds subtle textural and instrumental colors even as its muted dynamics, crystalline textures, and meandering harmony preserve the austere sense. This musical abstinence recurs throughout the work, usually as an accompaniment to Jewish prayer. In the Israelite’s trio before the Babylonian procession (Ex. 17), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego invoke both strands of this musical asceticism, shuttling back and forth between organum-like treatment of the *Salus Aeterna* melody and an equally simple heterophonic elaboration. Not everyone approved. “Artistically,” Holloway complained, “the result is a severe impoverishment, even a denial, of the free spirit that could once set Rimbaud and Michelangelo, and write the *Spring Symphony* and *The Prince of the Pagodas*.”⁶⁴

While some viewed this asceticism in terms of self-denial or even pain, most gave it a more positive spin, associating it with the new religious solemnity that Britten’s church parables had inaugurated. If reverential silence was—according to Brook—the response to which holy theater aspired, the humble setting and musical sparsity were apparently key: “the audience,” one commentator observed pointedly, “naturally did not applaud in the religious setting.”⁶⁵ Goodwin was even more explicit, assuring those disappointed “that Britten should have diverted his talent for the theatre into the more restricted surrounding of the church” that “the experiment has, if anything, enlarged . . . our own capacity for experience that can touch our hearts and minds very deeply.”⁶⁶ Invoking “simplicity” as a touchstone of authentic spirituality, he praised “the musical and dramatic conception” as “marvelously balanced and proportioned, conveying an effect of divine simplicity allied to a far-reaching depth of expressivity.”

For many, the climax of solemnity came when the angel descends to rescue the Israelites from the furnace (see Ex. 18). Here the noisy and exaggerated bombast of

quietly (*tranquillo*)
p

Mis. *p*
 And so_ must con - tin - ue, Child - ren of Is - ra - el, Ser - vants of Je -

An. *p*
 And so_ must con - tin - ue, Child - ren of Is - ra - el, Ser - vants of Je -

Az. *p*
 And so_ must con - tin - ue, Child - ren of Is - ra - el, Ser - vants of Je -

Viola *p*
 etc.

Fl.
 Tbn.

Inst. *p* Harp
 Hn.

f - ho - vah, Je - ho - vah. *pp* Lord, help us in our lone-li-ness.
f - ho - vah, Je - ho - vah. *pp* Lord, help us in our lone-li-ness.
f ho - vah, Je - ho - vah. *pp* Lord, help us in our lone-li-ness.
 Organ *pp*
 dim. *pp*

The musical score is arranged in a system with five vocal parts (Mis., An., Az., Viola, and Inst.) and instrumental parts (Fl., Tbn., Harp, Hn., and Organ). The vocal parts are in a soprano, alto, and tenor range. The instrumental parts include a harp, horn, and organ. The score is in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo is marked 'quietly (tranquillo)'. The dynamics range from piano (p) to fortissimo (f) and pianissimo (pp). The lyrics are: 'And so_ must con - tin - ue, Child - ren of Is - ra - el, Ser - vants of Je - ho - vah, Je - ho - vah. Lord, help us in our lone-li-ness.' The organ part features a treble descant on top.

EX. 17. *The Burning Fiery Furnace*—“Israelites Trio”.

Babylonian chanting gives way to the Israelites’ Benedicite, set to an unassuming organum texture with a treble descant on top. While Anthony Lewis praised the “contrastingly simple music and beautiful number for three boys,” Goodwin was confident that “divine simplicity” had prevailed: “the Benedicite is taken up by the full company of men and boys’ voices in a triumphantly eloquent paean. It is a climax of great dignity and spirit.”⁶⁷ Andrew Porter was just as emphatic, insisting

The THREE are seen standing unhurt in the Fire,
with a fourth figure among them

Organ

Harp

Picc.

ff

Hn.

Tbn.

Db.

(pizz.)

Viola

ff

The Fire is still.
very quietly
(molto tranquillo)

80

Angel

Misael

Ananias
Azarias

O all ye Works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.

pp

EX. 18. *The Burning Fiery Furnace—Benedicite.*

“in its very simplicity must lie part of the power: the Angel sings shining unelaborated notes, almost as if catching the overtones of, and casting a steady celestial radiance on, the song of human praise rising below.”⁶⁸ For Peter Stadlen, however, the passage’s virtue was not in simplicity per se but in allowing listeners space to think: “the deceptively spare score,” he enthused, “makes in fact acute demands on the listener’s ingenuity and powers of detection; so much is left to be filled in, a beatific ellipsis.”⁶⁹ If bombastic hymns and dramatic processions were associated with mindless dogma, this simple hymn of praise apparently encouraged a more thoughtful, rational, and even intellectual faith, appealing—as Goodwin pointed out—to listeners’ minds as well as their hearts.⁷⁰

Just as stripping the musical altars was supposed to encourage free, spiritual contemplation, so too was careful choreography. As Graham noted, the “simple, frieze-like” movements were both symbol and model of meditative self-control: “Every movement of the hand or tilt of the head should assume immense meaning . . . This requires enormous concentration on the part of the actor, an almost Yoga-like muscular, as well as mental, control.”⁷¹ In foregrounding this aspect, he was paying homage to spiritual trends as well as experimental theatrical traditions; Yoga and other “alternative” spiritualities were said to model a direct, personal, and reflective relationship with the divine. While the Babylonians prepare themselves to be carried away with intoxicating hymns and dazzling images, the Israelites focus their minds in quiet supplication and prayer, emphasizing not just the importance of meditation but of staying true to one’s spiritual self:

ALL THREE [*TOGETHER*]
 Lord, help us in our loneliness.
 The idols of the heathen
 Are silver and gold,
 But Jehovah, Most High,
 Has armed us with salvation.
 In the armour of faith
 Lord, help us in our loneliness.
 We defy our enemies.
 Lord, help us in our loneliness.

HERALD
 By the Royal decree
 Of the great King of Kings,
 Nebuchadnezzar,
 There shall be set up
 In the province of Babylon
 An Image of Merodak,
 The great god of Babylon.
 O people, nations and languages,
 At what time ye hear the sound of the cornet,
 Flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer,
 And all kinds of music,
 Ye fall down and worship the image of gold.
 Whoso falleth not down and worshipping.
 Shall be cast into the midst
 Of a burning fiery furnace.

[The three pray aloud and are interrupted by the instrumentalists preparing for the procession]

ALL THREE
 Blessed art thou, O Lord God of our fathers,
 Let thy name be glorified for evermore.

For our sins we are in the hands of an unjust king,
 But thy ways are just and true.
 O deliver us not up wholly,
 Cause not thy mercy to depart from us.
 They shall not be confounded
 That put their trust in thee.
 Lord, help us in our loneliness.

[Led by the Herald the Musicians circulate in procession, then return to the acting area where the Courtiers have gathered. The image rises in the background, and Nebuchadnezzar and the Astrologer come towards it.]

ASTROLOGER

O hearken, all ye people!
 I speak for the King of Kings.
 Now fall ye down and worship –
 Worship the image of gold –
 Or fear the penalty!

[While the Three remain aloof, still praying to their own God, all the others worship and sing a hymn of adoration to the Image]⁷²

As one commentator pointed out, “the individual’s conscientious resistance to tyranny” was a timely theme in the 1960s, one arguably brought out in Britten’s music too.⁷³ In setting the foregoing text to music, the composer pitted the flexible temporality of Jewish prayer against the coercive rhythms and constant meters of Babylonian decree.⁷⁴ In the ceremonial robing music that frames the drama (see Figs. 5–7 and Figs. 91–92 in the published score), Britten’s subtle heterophony musicalized this point, evoking the “radical religious individualism” of mid-century spiritualism in musical texture and time. Compared with the thick hymnic textures and propulsive harmonies associated with Babylonian corporatism, this flexible heterophony and ambling modality naturally struck a freer, more individualistic tone.

In its combination of Western chant and Eastern heterophony, moreover, this robing music served as an emblem as much of cultural and religious pluralism as of individual liberty. Elsewhere, this connection is made even clearer, as the register accompanies the Israelites’ talk of cultural difference, as they respond to the courtiers’ chauvinistic remarks (see Figs. 46–49 in the published score). Accordingly, many critics heard the supple asceticism of Jewish prayer as a cipher for the pluralism that the parable seemed to promote. Jeremy Noble insisted that the “radical pride and racial hatred” of the Babylonian chorus were “all the more telling for being set against the calm dignity of the music of the three Jews.”⁷⁵ Goodwin went even further, casting Britten’s music, for the Israelites especially, as an “eloquent protest against intolerance and racial prejudice.”⁷⁶

BRITTEN'S BABYLON

Alongside the push to establish the new church parable's ascetic credentials went recognition that it stepped back from the brink of austerity in various ways. Plomer described it as "less severe in mood and incident" than *Curlew River*, and Britten's original conception was of a work "for the same instruments . . . probably using the same kinds of technique—but something much less sombre, an altogether gayer affair."⁷⁷ Despite all the talk of austerity and asceticism, even Peter Stadlen described Britten's *Furnace* as something of a *Meistersinger* to *Curlew River's Tristan*.⁷⁸ According to most commentators, this difference was down to the plot. Where *Curlew River* portrayed a mother's inner turmoil and grief, the biblical narrative staged an altogether more "dramatic" battle.⁷⁹ Noble remarked that, "for all their similarities, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* makes a more extrovert, less private impression than *Curlew River*," while Stadlen elaborated on the "wealth of coloristic, descriptive invention that mirrors the confrontation of the worlds of Babylon and Israel."⁸⁰ Thus, even as the narrative's progress rejects aestheticism explicitly, it also carved out space for it. Representing the Babylonian foil to ascetic spirituality meant depicting its contrasting qualities and features in full.

According to Graham, the more "outgoing, fantastic and colorful" elements were in the first place visual.⁸¹ As he explained in his production notes, the "rich purples, reds and golds" of the Babylonians set them apart from the Jewish heroes in their austere hues (see Figs. 11–12).⁸² This can be seen as well in the gaudy icon that the Babylonians worship (Fig. 13). "On the bare platform," one critic observed, "much of the dramatic effect comes from the costumes that the monks don. Most spectacular is a gold and orange robe for Nebuchadnezzar, with a train perhaps 10 yards long carried by two pages."⁸³ Another commentator made the point by comparison:

Visually, [the production] is much less austere—the golden image, a blaze of purpureal radiance, the fire, the vision of the four men and the fabulous sinister splendour of Nebuchadnezzar's appearance, his face and fingers masked in gold, his train a billowing mask of gold and orange.⁸⁴

This increase in vivid colors was apparently mirrored in Britten's score: "even the orchestration, though Britten has added only one instrument, an alto trombone, to the *Curlew River* complement, sounds richer and more colourful," noted one critic.⁸⁵ "To his earlier ensemble of chamber organ, flute, viola, horn, double-bass, harp and small bright percussion instruments," Porter reported, "Britten adds an alto trombone, which somehow miraculously enriches the musical texture—not least in the passages associated with Babylonian splendour."⁸⁶ Just like the reds, purples, and golds of the *mise-en-scène*, these "colourful" musical timbres symbolized hedonism, self-indulgence, and excess. But critics and audiences did not necessarily turn away in disgust: "Britten," John Warrack noted, "finds room for much more colour and incident than in *Curlew River*, and if that work's transfixing intensity is loosened, there is a gain in richness and humanity."⁸⁷



FIG. 11. The Three Israelites: (from left to right) Azarias (Victor Godfrey), Misael (Robert Tear), and Ananias (John Shirley-Quirk) (Orford Parish Church, June 1966). Photographer: Zoe Dominic. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library.

It was not just the sheer pleasure of Babylonian timbres that appealed but its dramatic potential too: “The scoring expands accordingly,” as one critic enthused, “most thrillingly in a Babylonian march of stamping pagan violence around the church, in the flickering sting of the fire music, in the lash of the added range of percussion.”⁸⁸ Another commentator followed Warrack and others by singling out the furnace music (see Ex. 16) for its evocative colors: “the evil crackle as the furnace is heated is appallingly evoked by flutter-tonguing on the muted horn, with the lick of flames in flute arpeggios.”⁸⁹ To some extent, the foundations of these effects were already laid both in the Bible’s rhetorical maximalism—with the furnace “heated up seven times more than was customary”—and in the libretto’s spectacular gaze: “See what happens . . . See them all / Go up in smoke! . . . See them burning!”⁹⁰ But even as Shawe-Taylor described Britten’s music as a modest (even abstemious) response to this imagery, most heard it as a timbral feast, with



FIG. 12. Nebuchadnezzar (Peter Pears) and His Golden Mask and Vestments (Orford Parish Church, June 1966). Photographer: Zoe Dominic. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library.

the cracks of the whip, viola and flute tremolos, chromatically inflected swells, and muted trombone ostinati coming closer to indulgent musical spectacle than the champions of asceticism allowed.

Elsewhere, the portrayal of the Babylonians struck a frankly “theatrical” tone. As Edward Greenfield observed:

With “Curlew River” the Noh-play adaptation was largely the antithesis of opera. In “The Burning Fiery Furnace” Britten . . . has found a compromise, keeping the bald structural simplicity and the sense of slow measured progress of “Curlew River,” but implanting a series of striking theatrical moments—the spectacular entry of Nebuchadnezzar in costume of red and gold with an enormous train borne by the acolytes, the appearance and later the equally instantaneous disappearance of the golden idol.⁹¹

In the Babylonian “entertainment,” the libretto thematizes precisely this turn from solemn ritual to theatrical spectacle:



FIG. 13. Nebuchadnezzar's Golden Idol (Orford Parish Church, June 1966). Photographer: Zoe Dominic. Image reproduced courtesy of the Britten-Pears Library.

All sit down and begin feasting, except the Three, who politely refuse what is handed to them. Attention is distracted from this by the Entertainers, who dance and sing.

ENTERTAINER 1
 The waters of Babylon,
 The flowing water,
 All ran dry.
 Do you know why?

ENTERTAINER 2
 Of course I do!

ENTERTAINER 1
 And so do I!

COURTIERS
 Good cheer indeed!

ENTERTAINER 1
 The people of Babylon,
 The thievish people,

Ate the figs,
 They ate the melons and ate the grapes—
 The thievish people of Babylon ate the grapes—
 Do you know why?

ENTERTAINER 2
 Of course I do!

ENTERTAINER 1
 And so do I!

ENTERTAINERS 1 AND 2
 The reason the waters all ran dry
 Was that somebody had monkeyed with
 the water supply;
 The reason the gardens grew like mad
 Was because of all the water they'd had:
 The reason they gobble up the melons and figs
 Was that Babylonians are greedy pigs!
 If pigs had wings then pigs would fly
 Far above Babylon. Babylon, goodbye!

COURTIERS
 Good cheer, good cheer!
 If every change of name
 Leads to a royal feast . . .

ENTERTAINERS
 Goodbye!

COURTIERS
 Good cheer indeed!

[Suddenly the Astrologer notices that the Three are not eating and drinking, and addresses them]⁹²

This sendup of theatrical *divertissement* is introduced in the stage directions as a “distraction” from the issue at hand, and elicits rowdy inattention from the onstage audience. Indeed, so taken are the Babylonian revelers with the spectacle that they remain blithely ignorant of its insulting content. But while most critics got the message, denouncing its “deliberately childish,” “prep. school” aesthetic, some reveled in its spectacle along with the Babylonians.⁹³ One noted that its “charming music” made up for the meaningless frivolity, while another declared himself grateful that Britten and Graham had made “more room for spectacle and diversions.”⁹⁴ Still another breathed a sigh of relief that “the story, if not unremittingly gay, provides scenes of feasting, comic entertainment, idolatrous ceremony and spectacular miracle, a range of moods so much ampler than that of *Curlew River*’s shadowy world.”⁹⁵

When it came to the adoration of the Golden Image, the ambivalence was even more extreme (Ex. 19). After the Astrologer urges everyone to fall down and worship, the chorus drops to its knees in “hysterical wailing,” chanting music that represents not only the Babylonians’ sinister corporatism, but also the literal swooning of the worshipers as they prostrate themselves before the Gold. Ascending sequences, constant crescendos, and extreme timbral effects choreograph their loss of individual control. While Peter Stadlen praised the “wealth of description, coloristic invention,” Shawe-Taylor compared the Hymn with *Moses und Aron*’s infamous pagan dance: “Aided by a mere handful of instruments Britten’s suggestions of a corrupt, hysterical Paganism far surpasses Schoenberg’s ‘Dance Round the Golden Calf.’”⁹⁶ It was “much more than ingenious,” Noble wrote:

Built up out of the glissando fourths with which the trombone had earlier set its official seal on the Herald’s pronouncements, it grows irresistibly into an ecstasy of mindless self-abasement. Dynamics and tessitura mount together, at the prompting of N[ebuchadnezzar] and [the] A[strologer]. Gradually all the instruments, all the voices but those of the Jews, are drawn into the wallowing mass of sound, and when the trombone finally lurches in, at the top of its register, the sense of nausea is almost unbearable.⁹⁷

Nor was he the only one to invoke “ecstasy,” “nausea,” and “intoxication.” This simultaneous repulsion and attraction were even more pronounced in responses to the Babylonian procession (Ex. 20). Here we encounter the full range of instruments in sight as well as sound: this “most spectacular” set piece, one critic reported, “is an orchestral interlude, midway in the piece, in which the players walk in procession through the church playing such instruments as hand harp, alto trombone, a glockenspiel, a French horn and a flute.”⁹⁸ As critics were quick to note, this array of sounds and instruments had its origins in the biblical source—in “the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick”—so it was hardly surprising that the composer responded with the richest, most indulgent textures in the score.⁹⁹ After the bass drum, horn, and trombone pull together the rigid march pattern, Britten superimposes a variety of decorative lines, each of which work independently and contrapuntally to give an impression of opulence and complexity: the erratic viola arpeggios; the syncopated flute pattern; the intricate rhythms of the glockenspiel; the meandering pentatonicism of the little harp. “The exotic instruments come into their own,” noted one critic, in “an astonishing feat of counterpoint”: “each instrument has its own characteristic theme (or rhythm) and at the climax of the March all the themes are simultaneously combined.”¹⁰⁰

But despite its attractive sonic surface, the Babylonian procession, in its quasi-militaristic rigidity, was like Babylonian law and scripture itself: a monumental imperative that allowed no space for individual reflection, deviation, or compromise. While one commentator insisted that “no one could fail to be stirred by

Musical score for "The Burning Fiery Furnace—Hymn to Merodak". The score is written for vocal soloists and a full orchestra. The vocal parts (Neb., T., Bt., B.) are in 8/8 time and feature a melody with lyrics "Me - ro - - - - dak!". The instrumental parts include Organ, Tbn. (*espress. e rubato*), Instr. (bassoon), Harp, Fl., Vla., Hrn., Db., and Bass Dr. The score is marked with *ff* (fortissimo) throughout. The organ part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* (trill) marking. The Tbn. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Instr. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Harp part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Fl. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Vla. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Hrn. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Db. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The Bass Dr. part includes a *ff* marking and a *tr* marking. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical dashed line. The second measure includes a *repeat ad lib.* marking with a wavy line.

EX. 19. *The Burning Fiery Furnace—Hymn to Merodak.*

We bow down before you!
 We bow down before you!
 We bow down before you!
 We bow down before you!

Musical notation includes:

- Vocal staves with lyrics and melodic lines.
- Piano accompaniment with chords and triplets.
- Dynamic markings: *p* (piano).
- Tempo/Performance markings: *accel.* (accelerando) and *port.* (portando).
- Triplets marked with the number 3.

EX. 19 (continued).

58 Led by the herald, the instrumentalists process through the church.

ppp

Lord.

March tempo (*Tempo di marcia*)

Horn

Bass Drum

long

pp *cresc.*

pp *< ff > pp* (always solo) *cresc.* *mf*

Tbn.

pp

cresc. *mf* *pp*

59 The courtiers gradually gather on the acting area

Fl. *portamento*

Vla. *smooth*

mf

pp *cresc.*

f *dim.* *mf*

EX. 20 and Ex. 20 (continued). *The Burning Fiery Furnace—Babylonian Procession.*

the episode,” another explained: “the effect of this pagan march, a contrapuntal web of multi-colored tone, is jubilant—yet menacing and sinister.”¹⁰¹ Still another made reference to the “arresting web of sound,” as if listeners were ensnared in the silky but deadly threads of Britten’s musical texture.¹⁰² But only the most candid reviewers admitted its invidious appeal: “The musical image is so compelling that we hardly need the text to specify the ideology before which the Babylonians are prostrating themselves: nationalism; with its concomitant evils of conformism, intolerance, racial hatred.”¹⁰³

REDEEMING RELIGIOUS AESTHETICISM

As these responses to the Babylonian ceremonies and processions suggest, Britten’s setting threatened the very hierarchies that the parable staged. The problem was not just that the Babylonian music and spectacle could be quite alluring, but also that Israelites’ asceticism struck some as bland. After juxtaposing the Babylonian hymn of praise with the “calm dignity” of the Israelites’ chorus, Noble demurred:

I have a feeling, though, that this is one more case where Babylon gets the best of it musically. Though others may not (in fact do not) agree, I found the final setting of the *Benedicite* oddly ineffective. The texture, with the three Jews chanting in organum-like parallel chords and the solo treble supplying a halo descant at the octave above the tenor line, . . . seemed the very reverse of triumphant.¹⁰⁴

After elsewhere insisting that “this moment of revelation demands a musical image of goodness as powerful as that of the evil that has gone before,” the critic sighed: “the setting of the *Benedicite* . . . seems not to do what is asked of it.”¹⁰⁵ Nor was he the only one to sense anti-climax. Another critic described the *Benedicite* as “the only point at which the music itself seems not quite to rise to the occasion.”¹⁰⁶

But there was yet another, perhaps even more disturbing, way of reacting to the *Benedicite*. According to a handful of critics, the literal representation of the angel amid the fire was as stagey and indulgent as the Babylonian spectacle it supplanted:

But—a miracle! The three young men are standing in the midst of the fire, and there is a fourth figure (a protective angel of God) at their side which grows in incandescence as the temperature rises. The flames part to reveal the youths unharmed and singing the Lord’s praises from the heart of the furnace . . . The youths step out, summoned forth by the astonished Nebuchadnezzar, untouched by fire.¹⁰⁷

While one critic listed the moment among the parable’s stunning *coups de théâtre*, another compared it to the miracle at the end of *Curlew River*, often regarded as a kitschy intrusion into an otherwise abstemious drama.¹⁰⁸ “One could wish,” one commentator complained with quasi-puritan disdain, “that the apparition of the Spirit might be left invisible; it looks painfully like the most sanctimonious Roman

Catholic oleographs.”¹⁰⁹ In a context in which external icons were pitted against individual faith, such a literal staging of divine power seemed to clutter the parable’s picture.

For many, moreover, connections between powerful Babylonian spectacle and the supposedly ascetic denouement were reinforced by the music. Much as in discussions of the *mise-en-scène*, these putatively opposed musical moments often drew comment in the same breath. Among the richest and most thrilling musical moments, John Warrack insisted, were “the Babylonian march of stamping pagan violence, . . . the flickering sting of the fire music, . . . [and] that of the clear treble that pierces the texture to make the fourth voice in the furnace.”¹¹⁰ Another critic offered a similarly revealing list:

The processional march is one of the musical highlights of the score. Another is the song of the three young men in the furnace, the *Benedicite*, with their divine companion, a treble: Britten had already made a memorable setting of this in the *Turn of the Screw*; the new one is necessarily much more solemn and when, at the end of the play within a play, the Babylonian court unites in a reprise the effect is climactic, a moment of musical as well as dramatic glory.¹¹¹

As this commentator reminds readers, the simple organum of the *Benedicite* is not confined to the Israelites from whom it originates, but is ultimately passed to the entire cast of Babylonian worshipers in a grand reprise. Whether arranged in one gigantic homophonic chorus or in multiple dispersed choirs with staggered entries—with the viola, flute, horn, and trombone now bolstering the organ accompaniment—it infuses the originally sparse texture with a richness and monumentality that seemed to undermine the ascetic point.

Yet even in its leanest, most austere guise—when it first interrupts the chaotic noise of the furnace with its solemn sound and overwhelming calm (Ex. 18)—the *Benedicite* still exhibits connections and affinities with the most striking moments of Babylonian aestheticism. One reason for this, perhaps, is the strict regularity of the homophonic refrain, which, for all its vaunted stillness and simplicity, and its treble descant, was as rigidly uniform as the authoritarian march.¹¹² There were also more specific musical or motivic connections, which—as Peter Evans pointed out—acted throughout as “bridges” between otherwise distinct musical worlds.¹¹³ One such connection, the melodic outline of a fourth, is particularly relevant here: as if to echo the Hymn to Merodak (Ex. 19), the interval appears throughout the *Benedicite*, marking the outer limits of the Israelites’ musical paeans. The opening of each vocal phrase, with chromatic appoggiatura on an open vowel (“O”) carried an even clearer sense of Babylonian provenance, suggesting something of their characteristic swooning even as it drew local connections between the respective vocal styles. In this particular passage, the accented half-step is as much a feature of the Astrologer’s music (see “True, O King”) as of the Israelites’s hymn, thus cutting cleanly across the scene’s musical battle lines.

It was not, however, just textural affinities and motivic connections that united the supposedly austere *Benedicite* with the gaudy Babylonian ceremonies: it was also, paradoxically, their differences. For, at the limits of their respective registers, such aesthetic opposites tend to converge; simplicity and complexity, asceticism and aestheticism, in their extremes, often look and sound remarkably alike. This was a point made in the original program notes, where it was suggested that the starkness of the contrast drew the two parts of the furnace music together: “The sudden stillness—the cessation of the ‘fire’ music,” the commentator observed, “is as moving as the brilliant instrumental depiction of the tongues of flames has been exciting.”¹⁴ Indeed, if the march of the procession or noise of the furnace is so rich, dense, or elaborate as to almost fall out of music entirely, the *Benedicite* appears to have had a similar effect for the opposite reason. In the latter, it is the extreme minimalism and simplicity—the chant-like repetition of the choral parts, the paucity of distinct melody or harmonic progression, the sustained notes in the organ and treble line—that focus attention on the sensual aspects of the sound itself.

It would seem, then, that even as *The Burning Fiery Furnace* embraced and rejected the aestheticism associated with Babylonian worship, it found a way of constructing an altogether more acceptable form. In passages such as the *Benedicite*, we encounter a kind of aestheticism that retained its otherworldly quality while appearing less indulgent and authoritarian; more modern, individual, rational, and even—paradoxically—more ascetic. At a time when liberal Christians and theologians were casting off high and low church divides, new age spiritualists were searching for more pluralistic modes, and the theatrical avant-garde were looking for authentic rituals, confusing these boundaries performed timely cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic work. In combining the extremes of religious aestheticism and asceticism, *The Burning Fiery Furnaces* allowed mid-century audiences to have it both ways.

At the same time, it suggests that the fault lines were by no means clear. It was arguably because of its problematic associations, and the self-conscious irony and exaggeration with which it was treated, that the Babylonian worship had such a powerful effect. Indeed, the very fact that the *Furnace* and its reception sought to redeem such registers implies that it was not just authoritarian zealots who longed for tangible access to the divine. Quite the contrary, as the Israelites’ *Benedicite* makes clear, extreme asceticism signaled comparable excess. Something similar might be said of *Curlew River* and more uncompromising examples of modernist austerity, as one critic was at pains to suggest: “No doubt the avant-garde will condemn the experiment for its ‘reactionary’ qualities, but in some ways Britten is here as close as any of their avant-garde (with their own brand of jingles and clonks) to achieving the new ‘complex of sounds’ which is the confessed ideal of Pierre Boulez.”¹⁵ If modernism has often been credited with carrying the secularism, rationalism, and scientism of modernity to its logical extreme, derailing

music into mere noise or sound, we might conclude by implicating even—or perhaps especially—the most extreme instances of modernist asceticism in the aspirations of religious kitsch. The very fact that some critics had trouble separating the two—or even deciding which they found the more compelling—suggests that there was more than one way to “bring the stars down to earth.”