Musica Academica
Volume 3. Issue 2 (2026): 96-106
DOI: 10.61215/MA.2026.vol.3.iss.2.07

DRAMATURGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SOUND AND MUSICAL PEDAGOGY IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S CHORAL WORK *A TRAGIC STORY*

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Abstract

This study examines the pedagogical and artistic significance of A Tragic Story, *one of the twelve choral songs included in Benjamin Britten's* Friday Afternoons *(1933–1935), a collection composed specifically for children's musical education. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining musical analysis, literary interpretation, and pedagogical reflection, the study explores the relationship between William Makepeace Thackeray's humorous poem and Britten's musical setting. Particular attention is given to the interaction between text and music, the composer's use of modal language, ostinato structures, agogic development, and piano accompaniment in shaping the dramatic and comic dimensions of the work. The analysis demonstrates how progressive tempo changes, dynamic intensification, and repetitive musical patterns portray the protagonist's futile efforts while reinforcing the satirical message of the poem. Beyond its artistic qualities,* A Tragic Story *is shown to possess considerable educational value. The piece develops children's musical skills through the cultivation of intonation, rhythmic precision, diction, ensemble coordination, musical memory, and listening abilities, while simultaneously encouraging critical thinking through humour and irony. Britten's ability to transform an apparently simple choral song into a sophisticated educational resource illustrates his broader pedagogical vision of making high-quality music accessible to young performers without compromising artistic integrity. The study concludes* that A Tragic Story *represents an exemplary synthesis of musical expression, literary wit, and educational purpose, confirming the enduring relevance of* Friday Afternoons *within contemporary music education.*

Keywords

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Benjamin Britten, choral music for children, Friday Afternoons, music education

Introduction

Music education, as an integral part of harmonious cultural development, plays an important role through its cognitive, social and artistic formative value. With the help of music, children manage to identify their own emotions and make others feel them as well, through listening or through creation, discovering communication by means of artistic language. Beyond the discovery of affectivity, this language improves thinking, memory, and concentration. Early music education stimulates the development of the intellect by creating mental structures that precede the acquisition of different types of knowledge, while the practice of collective music-making, singing in choir or orchestra, develops social skills such as discipline and collaboration, characteristic of team spirit.

Music education begins with song, through which, alongside specialist knowledge, values and traditions are also transmitted. Singing represents one of the purest and oldest forms of musical expression, the human voice being the one that directly conveys, alongside the most important forms of communication, the entire range of inner emotional states. Song, the meeting point between a literary text and music, inspires and captivates; it 'creates immediate images, accessible to all, direct or indirect. It addresses every subject and adapts to every situation. Regardless of whether the poetic ambitions are elevated or, on the contrary, the verses are childlike, song crosses space and time, apparently defying any aesthetic judgment.'[2]

1. Benjamin Britten's Pedagogical Concept

Song is the central element within the pedagogical concept created by the English composer, conductor, and pianist Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), the artist who devoted his entire life to music education, wishing to offer everyone access to culture. Through his sustained activity in the field of music education, Britten brought classical music closer to entire generations of children, young people, and adults, contributing to the development of aesthetic sensitivity and to the formation of an authentic understanding of artistic values. Britten conceived his works so that they could be received both by experienced music lovers and by listeners without specialist training, achieving a remarkable balance between artistic rigour and the communicative character of music. His activity in music education demonstrates an extraordinary understanding of the process of artistic formation and an outstanding pedagogical vision. Yet

[2] M.L. Dutoit-Marco – *Tout savoir sur LA VOIX*, Pierre-Marcel Favre, Paris, 1985, p. 51

his desire to address a broad public did not lead him to give up the rigour and refinement of his compositional language. Through his creations and artistic initiatives, Britten played an essential role in revitalising the British musical tradition and in bringing English opera back to the attention of the international public.

His best-known works are *Peter Grimes* (1945), *War Requiem* (1962), *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945), and *Billy Budd* (1951), to which many other vocal and instrumental works may be added – numerous among them intended for children. For them he even created works belonging to the operatic genre, with children as performers, in pieces such as *The Little Sweep* (1949) and *Noye's Fludde* (1958).

2. *Friday Afternoons – A Tragic Story*: Background and Significance

Between 1933 and 1935, Britten wrote the twelve pieces later brought together under the title *Friday Afternoons*, at the request of his brother Robert, headmaster of Clive House School in Prestatyn. The title of the collection comes from the choir rehearsals organised every Friday afternoon at the school, the occasion for which these songs were conceived. The collection marks the beginning of the composer's constant concern for music intended for the educational environment and for the musical formation of young people. Throughout this collection, Britten draws on texts by poets such as Izaak Walton, Eleanor Farjeon, Nicolas Udall, Jane Taylor, and William Thackeray, managing through his music to contribute to the creation of an artistic duality of word and sound-image with strong expressive potential. This expressivity is also due to the piano accompaniment, which subtly enters the poetic-musical interplay, supporting, through the instrument's own means, the essence of the artistic message.

Part of this collection is the piece *A Tragic Story*, composed to a text by the poet William Makepeace Thackeray[3], based on a German text by Adelbert von Chamisso[4]. Although the title suggests something disastrous, the poem is humorous. The poet creates an ironic juxtaposition: he mocks the absurd actions of the character, even though the title of the story suggests a tragic situation. At the same time, the verses can also be interpreted from a philosophical perspective, bringing into discussion those elements that cannot be changed in the reality around us and the exhausting suffering caused by their resistance to any modification.

The song tells of a wise man who had a tail attached behind him. He kept thinking how he might make it hang in front. He believed that if he

[3] 1811-1863 English novelist and illustrator, known for his satirical works

[4] 1781-1838 German poet, writer and botanist

turned, twisted, and spun around, perhaps he would manage to change its position. He tried again and again, he moved faster and faster, but all his efforts were in vain. He did not succeed in bringing his tail in front.

The wise man is convinced that the problem lies in the position of the tail, but in fact the theme is the perspective of his own thinking about things. He tries to change something that cannot be changed. The tail may be interpreted as a personal problem, a flaw, or a hopeless situation. However much one 'spins around,' it remains part of oneself. The author criticises the caste of wise men who are deprived of practical sense and satirises people who complicate simple matters, believing they have found solutions to persistent issues while in fact repeating the same mistakes.

3. Analysis of Musical Language, Style, and Meaning

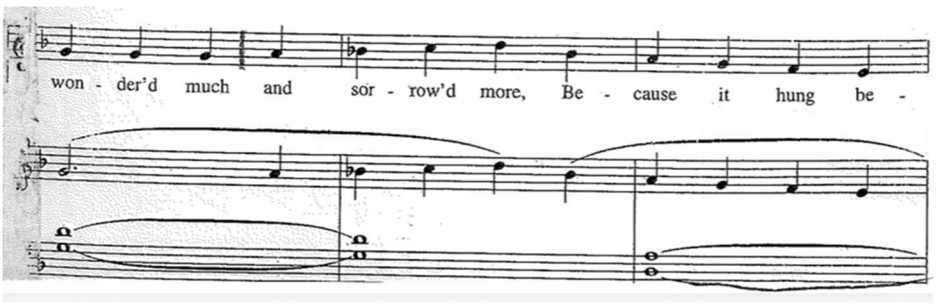
Britten transposed this story into the musical world in the form of a song, written in unison for children's choir, with piano accompaniment. The melodic line unfolds mostly within the first octave, within a range spanning a ninth, with a brief extension to a tenth toward the end. The piece is written in 4/4 *alla breve*, and from a tonal point of view the composer creates a framework that combines modal thinking with suggestions of tonality. Through the double pedal G-D that supports the melodic line, the opening of the work suggests G Dorian, then shifts to D Ionian with a variable sixth degree. In the introduction, the piano performs in the low register a harmonic fifth which, through sustained *legato*, occupies two bars – a double ison that, in varied form, accompanies the song to the end. This repeated interval – modified along the way – which the composer wishes to be clearly marked (*always marked*), suggests the obsessive and persistent thought that gnaws at the protagonist's mind. The form of the musical composition, like that of the poem, is strophic and follows the verses entirely, in a syllabic discourse that emphasises clarity of declamation. The use of fourths and fifths (avoiding completion with the third that would generate a chord) imitates the drone accompaniment characteristic of old English or Irish folk music.

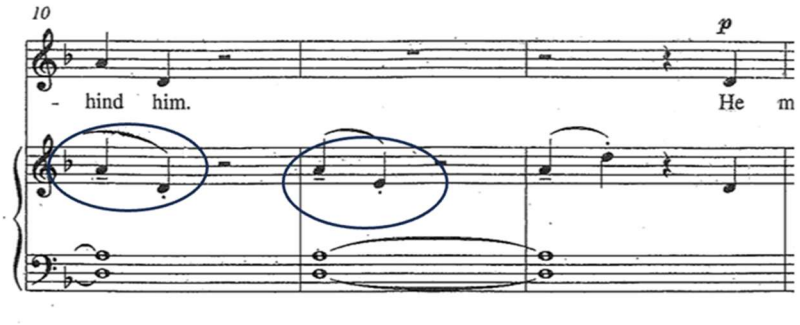
The piece begins in a calm *tempo* – the movement indication being *start slowly* – with an ascending, expansive melodic line that suggests the wise man's pride in the beauty of the tail he bears. His exuberance is also suggested by the expansion of the opening interval from a fourth in the first motive of the phrase to a fifth in the second motive. The harmonic dissonance and the ascending chromaticisation of the sixth degree bring a strong note of irony, underlining the word that highlights the tail's splendidness. These may be observed in the example 1, where all the performance indications written by the composer may also be followed: *start slowly*, *simply*, *always marked.*



Example 1 – Benjamin Britten, "A Tragic Story" bars 1–6.

This optimistic discourse is interrupted by a sad realisation for the hero of the story. He is greatly surprised and even more saddened because his wonderful adornment hangs behind him. This sorrow also appears in the melodic line that ends the first stanza in a descending passage, coming to rest on the minor tonic (D minor). The upper voice of the piano accompaniment follows the choir's melody, complementing the timbral colour of the children's voices. It acquires a dramaturgical role at the end of the stanza, when a figure of two quavers on the first and second beats suggests lamentation, a sigh, through *sospiro*-type cells, the first marked *tenuto* and the second *staccato*, as may be seen in the example 2.





Example 2: Benjamin Britten, "A Tragic Story," bars 7–12

With this sigh, repeated three times, the first stanza comes to an end, the composer granting the instrumental accompaniment two bars of external expansion of the musical phrase.

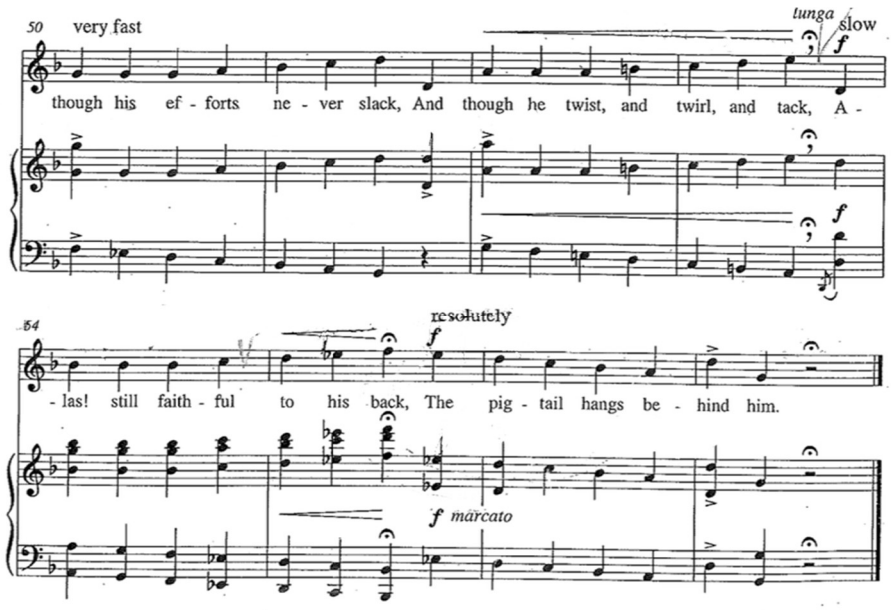
In the second stanza, it becomes clear that the wise man attaches great importance to the problem that preoccupies him and thinks in every possible way about how to solve it. He swore that he would change the tail's place, that he would bring it from behind to the front, showing strong determination. On the musical plane, the increasing agitation connected with fulfilling this desire emerges from the way the composer handles the initial fifth, making it appear more often and more forcefully. This interval, which represents the obsessive thought, now appears in every bar, while the harmony is enriched with notes that provide stronger colours. Against this sonic background, the choral line also appears more clearly defined, and the text takes on a tone of determination, although the melody itself remains unchanged.

At the moment when the hero passes into action (bar 22), convinced that he has found the solution, the *tempo* changes, becoming quicker (*with more movement*), and the dynamic intensity increases to *mf*. Agitation increasingly takes hold of his thinking, and the music suggests this by bringing to the fore the play of registers between the harmonic fifth and fourth in the instrumental low register, each of which is now accented. In the piano's melodic line, the same intervals follow one another (this time melodic), to which the octave is added, executed in anacrustic rhythmic figures interrupted by rests. All this, performed *marcato*, establishes the effervescent and deeply unsettled atmosphere in which the choir voices sing the protagonist's words, as may be seen in the example 3:



Example 3: Benjamin Britten, "A Tragic Story," bars 22–28

The next stanza brings with it an even stronger acceleration of the *tempo* (*getting faster*), as well as an increase in dynamic intensity to *forte*. The figuration in the treble of the piano accompaniment is now continuous, suggesting the protagonist's unbroken and increasingly agitated movement. The ever more intense effort he expends, in contrast with the predictable failure, creates a comic situation, and the energy wasted on something that cannot be changed highlights the absurdity of excessive concentration on certain personal traits. The soundscape suggests the hilarious situation through the exacerbation of *tempo* and dynamic intensity, and through the widening of the instrument's range in the *marcatissimo* chords, followed by rapid superimposed scalar lines creating dissonances, unfolding in contrary motion and coming to an abrupt stop. It is the moment when time itself seems to stop; the wise man's absurd obsession is ridiculed through a prolonged rest followed by the principal theme performed again slowly, as at the beginning, as a sign that after all the tumult nothing has changed. Then the children's choir states the conclusion firmly (*resolutely*): 'The tail still hangs behind the wise man." The choir's melodic line is supported in unison by the piano, a line that recalls the hero's regret at the beginning of the story, this time a fourth higher. This changes the range, which now gives the voices a brighter, more resonant timbral colour, while the choir's *forte*, supported by the same dynamic in the piano, lends force to the final argument. Thus the children convey decisively to all who listen to their voices the wise message that time should not be wasted on things beyond our control.



Example 4: Benjamin Britten, "A Tragic Story," bars 50–57

The obstinate repetition of the melody six times with changes on tne harmonic plane gives the work the value of a set of variations on an ostinato. The differing harmonisation at each repetition of the theme also advances the idea of an inversion of sonic planes in a set of variations on an ostinato, in which the variational plane lies in the bass (harmony), while the ostinato theme is in the treble, in the children's voices. This is a reversal of form in meaningful accordance with the reversal of logic, the absurdity of the text, and the musical situational comedy created by the composer.

4. Pedagogical Values – Message, Humour, Play

Britten does not choose texts at random. Here there is a lesson about thinking, without being explicitly moralising. The child understands intuitively: ''the hero does a lot, but does not think well. The solution is not correct." It is a lesson about the relationship between effort and intelligence. In the context of the school for which he wrote *the Friday Afternoons* cycle, the piece becomes a small life lesson for children: not every problem is solved through agitation, or, in terms more understandable to twelve-year-olds: ''don't keep spinning around pointlessly – think!" The deeper message for children may be: ''You cannot solve a problem merely by changing your position in relation to it, if you do not understand its nature." It is not just an abstract satire; it represents

pedagogy plus intelligent humour for children. After Britten composed these pieces, they became very familiar to children, much as contemporary pop songs are today, the ones children hum at school during breaks.

Friday Afternoons contains works for children aged 12–14, as the composer states. At this age, the text functions first of all as a visually comic story. The analysed piece presents a ‘‘wise man” spinning about ridiculously, an absurd situation that is easy to imagine, and repetitions that amplify the comic effect. Children can immediately picture the comedy of the situation (the continual spinning) and the exaggerated frustration of the ‘‘wise man.” It is possible to speak here of miniature musical theatre.

The text has ideal characteristics for choral education, being a meaningful story that arouses interest. Through structural repetition, ‘‘behind him” at the end of each stanza creates a playful support that can be used in various ways in the interpretation of the piece. ‘‘Behind him” must become an inevitable refrain in our choral story. Each stanza repeats the idea of failure. With each acceleration of the *tempo*, the inevitable ending of failure remains unchanged. The sensation of rotation must be felt through the progressive acceleration of the *tempo*; in this way tension increases, but without resolution. The wise man’s situation unfolds in a closed logical circle, impossible to break through action. The agogics closely follow the wise man’s agitation, which grows to the point of frustration. As the story advances, the acceleration of the song’s *tempo* intensifies, not only from one stanza to another, but even within certain passages during the unfolding of the verses.

Here children will learn notions of agogics, will control coordination, and will learn to listen to one another, while, thanks to the very brisk *tempo* at the end of the piece, they will acquire very clear and articulate diction together with the whole ensemble. This helps with awareness of the pronunciation of the text and rhythmic clarity, as well as with the development of musical memory.

They can become aware of the fourth and fifth intervals with which the two rhythmic-melodic motives at the opening of the stanzas begin, and they will understand the important relationship between the piano accompaniment and their own song, making the aural connection between these two elements. The development of musical hearing is also achieved through this relationship, because initially the piano offers the choristers exactly the starting interval of their melody, while the interlude between the stanzas – different from the introduction at the beginning of the piece – creates mildly dissonant harmonies. The conductor will bring this out; attention to intonation and the activation of musical memory in

recalling the starting interval of the stanzas are basic elements for the successful performance of the composition. They will observe the aural support provided by the piano and at the same time the timbral differences and their blending in the shaping of the performance. Thus, for children, performing this choral piece becomes engaging, enjoyable, and easy to follow and sing, as the instrumental accompaniment mitigates the challenges posed by its unconventional agogics and mildly dissonant harmonic language.

In the context of choral pieces for children, this work is not abstract philosophy, but a combination of play, irony, and a subtle lesson about thought. The title says ‘‘tragic”, but the content is absurd and comic. A pedagogically valuable contrast appears: serious versus absurd. The story is not static; it begins with the calm wise man, who becomes agitated (he keeps spinning) and reaches maximum frustration at the end (contrast from the penultimate staff, *tempo very fast* – to the last staff, where it changes to *tempo slow* – with the climax on the note F2 with fermata, on the word ‘‘back”[5]), but the result does not change. Children can convey in performance feelings of bewilderment and frustration, and they can perceive the comic element.

Conclusions

In the context of *Friday Afternoons*, all the pieces are short, clear, and double-layered in meaning, but this one is special because it introduces intellectual irony without becoming inaccessible to children.

Thackeray’s text, apparently a comic nonsense piece, arouses curiosity and functions as a satire on illogical thinking, while Britten’s composition amplifies this effect through a progressive musical intensification that reflects the character’s frustration, showing in the final conclusion that absurd torments have no resolution. In an educational context, the piece becomes an evident form of musical pedagogy and, at the same time, a subtle form of general pedagogy, made accessible through its artistic mode of presentation.

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[5] See Example 4

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