

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISABLED PHONATION IN B. BRITTEN'S BILLY BUDD

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ABSTRACT

The purpose has been to show by acoustical analysis the essential function of Billy Budd's (BB) stammering in relation to the structure, the main characters and the intrinsic value of the opera. Fabrice Raviola, baritone, who has sung Donald's part in the late Geneva performance (March, 1994), has provided us with live singing of BB's stuttered articulation, free of orchestral interferences.

1. THE CORE OF THE OPERA

The very heart of the work is given by the instrumental leitmotif that appears in Vere's prologue, underlined by a sustained *ppp* trill. It becomes increasingly strong and insisting when the captain sings: There is always

some flaw in it,...some stammer in the divine speech. Just on the extended final syllable of divine before Vere attacks speech, the clarinets play the theme that will illustrate all of BB's fits. The essence of Britten's drama is comprised in this cell of music: that is the ambiguity between BB's honesty, his helpfulness and the evil which assails him from outside. BB stammers whenever some outstanding emotion is overwhelming him.

As to the trill, it is much more extended than the short leitmotif. It indicates BB's acute sensitivity. When we hear it, his psychophysical coherence is splitting up, all his being is shaken. Any other character or happening is than subordinated to the hero's climaxes. While the tremolo sounds

Figure 1. BB, act 1, prologue, Vere, [1]:5.

- even indirectly, for instance, when Claggert is acting his accusation against BB - everything gets uprooted and has to be reset. Any configuration becomes possible and at the same time these shivers push BB to his fatal issue.

2. BB'S DISABILITY ARTICULATES THE OPERA

There are four crucial events of BB's stammering:

1. near the beginning, when the Master-at-Arms questions BB about his origin (I,1) and the latter sings: They/ say - I was a.../ was a ... a.../ a... a... a.../ a... a.../ ...a/ ...a/foundling /;

2. when BB sees Squeak rummaging in his bag (I,3): Hi! - You... a... a.../ a...- / ... - a...- - a... a...- / a...- / Come out of that.-/;

3. when the Novice offers BB money to set up mutiny (I,3): Why for/ me? - / Why - d'ye think I'd.../ - Ah.../ A... A... A...- A... A...- / Dansker old friend, glad - to/ see you.-/;

4. after Claggert's false accusation, just before BB carries out his fatal stroke (II,2): Vere: Defend yourself! BB: / - / a...- a... / - a... / a... a...- / - a... / - a...- / a...- a...- / - a...- / devil! - /.

By their placement, the introductory and the tragic final stammerings are particularly important and more elaborate than the other two. These intermediate ones occur in relative proximity, more or less half-way between the two outstanding stutterings and they are characterized by a lighter structure. Linking in a wide span BB's debut and his exit, they act as half-time trials.

3. PHONETIC AND MUSICAL SIMILARITIES OF THE FOUR STUTTERS

Besides the presence of the leitmotif in the orchestra, speech is blocked more or less on the same vowel [æ] or [a] during quadruple time (4/4). This one may be preceded (events 1 and 3) and

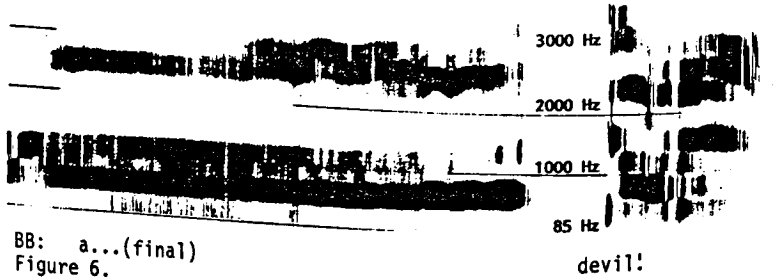
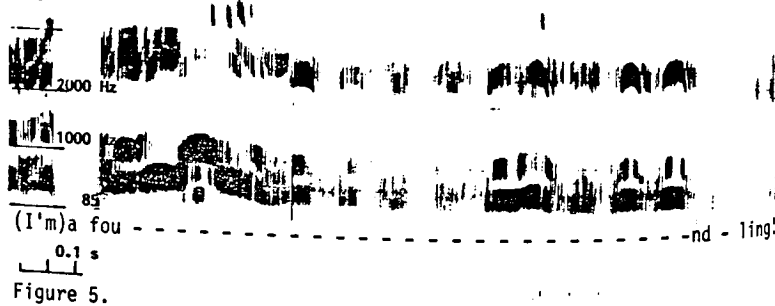
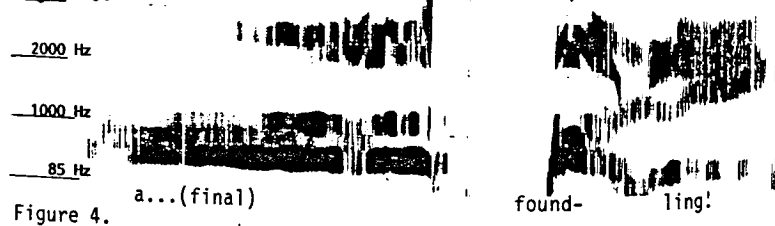
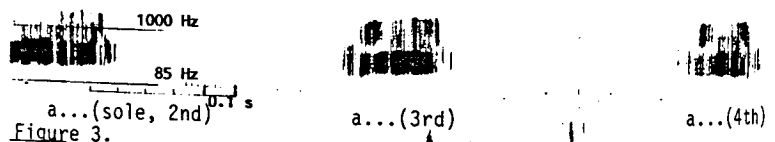
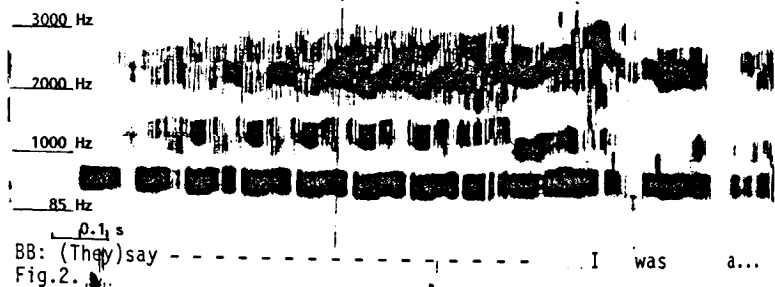
followed (event 1) by 3/4 time but it is basically necessary, especially for Britten's various handlings of syncopation, in order to shape the stammers to the utmost. Quadruple time offers the ideal frame to dislocate syllables by contra tempi into jerks until speech is rehabilitated and accompanied by action. The lower and the upper formants of [æ/a] are "frozen" in a compact display (Fig.3,4,6). Their neutral acoustical profile, largely rendered by quavers and semi-quavers, assures optimal flexibility for rhythmical effects, crescendos and decrescendos as well as subtle instrumental and external vocal interspersions (s. second event).

4. PARTICULARITIES OF THE FOUR EVENTS OF INHIBITED SPEECH

The First Event (I,1)

BB has just joyfully proclaimed: But I can sing! The timpani underline the significant final word with a foretelling tremolo. Three-four time rules the first measures of stammering. In the middle of the verb say, the tremolo sounds again and a considerable extension of the syllable begins to unbalance BB's speech. Then, during a syncopated *pp* stammer, 3/4 time changes into 4/4 time. There follow three decrescendo arsis quaver stutters and another syncopated one. The rests lengthen. The next two stammers are contiguous, marking despair by redundancy: the one is a quaver, the other moves into a contra tempo, stopping dead like a hiccup. After a last crescendo arsis stammer, 3/4 time is reset and a quickly fired discharge on foundling (*sf* [] brings back fluent speech.

As to the coherence of the opera, it is remarkable that at the break of the antepenultimate stutter, the Second Mate starts singing Vere's statement There is always some flaw in them. (slight variation). There is to be noticed, too, that the recovery of speech progresses by rebounds. BB sings foundling four times, unfolding the



notion like a precious find (Fig. 5).

The Second Event (I,3)

For lack of space, we just want to compare the shortest and most isolated stammer of the previous happening (Fig. 7) to the frontal stammer reduction and its effect of delay we find during the second event (Fig. 8). Between this reduced stutter and the preceding one, Red Whiskers and Dansker insert the comment: He's a stammer!

The Third Event (I,3)

It is announced by a striking expansion of the pronoun why which breaches the usual syllabic rates. Psychic and dramatic requirements justify the singing voice in transgressing phonetic boundaries.

As to the stammering itself, compared with the second happening, it comprises similar frontal stutter reduction by a preset rest, associated with syncopation.

The Fatal Event (II,2)

Falsely accused, BB is dumbfounded: his stammer rises from complete muteness. And immediately after his fatal stroke, he is silent again. The stutter is projected straightforward without any preliminary or subsequent swell of syllables and words. Moreover, it is enacted in an extremely sharp-cut way: the longest

stammer touches directly the shortest and strongest discharge (Fig. 9).

There is no further stutter in the opera. The night before being hanged, BB sings a highly melodious part which, as it progresses, becomes a testimony. It ends with the repetition of brief phrases, a sort of phrasal stammer, a far echo of BB's severe inhibitions. Finally, there is the articulated singing of the choir.

5. CONCLUSION

BB's fits of aphasia are the fundamental knots of the musical drama. They link the characters by their acoustical, rhythmical and psychic constituents and give the opera its architecture and its symbolic dimension.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Britten, B., Forster, E.M., Crozier, E. (1985), *Billy Budd, an opera in two acts, opus 50*, revised version 1961, Londo, etc.: Boosey & Hawkes.
[2] Boukobza, J.-F. et al. (1994), "Billy Budd, Benjamin Britten", *L'Avant-scène Opéra*, no 158.

