

# ***THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE***

By  
Benjamin Britten.

## **SUPPORT NOTES FOR STUDENTS**

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### **A Parable for our times - the Director's Concept**

Nebuchadnezzar's words in the Book of Daniel. iv. 30:

*Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?*

It is an historical fact that ancient Babylon was an economic and military force to be reckoned with and especially under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled for 43 years from 604BC, it was clearly the superpower of its day. Its prosperity fueled itself on the military and economic pillage of neighbouring nations, including that of the Israelites (598BC). Not only was Jerusalem sacked and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, but its best minds were also plundered by the victors during the infamous Babylonian captivity. The Babylonians worshipped gold and its power, and they saw this power as universal. Their architecture reflected this, with the Tower of Babel signifying the arrogance of a king, who having conquered the earth would now storm the heavens.

In this production of Britten's opera, I have tried to translate this ancient tale into a modern parable. Babylon is seen as the symbol of all that is worst in the modern commercial system, encapsulating the least favourable features of globalisation and prevailing corporate greed (The recent Enron collapse in the US has been a sober reminder of these aspects). So Nebuchadnezzar, as the CEO, oversees a world based solely on cash flow. His managers, all of whom have been consumed by the 'fiery furnace' of greed, are little more than robotic wielders of his corporate will. Ananias, Misael and Azarias, the three young men brought from Israel, have been 'headhunted' to 'rule over three provinces in Babylon'. Their lives are ruled by a force unknown to Nebuchadnezzar and his board - a force of serenity and compassion. So, Nebuchadnezzar brands them with Babylonian names 'to hide their true natures'. Advised to test their loyalty to the Babylonian company creed, Nebuchadnezzar forces the young men to worship the 'god of gold'. Their refusal enrages him, and he commands that the 'fiery furnace' to be stoked hotter than it has ever been and has the three men thrown in. To Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment they are untouched. In the midst of the furnace the three men intone a hymn of peace, as the symbol of their humanity crystallises about them in the form of an angel.

At the end of the parable, Nebuchadnezzar and his court turn away from their avaricious ways and follow the precepts of the three young men. A cynic could view this as impossibly fatuous and wishful thinking, for it is our human experience that self-serving actions are an intrinsic part of our natures. However, I hope the conclusion of the moral will show that in the best of our human nature there is something noble and resilient, willing to learn and change if given the right inspiration. In doing so we rise courageously and serenely above the petty grasping and jealousy which can often overwhelm us.

### **Benjamin Britten and the “Three Parables for Church Performances”**

In 1956, Britten made a concert tour of the Orient. This experience was to be a major influence on the compositions that were to emerge in the last phase of his compositional life. In particular there were two Eastern artforms that caught Britten’s attention. One was the Javanese gamelan orchestras and the other was the Noh Theatre of Japan.

Britten had long been fascinated by the range and colour of the percussion family and had featured it skillfully and innovatively in several of his compositions to date. From the ‘slung mugs’ in *Noah’s Fludde*, to the virtuosic timpani writing in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Nocturne* Op 60, he showed his affection and skill in writing for this family of instruments. However, the colour and complexity of the Javanese gamelan seemed to draw from him new ideas as it struck in him a resonance that vibrated the essence of the wonder and mystery of the exotic orient. Thus, his use of percussion in later works such as the Church Parables, *Phaedra* and especially *Death in Venice* conjure up the unknown, forbidden and sometimes dark mystery of the east.

The other major eastern artform that inspired him was the traditional Japanese Noh Theatre and this had an altogether more direct influence upon his output. In Tokyo he saw the Noh play *Sumidagawa* by Juro Motomasa (1395-1431). Noh is an ancient artform, the discipline and tradition being handed down through the generations. All the action takes place in a severely restricted area which is occupied by both the actors and the musicians. This ‘stage’, by its nature limits any attempt at ‘realistic’ acting techniques. The actors wear masks and the action is slow and ritualised, involving spare yet potent gestures and yoga-like physical control. The experience made a deep impression upon Britten. In the Buddhist (?) philosophy, which lay at the heart of the play’s message, he saw a link with the medieval morality themes of Christian England. This played on his imagination for several years before crystallising in 1964 into the first of his “Parables for Church Performance” *Curlew River*, an adaptation of the Motomasa’s work by librettist William Plomer, who had been Britten’s librettist for his 1953 opera *Gloriana*. While there was no specifically Japanese references in *Curlew River*, much was derived from it. The all male cast of the Noh tradition was retained but now linked to the monastic tradition of Christendom. The acting area would be restricted and the action, like that in the Noh tradition, would be severe and economical with the small orchestra integral to the drama. The plainchant which opens and closes the play on the other hand, would stress its western origins, serving to give it a sense of time and place as well as providing the germ of the musical material to follow. Geographically the story is firmly rooted in the fen lands of his own beloved East Anglia.

Two years later in 1966, Britten and Plomer again collaborated to produce the second in the trilogy of Church Parables. This time they drew their subject from a specifically non-Japanese source by turning to the the Judo-Christian tradition. They chose the Old Testament story of Ananias, Misael and Azarias in *The Burning Fiery Furnace*. This parable is a distinctly more immediate work musically. Where *Curlew River* is surely the most intense and musically controlled of the three pieces, its esoteric nature is not immediately accessible. The *Burning Fiery Furnace* has a broader range of mood compared with *Curlew River*’s shadowy world. The addition of the alto trombone to the orchestral ensemble also adds to the sense of festivity, frenzy and menace that occupies the core of this drama.

The final opera in the trilogy was finished in 1968. This time the New Testament was the source and the subject was the parable of The Prodigal Son.

## MUSICAL DEVICES AND STRUCTURES IN Britten's *Burning Fiery Furnace*

### General Structure:

As with all three of Britten's Church Parables, the *Burning Fiery Furnace* is framed by a plainchant, in this case "Salus aeterna". This prologue/epilogue framing of his dramas was a favoured device of Britten, seen also in such stage works as *Billy Budd*, *Rape of Lucretia* and in other works such as *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*.

What contributes to the more flamboyant mood of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* as compared with *Curlew River* is the fact that it is structurally more diverse offering a series of set pieces, several with a deliberately festive quality. The orchestration complements this with the instrumentation having strong associations with certain characters and scenes eg the flute and percussion of the Entertainers scene has strong echos of the 'tongs and the bones' scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while the brass is duly associated with the splendour, as well as the menace of Babylon, just as the harp is with the three young men.

### The Plainchant as a source of musical material

As was the case in the other Church operas, much of the musical material for *The Burning Fiery Furnace* derives from the Plainchant "Salus aeterna". As one might expect it provides a rich source of motivic material that is developed throughout the work (see below). What is less expected is the transmutation of the melodic material of the chant into the harmonic substance of the work. (this was a device that Britten was to return to more and more in his last works) The basis for this device emerged naturally out of the ecclesiastical venues for which he conceived the trilogy.

Dramatic works in a church venue can be fraught with problems and many composers would baulk at the acoustic problems that they present. Where most might try to eradicate or minimise this reverberation, Britten enhanced it. Moreover, he engaged this physical phenomenon as not only a textural but a musical device. As we know, any one sound will be sustained for several seconds in such an acoustic. If another tone follows it, it blurs with the former. Take the plainchant 'Salus aeterna' which is sung in the processional of *The Burning Fiery Furnace*



As each note sounds, it is sustained in the melodic 'soup' to become an harmonic cluster with the ensuing notes. It is in this manner that Britten unfolds his harmonic structure directly from his melodic material.

We see a deliberate labouring of the melodic 'blur' in the first instrumental interlude during the robing ceremony, where the melodic germ of the plainchant enhances the 'reverb' effect by the use of close canon in the instrumentation. He does so again later in the opera when the 3 men are left alone on stage





**Interval of the 4<sup>th</sup> and other structures:**

Structurally the interval of the perfect 4<sup>th</sup> plays an important role in the evolution of the musical material in the work. This litany of horizontal and vertical 4ths are often associated with the name of Jehovah and the Three Men and as such could be seen to be symbolic rather than constructive. However closer examination shows that its use is by no means the exclusive domain of the Israelites but also dominates the music of the pagan Babylonian court

The genesis of the motif seems to arise from the plainchant, the Salus Aeterna of the processional. Its lines seem to operate within a fourth span just as the graceful arch of the opening phrase caresses this interval.

The structural (rather than symbolic) use of the interval is confirmed when we see that it is used not only to express the faith and resolve of the 3 men (the perfect 4<sup>th</sup> and its doubled form the minor 7<sup>th</sup>)

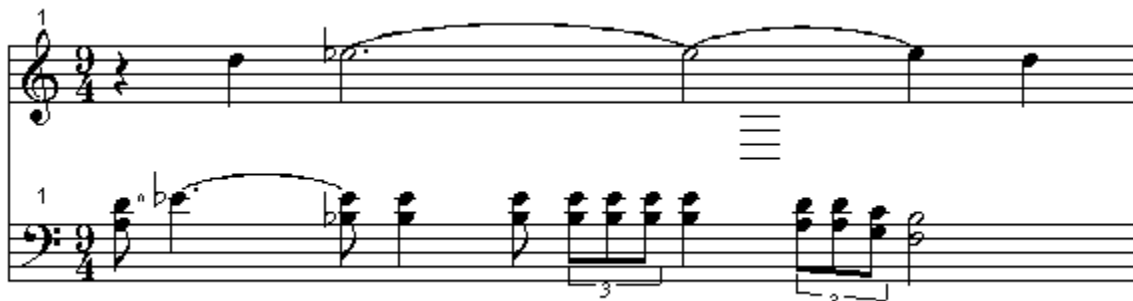
Example:



.. but in no uncertain terms is also used for the pagan howls of the Babylonians as they worship Merodak, the image of gold.



In fact the sonority is so subtly manipulated throughout the work that what could be monotonous in the hands of a lesser composer is here used by Britten as a cumulative gesture, building in effect through its many guises and reaching a climax in the final Benedicte. Here, the reason that the resonance of the organum-like 4ths achieve such a moving effect is simply because it is generated from a sonority which has been such a dominating feature of the work in one form or another.



If Britten uses this and other devices for structural purposes, he relies on other methods (most quite traditional) to establish and sustain the major dramatic tensions in the work.

Dominating these is the over-riding tension of the conflicting Dmaj/Eb tonalities that characterise the Babylonian music in particular. But he also manipulates motifs for dramatic purposes in much the same way Wagner did. In turn, such motifs are often enhanced by the association with the various instrumental sonorities.

#### Curlew sign – no conductor!

In keeping with the Noh Theatre tradition which inspired the works, Britten intended that the Three Parables be performed without a conductor. For this to be possible, two things needed to happen. The rehearsal process would have to be thorough, and there would have to be some device in the score which provided a point of reference, while allowing the performers a degree of flexibility. To effect this he invented a sign which he called the ‘curlew’ (after *Curlew River* and appropriately shaped like a bird!). Britten explains that “the sign over a note or rest shows that the performer must listen and wait till the other performers have reached the next bar line, or meeting point – ie., the note or rest can be longer or shorter than its written value”

However, since these current performances will not have the luxury of protracted rehearsals, we will be using a conductor.

## **BABYLONIAN TRIVIA**

### **Nebuchadnezzar's City**

The ruins of ancient Babylon lie on the east bank of the River Euphrates, about 50 km south of modern Baghdad in Iraq.

Inscriptions, documents and letters written during the 43 years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign give an idea of the power and wealth of Babylon. Here are some interesting facts according to the Greek historian Herodotus about Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon:

- In the form of a square, 14 miles on each side, and of enormous magnitude
- The brick wall was 56 miles long, 300 feet high, 25 feet thick with another wall 75 feet behind the first wall, and the wall extended 35 feet below the ground
- 250 towers that were 450 feet high
- A wide and deep moat that encircled the city
- The Euphrates River also flowed through the middle of the city. Ferry boats and a 1/2 mile long bridge with drawbridges closed at night
- "Hanging Gardens"(one of the wonders of the ancient world) and water was raised from the river by hydraulic pumps (see below for more on this)
- Eight massive gates that led to the inner city and 100 brass gates
- Streets were paved with stone slabs 3 feet square
- The great Tower (Ziggurat) and 53 temples including the "Great Temple of Marduk." 180 altars to Ishtar
- Golden image of Baal and the Golden Table (both weighing over 50,000 lbs of solid gold.)
- 2 golden lions, a solid gold human figure (18 feet high)
- Nebuchadnezzar's palace was considered to be the most magnificent building ever erected on earth.

# THE HANGING GARDENS of BABYLON

The brilliant color and luxury of Babylon became legendary from the days of Nebuchadnezzar, who is credited with building the legendary Hanging Gardens. It is said that the Gardens were built by Nebuchadnezzar to please his wife or concubine who had been "brought up in Media and had a passion for mountain surroundings." During this time, the Hanging Gardens was cited as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Detailed descriptions of the Gardens come from ancient Greek sources, including the writings of Strabo and Philo of Byzantium. Here are some excerpts from their accounts:

"The Garden is quadrangular, and each side is four plethra long. It consists of arched vaults which are located on checkered cube-like foundations.. The ascent of the uppermost terrace-roofs is made by a stairway..."

"The Hanging Garden has plants cultivated above ground level, and the roots of the trees are embedded in an upper terrace rather than in the earth. The whole mass is supported on stone columns... Streams of water emerging from elevated sources flow down sloping channels... These waters irrigate the whole garden saturating the roots of plants and keeping the whole area moist. Hence the grass is permanently green and the leaves of trees grow firmly attached to supple branches... This is a work of art of royal luxury and its most striking feature is that the labor of cultivation is suspended above the heads of the spectators".

However....

There are no records of the Hanging Gardens in Babylonian literature, and the most descriptive accounts of it come from Greek historians. In tablets from the time of Nebuchadnezzar, descriptions of his palace, the city of Babylon, and the walls are found, but not a single reference to the Hanging Gardens is found. Some historians believe that the legendary Hanging Gardens are only the blended stories of the gardens and palm trees of Mesopotamia, the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, the Tower of Babel, and the ziggurats - stories told by Alexander's soldiers when they returned home.

In this century some structures, possibly of the Hanging Gardens, were discovered. Archaeologists are gathering evidence to reach conclusions about the location of the Gardens, their irrigation system and their true appearance.

Recent archaeological excavations at Babylon uncovered the foundation of the palace. Other findings that support the existence of the Hanging Gardens include the Vaulted Building with thick walls and irrigation near the southern palace. A group of archaeologists surveyed the area of the southern palace and reconstructed the Vaulted Building as the Hanging Gardens. The Greek historian, Strabo, stated that the gardens were situated by the River Euphrates. Others argue that the site is too far from the Euphrates to support the theory because the Vaulted Building is several hundred yards away. The site of the palace was reconstructed, and the gardens were located in the area stretching from the river to the palace. Massive walls, 25 feet thick were recently discovered on the river banks, which might have been stepped to form the terraces described in the Greek references.

## **ENRON – a contemporary parable!**

The following article appeared in the British newspaper *The Observer*, soon after the collapse of the ENRON corporation in America. It is a chilling account of a contemporary corporate 'Babylon'.

### **Greed is the creed**

**Will Hutton**

**Sunday January 13, 2002**

[The Observer](#)

American democracy is increasingly a fraud. Money buys votes, influence and office. Contemporary Washington makes Caligula's Rome look like a vicar's tea party. American politicians' need for business donations on a gigantic scale to win their election campaigns now pollutes the discourse of the country's public life, with business writing public policy and corrupting everything it touches. And the noxious consequences, in terms of ideas and business practice, spill over into Britain.

The bankruptcy of the energy trader Enron before Christmas with \$40 billion of debts, the largest recorded in history, was spectacular. It had overstated its profits by half a billion dollars over three years and lost more still in private companies set up to enrich the coterie of top executives in schemes undetected by its auditors, Arthur Andersen. They, we learned last week, had happily disposed of potentially incriminating documents and misled Congress. In tougher times, Enron's capacity to hide what we would understand as theft was exhausted - and the company collapsed. Now the subject of a criminal investigation by the Justice Department, the details spilling out offer a bird's-eye view of how business is done in the US, how favours are bought and how political ideas are honed to serve the interests of the political parties' benefactors. Two members of Bush's Cabinet - the Commerce Secretary and Attorney-General - have had to stand aside from the investigations because they received close to \$100,000 in political donations from Enron. Chief executive Ken Lay, 'Kenny Boy' as Bush dubbed his close friend, personally gave Bush \$100,000.

This was not innocent money for a buddy; Enron also greased the wheels of the Democrats. In 2000, it spent \$2.4bn supporting candidates for public office in the US - \$1.7bn for the Republicans and \$700 million for Democrats. Enron wanted a return on its cash and could not afford just to back Republicans. As an energy trader, it needed to find markets in which to trade, which meant opening up the US's patchwork quilt of state and federally regulated electricity and gas grids to private interests; sometimes, Democrats served this purpose as well as Republicans. Enron did not want to look like just another corporation using money to buy influence; it needed a cover story. It wanted minimal surveillance of its own operations and the maximum opportunity to enrich its directors while making paupers of its workers (before it collapsed, the directors sold \$1bn of personally owned shares while forbidding its employees to sell their Enron shares in their private pension funds); energy markets opened up fast. The story was deregulation.

No chief executive was as fervent an apostle of how regulation cripples wealth generation as Ken Lay, and now we know why. Republicans, of course, were willing allies in the belief that nothing inhibits businesses more than having to respect the law of the land and accept obligations to the wider society in which they trade. But money talks, and during the 1990s Democrats became evangelists for the same set of ideas. How could they accept Enron's money, and that of dozens of other corporations, otherwise?

Thus, over the last decade, Ken Lay and Enron have bought a series of decisions that have driven the company's growth. In the early 1990s, the company ensured via the good offices of Wendy Gramm, then chairman of the Commodity Futures Trade Commission and wife of Enron-supported Texan senator Phil Gramm, that key aspects of Enron's trading should not be regulated; she was rewarded with a seat on the board.

In the mid-1990s, Enron spearheaded the botched deregulation of California's electricity grid, ensuring, amid the mayhem that would lead to black-outs and sky-high prices, that at least there was a mandatory spot market in electricity in which Enron could trade. It made sure, with Bush's election, that regulation remained favourable to Enron, helped design an energy policy based on more spot market trading and successfully lobbied for the repeal of minimum corporate taxes, the proceeds of which, had they come sooner, would have been used to plug the financial holes created by its own executives' venality. This was a much better use of the money than serving the public interest.

This was a pretty useful return on its political contributions, but Enron could not have made the progress it did without the intellectual backdrop that all regulation and taxation is bad - and that the more the US deregulated, the better its economy performed. This was, and is, balderdash. Recent work by economists, notably at investment bank Credit Suisse First Boston, shows that after making the necessary accounting adjustments and including downward revisions, productivity growth in the US has done no more than match that in Europe. Indeed, countries like France and Germany have higher absolute productivity and faster rates of growth than the Americans, despite their approach to regulation and taxation. The deregulation philosophy that enriches Ken Lay and his cronies does not necessarily enrich anybody else. 冪