

Inconclusive conclusions: Ambiguity, semiotics and Britten's Third String Quartet

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Arnold Whittall has suggested that Benjamin Britten's music has a general tendency to reach what he describes as 'inconclusive conclusions'.¹ This phrase seems to catch something of the elusive nature of many of Britten's works, and provides the inspiration for the following analytical study. Specifically, Whittall's notion will be investigated with reference to 'Duets', the first movement of Britten's Third String Quartet (1975)—surely the most elusive movement of one of Britten's most enigmatic, and masterly, works.

Whittall's phrase at first appears to be a contradiction, for how can a conclusion be recognized as such if it is inconclusive? It is possible to argue, however, that within a musical context, conclusions can indeed be inconclusive. A musical conclusion will be defined in this paper as a gesture or passage that gives an impression of closure, a sense of completion, of being finished. This is not necessarily the same as simply ending, for a piece of music may end without reaching a conclusion, stopped in 'mid-stream', as it were. Musical conclusions, therefore, involve an element of anticipation, signalling the end before it actually arrives. In this paper, the term *conclusion* will be applied to the endings of particular sections of the movement, and not just the ending of the movement as a whole. Even though sectional endings may not resolve all the processes at work within the movement, they can still be considered conclusions if they resolve the particular concerns of their part of the work—acting as 'local conclusions'.

A conclusion may be inconclusive in a musical context because there are usually a number of elements involved in its establishment: harmonic, melodic, textural and so on. When some of these elements are arranged to create a resolution, but others are not, listeners may perceive that a conclusion has been reached, yet one that contains aspects of irresolution. The identification of features that form a conclusion is, in semiotic terms, the recognition of a *sign*—a *closing sign*.²

Britten's approach in 'Duets' is arguably to present only partially fulfilled closing signs. The sectional endings in this movement seem to be recognizable as conclusions through the culmina-

tion of motivic and textural processes, aided by dynamics and articulation. But these endings rarely achieve tonal clarity. The often triadic, apparently functional harmonic structures of much of the music generate an expectation that tonal clarity will eventually be reached,³ but what is often given instead is a form of tonal ambiguity which leaves a sense that the conclusion has been inconclusive. Furthermore, 'Duets' also involves much structural ambiguity, so that when a clear tonality does crystallize, its structural significance may be in doubt, once again introducing an element of uncertainty into just what is to be concluded from the conclusion presented to us.

One of the clearest examples of a partially fulfilled closing sign in 'Duets' is found at the end of what Peter Evans describes as the movement's 'dramatic interlude'. He notes that, at the beginning of the interlude, the 'expansion of conflicting pitches into conflicting chords quickly generates the movement's crisis'.⁴ Example 1 shows the opening four bars of the interlude, bars 40–43 of the movement as a whole. The alternating pitches B and C sharp, and the G and A major chords they respectively give rise to, receive equal emphasis, bars 40 and 42 beginning with B, and bars 41 and 43 beginning with C sharp.⁵

This competition between G and A major for primacy is carried into different harmonic regions as the interlude progresses, finally culminating in the passage shown in Example 2. These bars clearly form the climax of the interlude, conveying this sense largely through motivic and textural means. Prior to these bars, the conflicting alternations that characterize the interlude are separated by scalar interjections, evident in bars 40ii, 41ii and 43 of Example 1. The passage shown in Example 2 is the first prolonged region of the interlude to lack these interjections, their absence serving to concentrate the alternations from which the drama of the interlude mainly springs, thereby intensifying the conflict and producing a sense that matters are being brought to a head. This passage is also the end-point of the gradual textural build-up that has been occurring throughout the interlude, for it is in these bars that the full resources of

39 (♩ = ♩)

espress.

cresc.

mf

p

mf

mf

p

42

mf

mf

mf

Example 1: Benjamin Britten, Third String Quartet, 'Duets', bars 39-43

52

ff

ff

ff

ff

mf

mf

mf

mf

54

mf

mf

p

mf

mf

mf

Example 2: Benjamin Britten, Third String Quartet, 'Duets', bars 52-56.

the ensemble are finally employed. The ascending motion of each part, rising with a *crescendo* into the highest register of the interlude thus far, conveys a sense of movement towards a goal, adding to the overall impression of culmination.

Tonally, the passage does have some aspects of closure, for it contains a V-I cadence to G major. G major triads are formed by the cello and second violin in bar 52, and continued by the second violin into bar 53, where they alternate with D major triads played by the first violin, forming a sequence of perfect cadences in various inversions. On the last crotchet beat of bar 53, the second violin abandons its G major triad, stating instead a D tripled in octaves which adds emphasis to the D major triads of the first violin. The cello's G major triad in bar 54 acts as the resolution of the preceding D major. If presented alone, this perfect cadence would form a satisfactory conclusion to the interlude, for it resolves the conflict between G major and A major in favour of the former, clearly affirming that tonality.

However, the cadence to G is obscured by the presence of other harmonies that detract from the impression of closure. The viola unfolds a series of minor triads in bar 53, E minor for the first crotchet beat, F sharp and G sharp minor for the second, and F sharp and C sharp minor for the third. In this bar, the cello begins by stating the relative major of each of the viola's triads—G, A and B major—then moves to E major and F sharp minor. The harmonic progressions of the viola and cello do not reach cadential closure themselves, the viola simply prolonging the third of its C sharp minor triad into bar 54, and the cello moving up a step from F sharp minor to G major in this same bar. Although the cello's G chord of bar 54 represents the resolution of the first and second violin parts, it does not act in this way for the cello line itself. This is so despite the smoothness of the voice-leading between the cello's F sharp and G chords, for the progression does not establish a sense of closure. The octave-doubled A of the first violin in bar 54 does not create a sense of cadential closure for either the viola or cello.

Neither the viola nor cello part can be viewed as a subsidiary component of the pattern of V-I cadences in the violins, for the vertical pitch collections that result from the superimposition of all four parts do not enhance the sense of perfect cadences to G major, but obscure it. This is

particularly so in the last crotchet beat of bar 53, where the D major chord of the violins is overburdened with the pitches E, B, G sharp and C sharp—additions too numerous to be heard simply as colouring within an overall D major context.

Thus the ending of the interlude creates a form of tonal ambiguity, for it presents at least two distinct tonal processes simultaneously. On the one hand, there is a perfect cadence to G major; on the other, a series of harmonies (possibly two series if viola and cello are considered to be separate) that do not participate in the cadence, but which are left hanging at the arrival of G major. These unresolved harmonies do not totally negate the sense that a form of closure has been reached in bar 54; the textural and motivic aspects of the passage discussed above, as well as the cadence to G, are too significant for this. But their presence creates a sense that the ending of the interlude contains both elements of closure and continuation. In terms of the conflict between G and A major, the unresolved harmonies are more in the orbit of A than G, implying that although G seems to be favoured at the interlude's conclusion by the perfect cadence to it, competition from A has not been entirely removed. Thus the conclusion does not resolve the conflict, and is, therefore, inconclusive.

A similar situation exists with the ending of the movement as a whole. The conflicting alternations that characterized the interlude are revived in the coda, from bar 76, but seldom with the same intensity. The final eight-bar phrase of the movement, shown in Example 3, begins with a subdued alternation between A and G, returning once more to the protagonists of the interlude. Here, closure is signalled by the chord of bar 88, for this is virtually the first homophonic statement involving the whole ensemble in 'Duets', and the only one so far of significant duration. It is in marked contrast to the constant syncopated motion of most of the preceding material, and its repeated appearances, in bars 91 and 94, gradually stem the onward flow of the music, thus bringing the movement to a close.

However, this closing chord does not resolve the tonal ambiguity surrounding the alternating pitches of the final phrase, an ambiguity that arises from the sense that two tonal levels, albeit ill-defined ones, are at work, evident in the chromatic conflict between G and G sharp in bars 87 and 89. A

Example 3: Benjamin Britten, Third String Quartet, 'Duets', bars 87-94.

similar, yet more prolonged, conflict is present in the opening of the movement, where the duet partners maintain separate identities through consistent chromatic discrepancies of the sort discussed above, and through enharmonic respellings of each other's notes. The effect is of two voices which move in sympathy with one another, yet which traverse slightly different harmonic regions, never quite reaching agreement. The return of this conflict in bar 87, although not as strong, still invokes separate tonal levels, due to the precedent of the opening. The closing chord does seem to give greatest weight to G, for this pitch is the only one to be doubled, and occupies the lowest position in the chord. The B at the other extreme of the chord contributes a sense of G major to the collection, but the F, C and A also present detract from this in the same way that the unresolved harmonies at the end of the interlude prevented a definite tonal conclusion from being reached. Thus, the conclusion of the movement may also be said to be inconclusive in so far as it does not fully resolve the

conflicting tonal suggestions present throughout the work.

There is only one place in the movement where a clear tonal centre is established, without being obscured by competing tonal suggestions: the V-I cadence to E major in bar 71, shown in Example 4. The C-based chord of the second violin and cello in bar 66 does persist as far as bar 70, but it does not *obscure* the cadence to E major, even though it is 'left hanging', because its *sforzando* dynamic marking and *pizzicato* articulation in bar 70 give it more of a percussive sound than one of definite pitch, and because throughout the passage quoted in Example 4, there is a sense of the E major tonal level emerging from the C-based one, the latter being gradually left behind. Although the motivic processes at work in this region culminate in bar 71 in a fairly obvious manner, the significance of E major itself is by no means clear. This contributes an element of uncertainty to the ending in bar 71, once again creating a conclusion that seems only partially complete.

The musical score for Example 4 consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system (bars 66-68) shows a complex texture with various dynamics like *pp* and *p*. The second system (bars 69-71) shows a more resolved texture with dynamics like *cresc.*, *pizz.*, *sf*, and *p dolce*. The key signature is E major, and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 4: Benjamin Britten, Third String Quartet, 'Duets', bars 66-71.

The line of motivic development that ultimately leads to bar 71 begins in bar 64, where the texture of the interlude returns, although in less dramatic form. The alternating chords and interjecting scalar passages of the interlude are revisited in this region, although only the viola part in bar 65 exactly recalls interlude material, being a transposition of the cello in bar 48. Other correspondences are only approximate, involving the same motivic shapes but different specific intervals. In bar 68, the first violin transforms the scalar figure it stated in the previous bar by introducing a dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythm as part of the figure, shown in Example 4. This rhythm has been previously encountered as a characteristic part of many of the motivic cells employed before and immediately following the interlude, and is evident in bars 87 and 89 of the coda, shown in Example 3. Its appearance in bar 68, growing out of a scalar passage derived from the interlude, establishes a link between what were formerly distinct motifs,

confined to separate regions of the work. The process continues in the first violin part in bar 69, also shown in Example 4, where the dotted figure is expanded into a crotchet followed by a quaver, recalling another motivic shape encountered in the opening of the movement, and also evident in the coda, in bar 90. Thus, in bars 67 to 69, a type of motivic reconciliation may be said to occur in which the distinctions between motifs are smoothed over through the transformation of one motif into another.

Bars 70 to 71 clearly represent the end-point of this process, for they accelerate the gradual ascent in register begun in bars 67 and 68, and emphasize the last motivic transformation to occur, as well as cadencing in E major. This ending ushers in the calmest region of the movement so far: a spacious first violin melody accompanied by a pianissimo trill in the viola, the two seeming almost still in comparison to the unrelenting forward flow of all the previous music. Such uncharacteristic tran-

quillity establishes this region as one of great structural significance in the movement, possibly as the movement's climax, for it seems to represent the culmination of the music's driving forces, the release of the internal tensions that propelled the music thus far, abated perhaps in the process of motivic reconciliation that leads to this point.

The cadence to E major, however, is somewhat enigmatic. The emergence of tonal clarification at this point is appropriate to the new calmness of the texture, confirming the sense that the principal tensions of the movement, both motivic and those stemming from the interplay of contrasting tonal levels, have been resolved. But the significance of E major as the choice of tonality to crystallize is perplexing, for it seems largely unrelated to any other part of the music, either before or after the bar in which it is established. There is no obvious connection between it and the tonally unsettled opening of the movement, or the dodecaphonic and chromatic regions prior to the interlude. The interlude itself is primarily concerned with the conflict between G and A major, ending with the movement's first recognizable suggestion of a tonal centre: the obscured cadence to G major discussed above. Although E is the dominant of A, the 'less successful' protagonist of the interlude, this relationship hardly seems to justify the appearance of E major in bar 71, for the interlude does not prepare in any way for the subsequent establishment of this tonality. Nor is E major explicable in terms of the material that follows it, for the coda, beginning in bar 76, again suggests a G orientation, as the 'closing chord' of bar 88 illustrates, with no hint of involvement with E.

Thus, the E major tonality that crystallizes briefly in bar 71 seems to be outside the tonal processes of the rest of the movement. One could argue that this may have been precisely the effect sought by Britten, corresponding to the sense that the calm attained in bar 71 lies beyond the restless wanderings of the remainder of the music. But whereas the stillness achieved at this point seems to grow

naturally from what was called the process of motivic reconciliation above, and is thus explicable in terms of prior motivic contrasts, the cadence to E major does not seem a logical outcome of previous tonal tensions, and cannot be understood in terms of earlier tonal processes. Thus, the closing sign presented in bar 71 is clear in its resolution of motivic contrasts, but remains enigmatic in its choice of tonality, providing listeners with a conclusion that contains a puzzle, and which may be said, therefore, to be an inconclusive conclusion.

That Britten was aware of the effect his conclusions could create seems evident from his remark about the finale of the Third String Quartet—the movement that elicited the response from Whittall that heads this paper. Britten is reported to have told Colin Matthews that he wanted the work 'to end with a question'.⁶ That Britten should be so drawn to questioning, uncertain and inconclusive endings as a fundamental part of his musical expression in the Third String Quartet may reflect an uncertainty about his own ending, for his declining health in these last years signalled that death could not be far off. But what to make of death? That, perhaps, is the question that Britten left unanswered at the end of the quartet, and in the inconclusive conclusions of 'Duets'.

NOTES

¹ Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 282.

² See V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 13.

³ See Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: Dent, 1979), p. 335.

⁴ Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p. 342.

⁵ The first pitch sounding in bar 43 is actually B, but as this is tied over from the previous bar, C sharp may be regarded as the first 'event' in the bar. The musical examples used in this paper have been reproduced with the permission of Boosey and Hawkes (Australia) on behalf of Faber Music.

⁶ Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p. 179.