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COVER SHEET

Musical topics, (self-)narrativity and adaptation in my recent composition *Pearl*

Matthew Kaner

Abstract:

This exposition charts the creation and musical-narrative structure of *Pearl*, my recent composition for symphony chorus, orchestra, and solo baritone: a setting of extracts from the medieval poem *Perle*, translated into modern English by Simon Armitage, commissioned as part of the BBC Proms in 2022. Envisioned as a contemporary adaptation of the poem's historically distant, yet somehow timelessly poignant and continually resonant story, *Pearl* takes the form of a musical narrative that evokes both past and present, through personal and more universal reflections on the nature of loss, grief, and acceptance. By drawing together analytical techniques taken from musical theories of narrative (principally Byron Almén 2008), musical topics, and the adaptation of narratives across media (Marie-Laure Ryan 2014), with a self-narrative approach to documenting my practice in action (as advocated by Christopher Leedham and Martin Scheuregger 2018), I unpack my creative approach to *Pearl* in what might be understood as 'bricolage' as proposed by Robyn Stewart (2007). Constructing a 'new story' through a 'plurality of approaches', I adopt Stewart's methodological eclecticism to theorize and situate the work as a musical narrative. However,

through the slippage that occurs between narratology and self-narrativization, Pearl is shown to also mirror and situate my personal artistic experiences as a contemporary practitioner. In response to the recent and ongoing debate about the nature and validity of Practice Research in Composition, the article addresses calls to share the 'messy, complicated, uncertain, and soft' (Arthur Bochner 2000) aspects of the artistic process suggesting a more open, and even collaborative, role for the sharing of compositional research.

Keywords:

narrative, composition as research, adaptation, practice research, lament, microtonality, medieval poetry, dream vision, topic theory

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Page description: An illustration accompanying the original manuscript of *Perle* is depicted to the right of the text. It shows the main characters of the poem, the jeweller on this side of a river and his beloved 'pearl' on the other.

Musical topics, (self-)narrativity and adaptation in my recent composition *Pearl*

By Matthew Kaner

Introduction and Background

Pearl is a thirty-minute work for symphony chorus, orchestra, and solo baritone that I composed between 2019 and 2022. It sets extracts from the medieval poem *Perle* (probably by the anonymous 'Gawain poet'), [1] translated into modern English by poet laureate Simon Armitage (2016). It was commissioned by the BBC Proms and premiered in 2022 (after a 2-year delay, owing to the global Covid-19 pandemic), by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with Roderick Williams as the baritone soloist, conducted by Ryan Wigglesworth.

Written largely during (though not submitted as part of) my recently completed DMus in Composition entitled *Composing Narratives: Reimagining Musical Storytelling in New Vocal and Instrumental Works* (Kaner 2022a), *Pearl* constitutes Practice (as) Research (P-R) on themes linked to those of the doctorate. Taken together, these works form a body of recent compositions in my catalogue concerned with the creative potential of music intended to convey a narrative, whether this music contains a performed text (sung or spoken), or is purely instrumental, founded in the scholarship of Almén (2008), Klein (2013), Kramer (1991; 2013), Reyland (2008; 2013), Ryan (2014), and others.

This article then, in a sense, acts as an extension of my doctoral research, and, as will become apparent, shares with it not only the concern with musical narrativity, but also the 'self-narrative' (Spry 2001) documentation of practice following P-R models commonly used in other disciplines such as theatre (see Nelson 2013, especially Chapter Five). The main aim of this approach is to foster sufficient reflection in action on the compositional process and decision-making, rather than solely after the 'musical output has been created'; the latter being

‘a sequence that is specifically warned against in other P-R disciplines, where the disconnect between practice and theorising of practice is considered dislocating’ (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018: 12). Thus, the self-narrative model is considered to offer a far richer portrayal of the day-to-day creative activity that, ‘when placed in historical, social and cultural contexts, form[s] a neonarrative, a new story shaped through autobiography as a portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates their experience’ (Stewart 2007: 126), and captures the ‘subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on the research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist’ (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011: 274).

In this case, such an approach is used in conjunction with more conventional music-theoretical models, leading to a multi-layered form of self-analysis and reflection intended to unpack both the technical *and* ‘the ephemeral aspects of the creative process—which are precisely the kinds of knowledge that only creative practitioners can provide’ (Leedham and Scheuregger 2018: 4), arguably resulting in what Robyn Stewart eloquently describes as a ‘bricolage’, that ‘works within and between competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms’ to generate ‘vast possibilities [...] to reflect the diverse ways of artistic practices’ (2007: 127).

Accordingly, this exposition is presented in two parts: in [Part 1—Technical Account](#), I offer an analytical exegesis of the finished piece; in [Part 2—Creative Journey](#), I present and discuss a number of extracts from my creative diary (kept throughout the writing process), alongside compositional sketches, with the aim of painting a richer picture of the process leading to the completed work by exposing some of the major artistic problems I confronted along the way. In contrast with what is often critiqued in P-R (and self-narrative writing more widely) as a tendency towards a heroic portrayal of the researcher (see Freeman 2015; Leedham and Scheuregger 2020: 78), via this two-pronged approach, I offer a possibly more balanced account of the work’s gestation that perhaps mirrors the more subtle, unheroic plot of *Pearl* itself. [2] Ultimately, I characterize my artistic endeavour as one that yielded few dramatic epiphanies, but rather a gradual accumulation of understanding, building on my previous creative experience, of the nature of musical storytelling in this piece, resulting in a broader sense of equanimity with my individual traits as an evolving creative practitioner and musician.

Extensive scholarship and debate on musical compositions as narratives (and the musical setting, or adaptation, of narratives from another medium such as poetry) has of course existed within the sphere of musicology for decades. [3] Yet, as a multi-modal piece of *creative* research, this article represents a more unusual contribution to the slowly (but now steadily) emerging field of Practice Research in Composition, [4] in which, so far at least, composers’ thinking on narrativity in their own work is less often foregrounded. While it will ultimately fall to others to determine the specific resonances and relevance of my approach for practitioners working outside music, my aim is that sharing my work in the inherently interdisciplinary context of this journal might invite comparison and discussion of other approaches to narrative, especially those that are adaptations from one source medium to another, and perhaps stimulate ideas for creative application and/or collaboration elsewhere. In particular, my use of narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2014) framework for the analysis of ‘storyworlds’ across different media highlights, I believe, its power to parse a source narrative in one medium into its constituent components and then think about how to creatively reconstruct/reconfigure it in

another (or others). Similarly, Byron Almén's *A Theory Of Musical Narrative* (Almén 2008) has perhaps yet to make a significant mark on the domain of music theory. However, with its specific insights about the non-verbal potential of music to narrativize, not as a 'derivative' of literary narrative, but in his words, a 'sibling' form that identifies 'foundational principles common to all narrative media' as well as those 'unique to each medium' (12), I believe this article highlights some of its value and untapped potential for artistic practice, even beyond music. Taken together, I hope this case study demonstrates the potential of all these tools, in combination, to enrich and support artists' thinking about narrativity, especially in non-verbal mediums, in a manner that might suggest avenues for further creative research and exploration.

[1] The authorship of the poem is uncertain, but it is widely believed to be by the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. (See Armitage 2016: xi.) ↩

[2] Described by one reviewer as 'profoundly undramatic' (Stein 2022: 53). ↩

[3] For a brief survey, see my recent article in *Adaptation*; (Kaner 2024: 126-127). ↩

[4] While the debate as to whether composition should be considered research or not, especially in the wake of John Croft's (2015) infamously provocative article in *Tempo*, is perhaps now considered closed by many, only a modest number of practitioner colleagues have shared and documented their creative practice in scholarly journals in the nine years since its publication. ↩

[Next: Scores and Recording →](#)

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Scores and Recording

For readers' reference, the full and vocal scores of the work are included below, along with a five-minute audio extract of the work (bars 179–302), performed live at the BBC Proms on 10 August 2022, by Roderick Williams (baritone), and the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Ryan Wigglesworth. (Recorded by BBC Radio 3; further audio examples are embedded into the essay later with accompanying score extracts.)

The poetry reproduced in the scores is by Simon Armitage © 2016, published by Faber and Faber Ltd. Included by permission, all rights reserved.

Audio and score: Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2354016> to listen to an extract and read the scores.

[← Previous: Introduction and Background](#)

[Next: Part 1: Technical Account — Synopsis and Storytelling Aims →](#)

This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2354390> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Page description: The opening page of the original manuscript of the *Perle* poem is depicted to the right of the text.

Part 1: Technical Account

Synopsis

For those unfamiliar with *Pearl* the poem, a brief synopsis of the work is provided here, extracted from my own programme note for the premiere:

The poem, found in a manuscript now held at the British Library, tells the tale of a grief-stricken jeweller who revisits the place of the death of a girl he calls his “pearl” (presumably his daughter, though this is never confirmed). He falls asleep in his sorrowful state and has a remarkable dream of a gleaming paradise, which he journeys through to discover, to his amazement, his beloved “pearl” standing across a river surrounded by a heavenly chorus singing “harmonies that would melt the heart”. Stunned, he enters into a long dialogue with her about his grief, and longs to cross the water to join her. As he attempts to do so, his path is blocked, and he awakens, transformed by his vision and unburdened of his grief, assured of her eternal peace in paradise (Kaner 2022c: 8).

Consisting of 101 twelve-line stanzas, it is a relatively lengthy work (especially for musical setting) with a complex verse structure involving ‘concatenation’, an intricate system of repetition that groups its 101 verses into twenty sections. Its genre has been fiercely debated by literary theorists since its publication in the late nineteenth-century, containing elements of elegy, allegory, and dream vision. (For an overview, see Mitchell 2000.)

Creating/Curating the Text

In initial discussions with Simon Armitage (whom I approached for a new text following a previous collaboration (Armitage & Kaner 2018)), he quickly proposed *Pearl* as suitable for musical setting on this scale. Given its length, and extensive passages of Christian evangelism, some of which simply paraphrase scripture, I had some early misgivings about setting the poem, though I was immediately struck by the innate beauty and musicality of its structure and imagery, especially in Armitage’s reworking. Nevertheless, after several abortive attempts to combine passages from it with excerpts from other poems by Armitage on related themes of loss, I ultimately alighted (with the poet’s encouragement) upon a setting of *Pearl* in its own right, by selecting a small set of extracts that captured what I felt to be the essence of

the poem's narrative thrust and some of its most powerful and moving imagery. (The final text appears in the preliminary pages of both the [vocal and full scores](#).)

Storytelling Aims

As stated in the introduction, in my recent practice (cf. Kaner 2022a; 2024), my approach to musical narrativization is grounded in the work of Byron Almén (2008), who proposes 'a sibling model' that 'recognizes both its commonalities (temporality, directedness, psychological and cultural significance, hierarchical organization, conflict, an emphasis on action) and its potential differences with respect to literature and drama' (37). The once-vigorous debate as to whether music can be considered to narrate in literary or dramatic terms is thereby largely sidestepped by Almén, allowing him to focus on developing a hermeneutic approach to examining evolving musical interrelations (or 'hierarchies') within the course of a work. As a composer, his theories (and others') have enabled me to develop the means to depict changing musical worlds and unfolding events in response to a poem's (or other text's) narrative shape. The details of how this evolved for *Pearl*, and how I set about achieving it, will be explained in stages below. However, in summary, my intention was to create a musical narrative that functioned both as a supporting enrichment of the text, and in its own right (supposing, for example, a listener was unable to understand its text for some reason) through musical devices such as word-painting, the employment and manipulation of *topics* and a goal-directed musical structure governed by, in Almén's terms, evolving hierarchies over time.

In doing so, it was my aim to highlight features of the narrative and poetic imagery I was especially drawn to as follows:

- the images of pearlescence and radiance found throughout the poem, and their intensification as the Jeweller gets closer to seeing Pearl;
- the depth of sorrow expressed in the Jeweller's mourning, especially nearer the opening;
- the larger 'journey' of the narrative in which the protagonist reckons with, and eventually overcomes his grief (even though, in a more literal sense, the Jeweller remains on 'the same spot' throughout the entire story);
- the distant and somewhat strange world of the poem, whose story is both immediately relatable on some level, yet also unfamiliar and distant, given its twelfth-century setting;
- the intensity and uncanniness of the Jeweller's dream-vision, especially at the point where he 'speaks' with his deceased beloved Pearl;
- elements of the religiosity of the poem, without too much emphasis on the specifics of the Christian doctrine.

[← Previous: Scores and Recording](#)

[Next: The Narrator-Protagonist-Soloist →](#)

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Page description: An illustration accompanying the original manuscript of *Perle* is depicted to the right of the text. It shows the jeweller dreaming at the side of the river.

The Narrator-Protagonist-Soloist

One of my earliest creative concerns was to develop the role of the Jeweller in musical terms. At once the protagonist and the narrator of the poem, his poetic lines shift freely between different registers, ranging from inward-facing, mournful lyricism ('my wretched desire writhed in despair'), literal recounting of events ('I witnessed a crystal cliff'), reported speech, and more metaphorical depictions ('that pearl had rolled away from a mound, where brightly lit stars cast bold shadows'), all of which I wished to set convincingly, in a manner sympathetic to the act of storytelling.

In a previous narrative collaboration with Armitage, *Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes* (2018), I had opted to use speech rather than song for much of the work, primarily for the sake of intelligibility. This was a continued concern here; for the story to be understood, the text had to be discernible. (This was noted often in my creative diary, for example on 20 June 2019: 'Looking at how to get text across best [...] needs a more speech-rhythmic approach I think'.) I had, and still have, many reservations concerning the setting of text in much (particularly late nineteenth-century, but also more recent) opera, where the musical expressivity of elaborate, ornate, and sometimes angular vocal lines can be prioritized over textual clarity.

My solution here was ultimately multifaceted. First, in order to preserve (or even amplify) the changing poetic registers adopted by the Jeweller, I elected to employ different modes of musical text-setting in response to the evolving emotional contour and tone of his narration. Perhaps because of my decision to link the poem's medieval setting with references to earlier musical styles, this took the form of a predominantly syllabic vocal setting throughout (often deliberately evoking medieval plainsong and neo-baroque recitative), especially for sections of recounted narrative. Only very occasionally did I employ a more expressive aria or arioso style, with a small number of melismas to highlight certain words and emotional gestures, alongside a few moments of word-painting. This somewhat traditionalist approach was something I intended to mirror the expressive contour of the poetry in support of the storytelling.

Second, I spent much energy and time pre-planning the harmonic language for the work, such

that the chord-spacings (and ultimately orchestration) would allow the baritone voice to be heard clearly. The difficulty of writing for baritone specifically had been highlighted to me many times, as a student, by Prof. Julian Anderson; the legacy of post-spectral and modernist approaches to harmony often results in spacings that make rich use of the lower-middle register (a lyric baritone's main range; the problem is also often discussed in relation to the cello, especially when accompanied by an orchestra). The brief passage below offers a particularly pronounced example of this technique; here, the use of the upper register to convey the radiant shimmering described in the poem (discussed below in topical terms) leaves a large 'gap' between the baritone voice and the bass note supporting it. [1]

Score and audio description: Figure 1. Representative score and audio extract of a passage from *Pearl* in which the lower register is left clear for the baritone's vocal line, except for the bass line nearly two octaves below. The accompanying harmonies are in the treble register above the voice.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2354454#tool-2354516> to read the score and listen to the extract.

[1] This concern also had a bearing on the orchestration. For example, the cellos frequently subdivide (e.g. bb. 70-74; 119-132) during and around the baritone's vocal to avoid overcrowding and control the density of sound in that register. ↩

[← Previous: Part 1: Technical Account — Synopsis and Storytelling Aims](#)

[Next: Establishing the Musical Storyworlds through Topics →](#)

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Establishing the Musical Storyworlds

In a recent publication for *Adaptation* (Kaner 2024), I analyse the first movement of my clarinet quintet, *At Night* (composed concurrently with *Pearl*, and thus sharing many of its narratological techniques, including the musical depiction of dreaming), by drawing on the scholarship of transmedia narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) to demonstrate how a sequence of differing musical *storyworlds* adapts and depicts the narrative of Robert Louis Stevenson's poem 'The Land of Nod' solely for instrumental forces. To do so, I employ Ryan's *storyworld* components (Existents, Setting, Physical Laws, Social Rules and Values, Events, Mental Events) (2014: 31–37) alongside Almén's (2008) specifically musical narratology as a way to unpack my use of familiar musical *topics* (see the following section) and their underpinning with evolving harmonic processes, to convey a succession of narrative 'scenes' and unfolding 'events'. [1] Thus, as I set about creating the broad narrative-structural outline of *Pearl*, I took a similar approach to adapting Armitage's translation of the poem: seeking out appropriately characterful, topical, materials to depict the storyworlds of the piece. This approach can be seen in my early annotations of the libretto (reproduced in Figure 2), which offer both literal musical ('mostly recit./ 'open brass') and metaphorical descriptions ('burst of bright light') of the emerging musical work, including those that pertain to its long-range harmonic design ('MAX tension'), demonstrating my early concern with both the *storyworlds* of the piece and its narratively underpinned harmonic teleology.

Images description: Figure 2. Original annotations of the poetic text for *Pearl*.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2355598#tool-2355633> to look at the annotations.

Employing Topics to Situate the Musical Narrative [2]

Leonard Ratner's *Classic Music: Expression Form and Style* (1980) introduced topics to the lexicon of musicology as an early eighteenth-century 'thesaurus of characteristic figures' with various associations including specific 'affections' and 'picturesque' qualities, that could be employed by composers as 'subjects for musical discourse' (9). In the more recent *Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, Danuta Mirka offers a refined definition, which since Ratner's seminal work has gradually expanded in meaning through its use in the work of many scholars; her position is simply that topics are 'musical styles and genres taken out of their

proper context and used in another one' (Mirka 2014).

In a significant sense, then, topics are a specific form of musical intertextuality ('intermusicality' as Wolf (2008: 213) terms it). As Mirka notes, they are frequently associated with certain affects (pathetic, tragic), and often in conjunction with certain melodic tropes (such as the sigh motive, Mannheim rocket), in that they 'allow one to recognize a style or genre [... to] form part of topical signification' (2014). Such a framing thus positions topics as a 'source of meaning and expression' (Mirka 2014) and arguably offers composers of *narrative* works a valuable tool with which to 'get us into the musical story' (Klein 2013: 23).

How exactly topical signification takes place varies (and can be subject to debate). On the one hand, topics may act mimetically, by resembling the sighs, accents, and inflections of the voice, as 'indices of emotional states' (Mirka 2014). Yet they may also operate as signs associated with affect by cultural-historical convention, whereby 'affective signification of topics is indirect because it arises from their similarity (icon) to genres or styles that, in their turn, are associated (index) with specific affects or affective zones'. If the latter is true, 'recognition of these affects is based on the listener's recognition of styles or genres' (Mirka 2014). Nevertheless, music psychologist Patrik Juslin posits that our perception of musical affect may be directly triggered by mimicry (or exaggeration) of 'voice cues from emotional speech, such as vibrato, sighs, screams, moans, or a 'crying' voice [...] which leads us to 'mirror' the perceived emotion internally' (2019: 291), and Mirka herself concedes that listeners can perceive a topic's affect 'by virtue of musical motion characteristic of it' (2014), even when it is unfamiliar to them. Ratner's original definition also includes 'picturesque' effects that more directly imitate of external (non-vocal) sounds. Again, while the use of pictorial effects need not imply reference to other music, certain well established topics have been shown to 'originate in pictorial effects that have turned into styles', meaning that their signification 'arises from their similarity to genres or styles rather than from direct musical imitation of nonmusical sounds' (Mirka 2014).

This emphasis on intermusical connections similarly informed my thinking around topics in *Pearl*, which form a broad network of significations (including the picturesque and emotive), with a range of origins, and in all cases, in relation to other musical works of some kind. Whether or not listeners are immediately aware of these was of less concern to me; as Umberto Eco notes regarding literary intertextuality, the device often 'provokes in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the *vague* feeling of a *déjà vu*', acknowledging that no 'intertextual archetype is necessarily "universal"' (1985: 5, my emphasis), and is contingent on the cultural knowledge and experience of the reader (see also Premier 2013: 93).

Nevertheless, through my most recent series of projects, I have come to see topics a powerful musical storytelling technique that can furnish listeners with interpretational cues with the power to enrich their 'understanding of the way music carries particular meanings' (Almén 2008: 92; cf. also Kaner 2024). As Almén emphasizes, the presence of topic(s) never necessarily denotes the presence of narrative and vice versa, explaining that 'topic is expressively static', whereas 'narrative is expressively dynamic' (Almén 2008: 48). Accordingly,

I consider it incumbent on me, as a composer drawing on the semiotic potential of topics in the service of musical storytelling, to do so with an inherent musical dynamism that facilitates the evolution of hierarchies over time (as is crucial to Almén's conception of narrative). This process can involve the juxtaposition of contrasting topics through the course of the work ('troping of two otherwise incompatible styles [...] to] create new meanings') (Hatten 2004: 68). However, it is equally possible for narrativity to arise within a single topic ('topic as frame') (Almén 2008: 79), through the manipulation of parameters such as harmonization, rhythm, texture, all of which may signify changing affective states and interrelations between the constituents of a narrative musical hierarchy. Both strategies were important for me as I composed *Pearl*, as I discuss below.

[1] Whether listeners can sense these unprompted, will of course vary; my concern is that this approach offers a means for me to creatively adapt a literary text and engender a sense of musical storytelling, regardless of any specific topical references. In the case of *At Night* (Kaner 2021) one reviewer noted that 'although I wouldn't have deduced these scenarios from listening alone, [...] there is characterful momentum that makes musical sense, whatever the story it conjures up for any particular listener' (Hughes 2023). ↩

[2] Note, the following discussion may seem to rehearse arguments and ideas that are overfamiliar to music scholars (who should feel free to skip to the next section), in order to bring non-specialists to a better understanding of my approach and its wider context. ↩

← Previous: [The Narrator-Protagonist-Soloist](#)

Next: [Pearl's Universe of Topics](#) →

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Pearl's Universe of Topics

Kofi Agawu's *Music as Discourse* famously sets out a limited 'Universe of Topics' for eighteenth-century Western art music (2009: 43). [1] Likewise, *Pearl* arguably has its own topical universe, shown in Table 1, which draws both from those familiar within Western musical practice going back to that era, but also from more specific sources coming, in some cases, close to quotation. Among the eight archetypes listed, some are eminently pictorial in nature, others perhaps indexical, yet they were all *conceived* intertextually to some degree, and are arguably therefore, topical. I set them out below with detailed descriptions and list the main sources and models of which I was openly aware during the composition process. (Many others could, of course, be cited, and different listeners' awareness of the topics is by no means contingent on knowledge of these pieces in particular.) While it can, at times, be hard to draw distinctions between these eight topics (it was often my deliberate strategy that they overlap, intermingle, and evolve from one another), the presence of sung poetry helps, I hope, to guide listeners as to their more specific significance in context.

As stated above, these topics can further be linked with Ryan's *storyworld* theories and components, and suggest the environment, affect or emotional status and characterization of the poem's narrative action. Indeed, it was my hope that, where the cut-down libretto extracted from the full-length poem leaves gaps in the details of the narrative (such as in terms of the protagonist's environment and inner experiences) the music steps in to fill them, 'by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen' (Kramer 1991: 112).

Table 1. *Pearl's* Universe of Topics. To view and/or listen to the highlighted examples, hover the mouse over the links. Bar references to the full score are only given where a corresponding example is not provided (when an effect is too reliant on its orchestration to be shown in reduction).

Topic Name	Description and Use	Source(s)
1. Early Music [2]	Perhaps better defined as a broad 'umbrella' topic (cf Agawu 2009: 93), this includes several interrelated sub-topics to suggest the narrative's setting in the distant past as follows: a. 'consort' string-writing	a. Purcell, <i>Fantasias</i> ; Consort Music by Byrd and Williams Lawes b. Hildegard of Bingen

	<p>b. <i>plainsong and recitative</i></p> <p>c. <i>aria</i> (sometimes accompanied by a neo-‘baroque’ obbligato instrumental solos)</p> <p>d. <i>chorale aria</i></p>	<p>c. J.S. Bach Passions and Cantatas, especially BWV82</p> <p>d. As above, especially BWV158: ii</p>
2. <i>Lament</i>	<p>Though partly encompassed by the above, this topic has special importance given the wider mournful nature of <i>Pearl</i> its allusions to early music. Although <i>evocations of the Baroque lament</i> do occur, through sighing gestures, descending melodic and bass lines (including falling chromaticism), other types of elegiac writing can be found, for example, in what I consider the ‘tragic’ phase of the piece (bb. 164-92), during which the orchestra (in the ‘<i>tragic violin theme</i>’) and chorus (‘<i>lament chorale</i>’) comment on the Jeweller’s grief and Pearl’s death as if from afar.</p>	<p>Cantatas by J.S. Bach on elegiac subjects, including BWV12 ‘Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen’</p> <p>Debussy, <i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>, especially the tragic orchestral interludes</p>
3. <i>Sinking</i>	<p>Growing directly from the descending lines above, this effect becomes a topic in its own right in the depiction of the Jeweller sinking ‘into heavy sleep on the ground’ with lines literally sinking from extreme treble to bass.</p>	<p>Grisey, <i>Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil</i></p>
4. <i>Rising</i>	<p>While perhaps rarely described as a topic, this category of material (or compositional device) has many precedents in the larger Western canon. [3] Prompted by the poetic line ‘Suddenly my spirit rose from that spot’, it is used in direct opposition to the sinking figures associated with both mourning and sleep above, to convey a rousing excitement towards a climactic moment of arrival, expressed through rising motives and larger scale ascending phrases. As discussed later (see Harmonic-Narrative trajectory), this effect can also be discerned on a structural level, in the form of a large-scale background ascent that governs the teleology of the piece’s harmony and voice-leading (bb. 343-504 in Figure 8).</p>	<p>Luther Adams, <i>Three High Places</i>: iii. ‘Looking Towards Hope’</p> <p>Knussen, <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>, ‘Sea Interlude 1’</p> <p>Kaner, <i>Hansel and Gretel: A Nightmare in Eight Scenes</i>: Scene 3, bb. 144-166 (dawn chorus)</p>
5. <i>Journeying</i>	<p>The depiction of travel (often in the form of riding) is a prominent pictorial topic in much nineteenth century repertory (from Schubert’s <i>Der Erlkönig</i> to Wagner’s ‘Walkürenritt’), and as in those cases, is depicted here through fast flowing figuration with a stronger sense of pulsation (mostly in 2/4 and then 6/16) and quicker harmonic pacing than elsewhere in the work .</p>	<p>Knussen, <i>Higglety Pigglety Pop</i>: ‘The Ride to Castle Yonder’</p> <p>Adams, <i>A Short Ride in a Fast Machine</i></p> <p>Nineteenth-century models incl. Schubert’s <i>Der Erlkönig</i> etc.</p>
6. <i>Uncanniness</i>	<p>Also an ‘umbrella’ topic, this is a set of related musical effects that evoke the uncanny qualities of the Jeweller’s encounter with Pearl in his dream-vision, as follows:</p> <p>a. <i>Shimmering</i></p>	<p>a. Rued Laanggaard, <i>Music of the Spheres</i>; Ligeti, <i>Lontano</i></p> <p>b. Kaner, <i>At Night</i>: i. ‘The Land of Nod’, bb. 203-258;</p>

Used throughout to depict the 'gleaming' images in the poem, this effect openly pays homage to Rued Laanggaard's *Music of the Spheres*, which features frequent depictions of bright light through high string tremolandi on diatonic cluster chords in evocatively titled movements (e.g. 'Like Sunbeams on a Coffin Decorated with Sweet Smelling Flowers'). In *Pearl* the phrase 'and she shone' prompts a near-quotation of the Laanggard. (Both are shown in the link on the left to aid comparison.)

b. *'Otherworldly' tunings*

This effect has multiple sources and is one I also explore when depicting dreams in my clarinet quintet, *At Night* (see Kaner 2023.) Overtone-series chords containing a flattened seventh partial are used, but rather than receiving bass support from the 'correct' fundamental implied by the chord, another pitch (or pair of pitches) is placed below it, designed to generate a degree of resonance yet also an uncanny sense of instability. (See also Figures 6 and 7.)

c. *Blurring*

This is achieved largely through heterophonic choral writing behind the solo baritone ('ghosting' in my notes) and passages of heterophonic string writing (e.g. bb. 370-73 and 382-86, not shown here), creating a haze around the musical foreground, often with a very slow harmonic rhythm to suggest a sense of 'suspended time' (c.f. Almén 2013: 64).

d. *Rumbling*

Not directly prompted by the poetry itself, this material grew compositionally out of expressions of unease in the bass in the *lament* topic, and the use of the low register that occurs at the end of the *sinking* topic depicting the Jeweller's descent into sleep. From there it subsequently arguably evolves into a distinct class of its own (perhaps suggesting an eighteenth-century *Sturm und Drang* topic), that plays various important structural roles in the piece, as its main source of long-term harmonic tension, and the 'darkness' against which the shimmering textures are often heard as a way to foreground them.

Abrahamsen, *Schnee* and *Let Me Tell You*; Vivier – *Lonely Child*

c. Benjamin, *Sudden Time*

d. Beethoven, Symphony no. 6: iv. 'Donner. Sturm.' (e.g. bb. 19-33); Debussy, *Nocturnes*, no. 3 'Nuages', [9]-end

<p>7. <i>Heavenly Joy</i></p>	<p>Also best understood as an ‘umbrella’ topic or ‘environment’, this encompasses the following:</p> <p>a. <i>Diatonicism, modality and quasi-tonal ‘added’ chords in the chorus</i></p> <p>This material was devised to depict the ecstatic joy expressed by Pearl and the heavenly chorus, in which the sung harmonies and lines employ diatonic collections. Shifts to other modal/harmonic areas are achieved through, as in much comparable liturgical music, smooth voice-leading and common tones.</p> <p>b. <i>Quasi-modal aleatoricism</i></p> <p>At the climax of this broader topic (b. 504 – not shown here) the choral singers independently perform plainsong-like melodic fragments, all of which employ diatonic modal collections. However, false relations occur across them and in the orchestra, forming a rich 12-note vertical.</p> <p>c. <i>Plainsong in unison/octaves</i></p> <p>Quasi-plainsong is performed by the chorus (and soloist), but now in unison/octaves to imply a sense of unity through shared faith.</p>	<p>a. Alfred Desenclos, <i>Messe De Requiem</i> (especially ‘In Paradisum’)</p> <p>b. and c. Jonathan Harvey, <i>Come Holy Ghost</i></p>
<p>8. <i>Wave</i></p>	<p>Described as ‘water swirling madly’ in my initial plan, this topical effect is used only briefly to depict in more detail the Jeweller’s blocked attempt to ford the river between himself and Pearl, drawing on picturesque precedents in many ocean-themed works where the full range of the orchestra is used to depict a large, loud ‘sweep’ before dissipating into a much quiet texture in the bass.</p>	<p>Ravel, <i>Miroirs</i>, ‘Une barque sur l’océan’ (e.g. nos [7]-[10])</p> <p>Debussy <i>La Mer</i>: iii. ‘Jeux de vagues’, [37]-[40]</p>

[1] Initially for mid-to-late eighteenth-century classical music, but he then expands this (citing both Grabócz and Mirka) with examples of the topical universes of Liszt, Mahler, Bartok and Stravinsky (Agawu 2009: 41-50). ↩

[2] This label is intentionally vague; the musical language employed is deliberately unspecific in terms of the era it refers to, emphasising the timeless quality of the poem’s narrative, thereby perhaps mirroring the effect of its translation into contemporary English. ↩

[3] Beyond those listed here, one clear example from the wider Western canon might be Chopin’s Nocturnes, whose B-section climatic ascents (and subsequent descents) are examined in some detail in Wintle (2006: 101-109). ↩

← Previous: Establishing the Musical Storyworlds through Topics

Next: Musical-Narrative Motives and Themes →

Musical-Narrative Motives and Themes

In *Pearl*, the topical approach described above is closely interlinked with a motivic-thematic musical design that both provides common points of reference across the piece, but also supports the evolving nature of the narrative events and their changing environments and affective connotations. Musical materials return throughout the work, cast in different lights and playing different functions, in response to the evolving musical plotline, in a fashion that could be compared with operatic leitmotifs. They are musically more specific than topics (which are archetypal in nature); indeed, the motives occur *within* different topical environments throughout the piece. However, without specific words attached to them, semiotically they are vaguer and (intentionally) left more open to listener interpretation.

While some were included in [Table 1](#) (such as the *journeying* motive associated with the rising topic), [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) below show the frequently recurring *Pearl* motive and *breathing* chord-pairing (so labelled because of its evocation of an inward then outward breath). [\[1\]](#) These two motives are stated in the opening measures and reappear throughout the work in a large number of contexts, generating long-range continuity between the different sections of the narrative (perhaps akin to the recurring images, such as gleaming gems, found throughout the poem).

The historical role of such motives, particularly in larger scale dramatic works is notoriously rich and complex (see, for example, Whittall 2001), yet without wishing to simplify and too precisely quantify their role here, I would like to emphasize the narrative function of their continual transformation through the course of the work, which might be compared to one crucial aspect of Richard Wagner's famed operatic use of the device. As Whittall puts it, 'the dramatic context justifies the nature of the musical transformation' (2001).

So, in [Figure 3](#) showing the *Pearl* motive, what begins as a musically rather neutral, even innocuous figure decorating a G-sharp, in bar 4, gradually undergoes a journey, with the Jeweller, in which it finds itself transformed, according to the narrative trajectory of the work, into new forms (such as plainsong in bar 29 to suggest the medieval setting of the poem; an important melodic element within the 'tragic violin theme' (bar 160 onwards); a climatic iteration on the trumpets in bar 430; a more disguised 'reminiscence' within the mournful cor anglais melody from bar 532).

Score and audio description: Figure 3. Score and audio extracts for both the voice and orchestra in which these motives are used from across the piece. The extracts vary in length, character and instrumentation – some incorporate the motives into longer melodic lines, others simply state it in isolation.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361693#tool-2361720> to read the score and listen to the extract.

Similarly, as shown in [Figure 4](#), the reprise of the opening *breathing* chords in the chorus after the Jeweller awakes (from bar 568), serves to remind listeners explicitly of the piece's start, to suggest a return to the original 'garden of herbs'. Yet, now rescored for voices, stretched out, and harmonically rather more fluid, they depict the medieval garden in a transformed light following the protagonist's dream-journey; the chorus itself perhaps distantly reminding him of the heavenly chorus of his dream-vision. Before this, harmonically and/or melodically more distorted forms of the motive (e.g. in bars 294–95; 301–02 and 404–onwards) might suggest the increasingly surreal, and hazy mental perception, for the jeweller, of his surroundings.

Score and audio description: Figure 4. Representative score and audio extracts of passages featuring 'breathing chords' across the piece. Again, they vary in length, character and instrumentation as described above.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361693#tool-2361716> to read the score and listen to the extract.

[1] An effect I have used extensively elsewhere, derived from various sources, perhaps most notably Jonathan Harvey's *Tranquil Abiding*; see Kaner (2022a). ↩

← Previous: *Pearl's* Universe of Topics

Next: Harmonic-Narrative Trajectory →

This accessible page is a derivative of <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361735> which it is meant to support and not replace.

Harmonic-Narrative Trajectory

Underpinning the topical and motivic components of *Pearl* that depict its environment and agents is a long-term harmonic design that governs, in Almén's musical-narrative framework, the *actantial* level of the work (2008: 229). Using Almén's formulation of narrative hierarchy, as the piece unfolds, its 'rank' values can be seen to shift: the pitiful ('low rank') qualities of the lament (and its protagonist) give way to increasing excitement; the subsequent long-term accumulation of harmonic tension suggests an impending arrival. As he approaches Pearl, the Jeweller's (and music's) sense of ecstatic joy increases and continues to do so as she, and the heavenly chorus, speak (/sing) to him.

From a musical theoretical perspective, these hierarchical shifts can be seen at the level of harmonic voice-leading, as shown in the middle-level reductions in [Figure 5](#). Specifically, the melodic and bass descents characteristic of the *lament* and *sinking* topics heard in the Jeweller's waking world (Figure 5i) are contrasted with several middle-ground ascents (Figure 5ii) that occur as the Jeweller awakens and begins his dream-journey onwards.

Images description: Figure 5. Musical graphs highlighting chord progressions that fall by step (i) and rise by step (ii) in both the treble and bass in response to the narrative.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361735#tool-2403898> to see the graphs.

As shown in the deeper structural-level voice-leading graph ([Figure 8](#)), a large background-level ascent then begins in bar 343 (the point from which the Jeweller sees Pearl in her radiance 'and she shone'), leading through to the gleaming, uncanny moment of her arrival (bar 427). Yet while this high-point is briefly followed by a temporary abating of tension on a local musical level, crucially, the ascent of structural upper voice soon resumes and continues to reach upward, reaching its true apex when the heavenly chorus sings of its 'great joy' in the aleatoric climax in bar 504. (The latter point that took me a very long time to recognize consciously; my first noted acknowledgement of this was written *after* the premiere; this epiphany and the difficulties its delay caused me are considered further in [Part 2](#).)

During the first phase of this ascent (bars 343–427), harmonic instability accumulates through the high degree of tension generated between the middle register and bass, which often

contains adjacent seconds ('rumbling') that undermine the possibilities for harmonic resonance. However, because of the spacing of these verticals, a *degree* of resonance is arguably perceptible. For example, the 'otherworldly' chord shown in [Figure 6a](#) is derived from the overtones on a low E; however, with its G and A cluster in the bass, a degree of resonance is generated by its near, but not actual, alignment with the overtones on a very low G ([Figure 6c](#)). On a metaphorical-narrative level, I intended this harmonic 'in-betweenness' to create a sense of uncanny to mirror the strangeness of the Jeweller's and the vision of his deceased Pearl. [1]

Image description: Figure 6. Comparison of the 'otherworldly' chord in b. 393 (a), with an overtone series chord on E (b), and a filtered overtone series chord on G (c). All three chords resemble each other sonically with several notes in common and similar spacings.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361735#tool-2361748> to see the score.

The topical shimmering in the upper register (shown in the uppermost stave in [Figure 8](#)) mirrors this trajectory, achieving its peak in bars 425–29 ('maximal shimmer'), just before Pearl speaks. As her character and the heavenly chorus sing, a subsequent increase in the resonance occurs as the rumbling topic dies away and the bass tends increasingly to support, harmonically, the notes above it, coinciding with the poem's depictions of heavenly joy and the Jeweller's delight. However, a complete sense of resolution arguably only truly occurs through the final descent in the bass in parallel twelfths (from bars 517–95, briefly derailed by the Jeweller's failed attempt to ford the river in bar 531), onto the C–G double-pedal that resonantly reharmonizes the opening 'breathing' chords. Thus, through this long-range harmonic approach, the inherent unease first encountered in the medieval (early music + lament) topic of the opening is resolved, and the Jeweller is a changed man.

On a very simplified level, this process can be seen by charting the evolution of the 'tonic' chord from bar 2, into the 'uncanny' chord in bar 343, and its ultimate resolution, over the C-G bass twelfth, in the final section of the piece (from the climax in bars 504 onwards to the end), shown here in [Figure 7](#).

Image description: Figure 7. Harmonic summary of the piece shown as six chords, labelled as follows: opening 'tonic' (b. 2) → 'uncanny' version (b. 343) → maximal shimmer (b. 427) → choral climax (b. 504) → till unresolved (b. 568) → final resolution (b. 595)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361735#tool-2361760> to see the score.

[Figure 8](#) below thus represents a more elaborate music-graphic attempt to show the work's long-range voice-leading processes, including the structural melodic ascent to the moment of 'maximal shimmer' in bar 427, and its continuation to the climax in bar 504 described above.

The graph is shown in two levels of detail (i and ii) to aid reading and clarify which harmonies and pitches have the greatest structural significance for the long-term musical trajectory of the work. [2] (I have included a key for those unfamiliar with these analytical methods; knowledge of Schenker/voice-leading theories is not a prerequisite for reading the graph.)

Image description: Figure 8. Musical graph using specialist, voice-leading notation to demonstrate the unfolding harmonic structure of the piece over time and its mirroring of the piece's narrative trajectory. Beginning on a chord featuring a prominent low G in the bass, upwards movement is visible in the treble, leading to the moment of 'maximal shimmer', but also beyond it to the moment of 'heavenly joy' in b. 504. The latter coincides with the prominent arrival of a low C in the bass. A subsequent stepwise bass descent occurs in parallel twelfths (E and B, through D and A, to C and G) as the piece reaches its close. The last chord is a reworking of the opening chord on G, on this new (and more resonant) bass foundation of a C with G a twelfth above it.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361735#tool-2361779> to see the score.

[1] In Heidi Schlipphacke's rereading of Freud's famous essay, 'Das Unheimliche', she notes: 'the uncanny embodies in-betweenness both in temporal (specters, ghosts, effigies, children) and in spatial terms (India and Europe as uncanny doppelgänger, neither same nor other; the garden as a space both controlled and uncontrollable; the doll as a representation in the here and now that both conjures and murders the beloved)' (Schlipphacke 2015, 171). ↩

[2] I should acknowledge here that such a graph is of course dependent on an understanding that *Pearl* exhibits a high degree of pitch priority: the sense that some notes, and combinations of notes (in chords), are more important than others, in a hierarchical and goal-directed manner comparable (but also distinct from) that encountered in common-practice tonality. A detailed discussion of this principle here, elsewhere in my work, and within the wider contemporary musical landscape to which it belongs, is outside the scope of this paper. For a good overview of pitch priority/centricity in a range of post-tonal styles and contexts, see Kleppinger (2011).

This could be read as an indication of my adherence to certain theoretical norms derived from the Western canon, and Schenker in particular. While this is undoubtedly true to a degree, and a product of my artistic and theoretical background, I feel this should not be overemphasized. The work arguably operates on many levels, of which voice-leading teleology is one; one that is also fundamental to many types of music (Agawu 2021), much of which Schenker did or would undoubtedly have rejected. Indeed, my voice-leading graph departs from Schenker's own ideals in a significant number of ways, and I actively reject many aspects of his work and its status: including both his overt racism but also what Philip Ewell describes as the perpetuation of the 'white racial frame' that has arisen from continued uncritical acceptance of his work and its implications within music theory and education (2020).

In this case, voice-leading notation offers a ready-made graphic solution for showing certain kinds of embedded deep structure around significant pitches and harmonies in relation to my musical-narratological analysis, which otherwise displays nothing resembling a Schenkerian *Ursatz*. ↩

Integrated Narrative, Storyworld and Topical Analysis

In order to bring these various narrative analyses of the work together, in [Table 2](#), I combine a written account of the work’s underlying narrative structure with its topical design and *storyworld* components, with the aim of elucidating the connections between them. After Almén (2008), I divide the narrative into eight *isotopies*: major structural groupings within the (musical) plotline. [1] My intention here is to illuminate the many means by which I conceived of the work as a multimedial adaptation of *Pearl’s* original poetic narrative, not only through literally setting some of its lines, but in a much wider sense, to reflect my interpretation of its multifaceted richness (its imagery, its mellifluousness, its strangeness, and so on, not least in Armitage’s limpid, glowing translation) in both the vocal *and* orchestral writing.

Table 2. Integrated Narrative and Storyworld Analysis of *Pearl*.

Isotopy	Bars	Narrative Components and Trajectory	
1. Jeweller recalls and mourns his Pearl in the Garden of Herbs	1-167	Storyworld Components	The Jeweller (existent), is introduced in the Garden of Herbs, the ‘spot’ where he lost his Pearl (setting), first recounting her radiant beauty, then grieving her loss (narrative events). Unable to overcome his ‘wretched desire’ (mental events), his overwhelming grief attempts to transgress the norms of his wakeful existence (physical laws) and religious doctrine (social rules and values). He longs to, but cannot be, reunited with her.
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The easeful breathing chord motive opens the work imbuing it with (as yet unknown) structural significance • An early music topic (or set of topics) is immediately introduced, suggesting the story’s historical setting. • Its deliberately limited timbral palette (with little percussion and woodwind), enhances this depiction, reserving the full orchestral colour-palette for the radiant textures to follow later. • The solo baritone enters with plainsong-like syllabic

			<p>vocal lines reinforcing the sense of medievalism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hints of a lament topic occur within the early music umbrella topic, through the emphasis on descending lines (bb. 10-11; 19-20) and melodic sighing figures (e.g. bb. 31, 62, 67, 74 etc.) • The lament topic grows more prominent as the Jeweller begins to describe his grief, with increasingly chromatic melodic descents (bb. 67-68 and 85-86), further melodic ‘sighing’ in the plangent cor anglais solos (bb. 135-136), and the tragic violin theme (beginning b. 163) that ends this isotopy.
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	<p>Diatonic modal clusters in the mid-register facilitate the free flowing, ornamented topical melodic style of the opening. However, a sense of unease is soon implied by occasional clusters in the bass which subtly undermine the resonance of the otherwise diatonic-modal harmonies above. As the mournful aspect of the text grows clearer, this effect becomes more pronounced, in tandem with the emerging lament-topical tropes, which results in an accumulating harmonic tension and growing affective unease (in the bass ‘outbursts’ e.g. bb. 63, 84, 92 etc).</p>
2. Chorus comments on his sorrow as the Jeweller sinks into heavy sleep	168-209	Storyworld Components	<p>The Jeweller (existent) remains in the ‘same spot’ (setting) but the focus shifts to a more reflective plain with the chorus and orchestra ‘commenting’ on Pearl’s death as he falls asleep (narrative and mental events), preparing his arrival in the dream-realm (change of setting).</p>
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ornamented melodic character of the early music topic recedes as the tragic violin theme continues, while still anguished and mournful in nature (b. 160 onwards). • Beneath the violin theme, the full chorus enters for the first time with the lament chorale, enriching the tragic character through falling sequential writing and further vocal melodic sigh. [2] • As the chorale ends (b.192), the descending lament figures within the tragic violin theme and lament chorale, transforming into the sinking topic proper and leading to the whole tone cluster in the extreme bass in b. 206.
		Musical-Narrative Trajectory	<p>While little plot action occurs in this isotopy, the musical depictions of grief and subsequent dissolution of this material into a large-scale descent add dimensions of depth to the Jeweller’s inner psychological experience. Following the music’s departure from the medieval garden/early music topic, via the sinking topic, the ensuing clusters in the low</p>

			register reinforce the function of the bass as a source of unease and prepare the way for the further accumulation of harmonic tension in the following two isotopies. Timbrally, the entire passage slowly introduces a larger orchestral palette, including more woodwind and tuned percussion, further implying a transition away from the ‘Garden of Herbs’ into a new dream-realm.
3. Jeweller’s spirit embarks on dream-quest to marvel and amazement	210-313	Storyworld Components	The Jeweller’s spirit (existent) awakens to a new gleaming dreamscape, ‘overwhelming’ in its ornament and his dream-quest now begins. As he journeys through the landscape, he focuses less on his grief and is overcome with awe and excitement (mental events). A new order of reality (or unreality) seems to prevail for the Jeweller, now unconstrained by the physical laws of his earthly existence.
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shimmering in the strings and tuned percussion become more prominent (while perhaps not yet fully topical) to depict the radiance of the landscape (e.g. bb. 224-225). • A gradual build-up of rising figures contrast with the preceding sinking topic to suggest building excitement, leading to the arrival of the more rhythmic journeying topic (bb. 216-237). • Chorus entries around the solo voice (bb. 264-287) further develop the rising topic within this setting. • Following the climax of the journeying topic (bb. 286) the bass rumbling becomes more distinctive and topical in nature (bb. 305-306; 309-310) suggesting an element of uncanny otherworldliness.
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	<p>A change of musical language occurs, defined by the introduction of the above new topics and textures, including a new harmonic vocabulary and timbral palette:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The arrival of the journeying topic heralds the use of new chord spacings emphasising perfect and compound-perfect fifths, with an increase in harmonic rhythm and stronger sense of pulsation. • The rising figures result in structural lines that now <i>ascend</i>. • The full colour spectrum of woodwind, high strings and tuned percussion is in use throughout. • The eventual arrival of rumbling bass clusters cements their role as the source of accumulating harmonic tension until Isotopy 5.
4. A more marvellous	314-436	Storyworld Components	The Jeweller remains present but now, with surreal excitement, glimpses Pearl (existents) from afar (on a

matter: beyond the beautiful water			gleaming crystal cliff across the water), no longer a child, but 'a young woman of grace' (events and setting). His emotions and sense of expectation are almost overwhelming.
	Topical and Motivic Components		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncanny shimmering gradually overwhelms the musical foreground as the poetry further emphasizes images of radiance, leading to an explicit reference to Rued Langgaard's <i>Music of the Spheres</i> combined with otherworldly microtonally inflected harmonies and further bass rumbling (bb. 349-360) • Blurring is employed as the Jeweller's speech grows increasingly 'dream-like' (bb. 368-377) and in the accompanying hazy string lines (bb. 370-373, 382-387). • Fragments of earlier melodic material (vocal and instrumental) recur in the bass melody of bb. 387-401, but these are somewhat eclipsed by the brightness of the shimmering effects, which continues to intensify in its approach to the moment of 'maximal shimmer' (bb. 425-435; see Figure 8).
	Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory		The harmony is now reconfigured to facilitate much shimmering above/around the baritone (and instrumental bass melody) as the Jeweller excitedly narrates what he sees, in somewhat breathless recitativo phrases. Tension continuously accumulates with much activity also occurring in the bass register, until reaching its goal of C-D whole tone cluster coinciding with the point of 'maximal shimmer' (bb. 425-435). However, this is not a climax as such – the structural line continues to ascend beyond this into the next isotopy.
5. Pearl, and the heavenly chorus, speak without sentiment	437-506	Storyworld Components	Pearl speaks first alone and then in harmony with the 'heavenly chorus' (existents and setting), persuading him that he should not mourn: she now lives in joy in paradise, where her new existence is joyful in nature (physical laws, mental events).
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The intense shimmering clears to reveal the 'purity' of Pearl's voice (a solo soprano voice), leading to the arrival of the heavenly joy topic in the chorus with a new simplified melodic language and more resonant harmony. • The earlier 'tragic' violin theme is reprised from b. 480; yet now reharmonized and played by all the strings, it is recast as joyful in character. • The joyful choral material climaxes in b. 504, achieving

			its high point on a top B (b. 502) just before the structural high point and climax of the work (b. 504), at which point all the choristers partake individually in singing exuberant lines, unified by a single harmony on a resonant perfect twelfth in the bass (C-G), setting up the role of this dyad as part of a new ‘tonic’ sonority. (A further stepwise onto this dyad occurs in the bass in the following two isotopies.)
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	The new harmonic resonance of the heavenly joy topic results in a dissipation of tension on a structural level. However, some tension remains: the (12-note) chord on a low C and G in bar 504 still arguably produces much <i>inharmonicity</i> (due to the false relations in its upper register), requiring final resolution in the remaining isotopies.
6. Jeweller’s vain attempt to cross the current	507-537	Storyworld Components	Overcome with delight (mental events), the Jeweller excitedly attempts to ford the river separating him from Pearl. As he does so, he finds his path blocked (physical laws, narrative events), to his frustration.
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reprise of journeying topic conveys the Jeweller’s excitement and attempt to ‘travel’ further (bb. 510-523). • His attempt is thwarted by the swirling water suggested by the orchestral wave (b. 525-531). • A bittersweet cor anglais solo (b. 532) signals the poignancy of his realisation that he cannot join her.
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	This isotopy begins the final long-range, structural descent in the bass in parallel twelfths, from E and B down to D and A. The Jeweller’s attempt to cross leads to a temporarily tense bass cluster around the D and A. However, this eventually clears to reveal the prominent C-sharp of the cor anglais solo in the treble, which functions as a voice-leading link to the following isotopy and ensuing large-level harmonic resolution, on C and G in the bass, at the reprise of the opening breathing chords.
7. Chorus reflects on faith and the afterlife	538-567	Storyworld Components	The Jeweller realises his vain attempt to cross was against God’s wishes (physical laws, existent, narrative events) and the chorus reflects on the eternal solace, love and support offered by God (mental events).
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The overlapping of a reworked version of the lament chorale, against lines from the solo baritone and the continuing elegiac obbligato cor anglais solo evokes a Bachian chorale aria topic: a liturgical ‘lesson’ in the chorus is heard against a more personal text in the solo voice, affectively refined by the instrumental solo.x • The chorale inverts its mournful sighing gestures to

			<p><i>rising</i> semitones, and though the phrase is repeated sequentially down a tone at first, it later rises from b. 554 in a final phrase that reaches a respacing of ‘tonic’ chord of bar 2, imbuing it with a new sense of hope and acceptance.</p>
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	<p>As the final ascending phrase of the chorale arrives on the respaced ‘tonic’ chord from the opening (cf. b. 2 and b. 562), a C# appears in the first sopranos, creating a voice-leading link with the C# that began the cor anglais solo (b. 532). This provides a voice-leading link with the following chord on the anticipated bass twelfth (C-G, b. 568), which will then ‘resolve’ further onto a reworking of the original ‘tonic’ chord above the C-G drone (b. 595).</p>
8. Jeweller reflects on his vision and newfound acceptance of grief	568-612	Storyworld Components	<p>The Jeweller awakens to the Garden of Herbs (existents, setting, narrative events), but now with a changed perspective, unburdened and accepting of his grief (mental events).</p>
		Topical and Motivic Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The opening breathing chord motive returns both in voices and instruments, now over the resonant low C and G twelfth. • Plainchant vocal lines reappear, returning us to opening medieval/early music setting, but now with more directly religious connotations, leading to the moment in which all singers (b. 596: chorus and soloist) perform in octaves/unison the poem’s invitation for all to unite in faith: ‘may we live both as his humble servants and beautiful pearls.’ • The final ‘amens’ echo this sense of unity and acceptance of religious salvation in death.
		Musical and Narrative Structural Trajectory	<p>The newfound resonance generated by the C-G twelfth in the bass generates large scale resolution and closure. However, this is not fully achieved until the final structural descent in the <i>upper</i> voice: the chord above the C-G drone in bar 569 is a tone higher than at the opening (with G# at the top) until it finally descends in b.595 (to F#).</p>

Lastly, in [Figure 9](#), I summarize this entire narrative structure visually to clarify and convey its overall trajectory to highlight the integration of its main images at the larger level of form. Significantly, in contrast with the arc-like or triangular contour of most comparable graphs (usually based on Freytag’s (1876) famous ‘narrative pyramid’ characterized by ‘rising action’ approaching a climax) mine has perhaps a more distinctive trajectory (cf. Hoffman 2002: 116 and Scheuregger 2021: 304). Arguably this functions on multiple levels: in a more literal sense, it conveys my reading of the poem and the fall and rise in status (or rank, to use Almén’s term) of the Jeweller-protagonist as he sinks deeper into his grief, falls asleep and undergoes his dream-quest, leading to his radiant vision of Pearl and her joyous existence, his

brief loss of rank in his failed attempt to cross the river, and final ascent to state of equanimity with his grief through his renewed faith. Yet in another, it depicts the harmonic underpinning of the work as depicted in [Figure 8](#) and [Table 2](#): the literal descent of the orchestra in isotopy 2; the ensuing climatic build-up; and the eventual attainment of harmonic equilibrium; thereby highlighting the close mirroring between the poetic and musical narrative in the work.

Graph description: Figure 9. Graphic depicting the plot trajectory as a line moving from left to right through time with textual labels. The line begins horizontally with the label 'Jeweller, in the garden of herbs' and then sinks as the protagonist relives his loss, reaching its lowest point as he enters 'heavy sleep'. As he dreams, his 'spirit rises', and the line thickens (shaded with a gradient from dark to light) to suggest growing 'radiance/shimmer'. It reaches an initial high point when Pearl speaks, but then continues to rise further, reaching its true climax at 'heavenly joy'. It then dips briefly as the jeweller attempts and fails to cross the river to reach Pearl, before rising again, and finally levelling, at a higher point than it initially began, to depict his final state of acceptance.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2361780#tool-2361826> to see the graph.

[1] The term is derived from semiotics, and is perhaps most clearly defined by Eco, as 'a constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence' (Eco 1980, 153). ↩

[2] C.f. J.S. Bach 'Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen' Cantata, BWV12, movement ii. ↩

← [Previous: Harmonic-Narrative Trajectory](#)

[Next: Part 2: Creative Journey](#) →

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Part 2: Creative Journey

As I stated above, the potential of employing such long-range harmonic techniques to control *Pearl's* structure in tandem with a tropological-topical approach to narrative pictorialism was part of my thinking from a relatively early stage in the creative process. As I noted in my diary (written, at this point, with a view to including the work in my doctoral portfolio):

Diary Entry 12 November 19

[C]urrently looking at word painting on structural-narrative level. Thinking about how sinking is inherent feature of early verses in the real world (mourning) and now rising, energetic material can be used to lead up to the narrator's surging through his dream landscape in excitement to find Pearl. Perhaps have a look at the email from [music psychologist, Prof.] John Sloboda to your student [...] about how these gestures actually mimic the sounds people make when they're sad / excited etc and link with topic theory?...

Moreover, many textual sketches show my attempts to divide the piece up into something like narrative isotopies (with some topical descriptions). Beyond the annotated poem (Figure 2) I later created the textual overview shown below in Figure 10.

Image description: Figure 10i. Handwritten draft (on manuscript paper) describing the unfolding narrative of the piece through time, with accompanying typed transcription.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-2370430> to look at the image.

Figure 10ii.

Formal / texture / harmonic overview

[section]	[poetry/passage]	[description]
1	"Beautiful Pearl" "But I lost" —INTERLUDE—	lush harmonies and melodic writing falling lines

2	“In that same spot” —melodic INTERLUDE with chorus (chorale ii)→descending to bass	more counterpoint / flowing lines
3	“Suddenly my spirit rose”	rich bass leading upward
4	“In a state of ecstasy”	Faster / evermore glistening colours, rising figures (choir?)
5	“A more marvellous matter”	Halt harmonic movement / shimmering / (same opening chords below) [1]
6	“Oh Pearl”	spectral / WILD OUTBURST
7	“Then that jewelled one”	Excited recit. / huge swell to silence (Vivier...)
8	solo voice [“Sir,...”]	sublime
9	→choir [“...there’s no truth in what you say”]	Harmonies and choral polyphony
10	“Delight deluged”	Water swirling – impatient, becoming turbulent
11	Distant chorale [“To please the prince”]	Within/emerging from turbulence
12	Faint hints of opening [“Here on this mound”]	
13	Tutti plainchant	

However, I recognize that sharing the foregoing analysis (written and assembled post-hoc, after all, but with reference to my notes and sketches) runs the risk of suggesting that the structure of the work was conceived fully (or near-fully) formed, with all of these interconnecting factors in mind. Indeed, I am well aware that to readers, perhaps especially fellow composers, it may all seem too ‘tidy’, and the piece implausibly considered in its conception. Indeed, colleagues (myself included when listening back now) have also commented on the ‘smoothness’ of the work.

Image gallery description: Large full plastic box filled with handwritten musical sketches on manuscript paper.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-3063744> to look at the images.

On one level, I believe this reflects my conscious response to the qualities of the poem: its easeful alliteration and technique of ‘concatenation’, and arguably also the remarkably flowing quality of Armitage’s translation. (Armitage discusses the effects of its poetic devices and his approach in his foreword; 2016: xi–xvii.) However, in a more down-to-earth sense, completing the piece involved (as undoubtedly familiar to most fellow practitioners), a very *messy* mix between conscious and intuitive decision-making, in which my analytical understanding of the work emerged gradually through its (unplanned) long gestation, right up until the very point of completion and in some aspects, even after its premiere. Failure was (as always for a composer) a real possibility, and given different circumstances (e.g. a 2020 premiere without

the intervening pandemic), I would certainly have arrived at a different version of the piece. Owing to circumstances, it had an unusually long period of development, and looking back over my diary in its entirety now, I am very struck by the sheer number of distressed depictions of being ‘lost’, in a ‘funk’, at a ‘low point’, ‘burnt out’, and a palpable sense of alarm at the experience of having to repeatedly ‘chisel’ away at the materials and structure more than I had ever done before (all quotations from my diary, 2019–20). Indeed, I am struck by how little of it seems to be about creative discoveries and solutions; reading between the lines I suspect I was naively awaiting the kinds of epiphanies I had experienced elsewhere (cf. Kaner 2022a; 2024), and when, for whatever reason, these never seemed to occur, I resorted to very slow and gradual realization of my creative aims that involved not only just ‘chiselling’ but even ‘smashing through walls’ (diary entry, 1 October 2020), as part of a creatively difficult and uncomfortable new experience for me.

On a day-to-day basis, while I recognized the nature and structural role of some passages relatively easily as I wrote them (and in turn used these findings to guide their further development), I experienced much difficulty in analysing others. I could often sense in vague, intuitive terms how these passages ‘needed’ to work but did not know how or why this should be achieved:

Diary Entry 1 August 2019

it’s a bit depressing when I realize some stuff [...] works well locally but the larger arc doesn’t feel right. Sometimes it’s too much of the same material cycling around, sometimes the harmonic pace feels inconsistent, etc. etc.

Diary Entry 15 August 2019

Back in London [after a residency in Aldeburgh, Suffolk], and going quite hard at the harmonic outline. It’s pretty tricky as there are so many small decisions involved to really fit everything together convincingly... Making progress though, it’s just frustratingly slow. But I have so much material now and I need a way to see how it all fits together to allow me to start putting it together properly[.]

Some months after the comments above (November 2019) I attempted, and failed (again), to create a harmonic outline of the entire work so far, including (as shown in Figure 11) thinking hierarchically about the role of the bass G at the opening, which I beamed with a white notehead as if on a Schenkerian voice-leading graph.

Image description: Figure 11. Handwritten musical sketch attempting to reduce the opening section (roughly the first 65 bars) to an extended sequence of chords, to analyse its voice-leading and the hierarchical role of a low G in the bass. It resembles the graphic produced by the author, after the piece’s completion for this paper, in figures 7 and 8.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-2370517> to look at the image.

Looking back now, though this structural sketch was simply abandoned after one page (taking it only as far as bar 66), I suspect it nevertheless represents an early step in my journey towards the final harmonic structure of the work.

Crucially, not long before what would have been the deadline for the vocal score (May 2020, if Covid had not intervened) I had a pair of doctoral supervisions with Dr Richard Baker, who alerted me to what he perceived as a lack of sufficient harmonic tension, in my original draft, during the first orchestral interlude (following the lines ‘and I mourn now, with a broken heart, | for my priceless pearl without a spot’). I reflected in this shortly afterwards in my diary:

Diary Entry 3 April 2020

had a lesson with RB last week and he really said what I needed to hear. I’d just not thought enough about the role of tension and darkness near the beginning. I need(ed) to sow seeds so that it can bloom into the foreground later, and this is really making much more sense. For example, in the first choral passage, the harmony was original so sweet—and without tension it just seems twee almost. So, I’ve been thinking about how to subtly introduce these sounds earlier, so that they just seem to appear unexpectedly but inevitably later on.

It’s something that I’ve known since an UG—I remember CW talking about this technique in Schubert, and GB made a big fuss about the idea of an initial source of tension in my music—climaxes and tension have to grow naturally they can’t just be shoved in. He gave example of *La Valse*. It’s so important. And now things feel like they’re clicking into place.

The two versions can be compared in Figure 12.

Score and audio description: Figure 12. Comparison of draft and final version of first orchestral interlude in *Pearl*.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-3062216> to read the score and listen to the recording.

This discussion proved pivotal for me creatively, crucially, reminding me of a discussion of my work as a Fellow at Tanglewood with Prof. George Benjamin, and his comments on an orchestral work I had written for the LSO’s Panufnik workshop in 2011 [*Chasm*, subsequently withdrawn]. Benjamin pointed out that I had simply written a climax without any real source of harmonic tension to set the musical forces in motion for such a build-up. He stressed, citing several examples from the repertory, that such tension should be somehow inherent in the material to be convincing. In my attempts to solve this, I referred myself back to Christopher Wintle’s chapters ‘Idea as Steigerung [Intensification]’ (2006: 89–93) and ‘On Intensification’ (101–10) (both of which I read as an undergraduate in Wintle’s analysis classes) for their insightful analyses of the means with which Britten and Chopin achieve such compelling climaxes in their respective *Nocturnes* for solo piano.

All the same, certain aspects of the piece's structural design continued to elude me until much later, and I continued to feel a high degree of tension between my intuitive impulses and analytical knowledge:

Diary Entry 26 July 2020

A lot of it is just sitting with the notes and listening to them incredibly carefully, making slight adjustments until they 'sit' right with my ears. Not easy to articulate why this might be during the process—but that is how I work. Always guided by what I hear. When I ignore these instincts (usually because of time pressure) I always feel some ambivalence about the results, and it's always frustrating when I don't realize this until after a piece is finished...!

So, it may seem mad but it's a process of having ideas, revising and refining them and endless tweaking. Of course, sometimes the material might 'want' to go a certain way, and I might follow it, but then realize that takes it in the wrong direction within the wider shape or trajectory of that passage within the piece as a whole.

This type of struggle was more familiar to me as practitioner and teacher of other composers. (It is described and analysed in relation to another composer's working process as 'problem accumulation' by Pohjannoro, for example (2016: 224).) Yet in previous works my experience had been somewhat different, with such creative difficulties often resolving themselves in a continuous burst of activity towards the end of the composition process that might be considered a 'flow state' (Harmat, de Manzano, and Ullén 2021).

Instead, as noted, the creative journey in this work was characterized, apart from a few more intense bursts of activity in its early stages, by a slow realization that the whole piece needed to be complete in a provisional state before the large-scale structural concerns could truly be solved. As I wrote in my diary in November 2019:

Diary Entry 6 November 2019

Today quite comfortably came up with more material later in the piece (ending ideas and elsewhere) which in fact is probably exactly what I need to do be doing to solve earlier problems—the difficult thing with writing those passages is that I don't know enough of what happens later to know where I need to take the harmony / textures structurally.

Indeed, with passages that did 'flow' quickly, it was not immediately obvious how I should integrate them with their surrounding materials, perhaps because certain crucial harmonic details were yet to solidify. This problem became acutely apparent when I realized, returning to complete the unfinished draft in 2021, after a great deal of agonizing, that a significant and lengthy passage (bars 387–435, leading up to the moment before Pearl appears) would need to be transposed down a major second, because of its premature arrival on an earlier version of the 'maximal shimmer' chord, which seemed poorly paced and insufficiently dramatic as a result. Extracts from both versions are shown in Figure 13.

Score and audio description: Figure 13. Comparison of draft (July 2020) and completed versions of *Pearl* and transposition/reworking of passage leading to ‘maximal shimmer’ chord. (Note: the bar numbers do not correspond as other changes were also made earlier in the piece.)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-2370594> to read the score and listen to the recordings.

Perhaps most disconcertingly for me, the precise chord progression leading to the moment of ‘maximal shimmer’ ([LL] to [MM] in Figure 13d) underwent many revisions, right until the very day before the submission of the vocal score in February 2022. With hindsight, I believe this was because I had not fully understood its role as ‘pre-climactic’. (An understanding that I perhaps only fully reached, and/or accepted, when revisiting the work and analysing it for this paper.)

Slideshow description: A small selection of sketches for the climax of *Pearl* at various stages.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2353444/2370405#tool-3063834> to read the score and listen to the extract.

Indeed, the sheer number of iterations of this harmonic progression in my sketches (a selection are shown in [Slideshow 1](#)) speaks to the degree of fine-tuning required to satisfy the complex harmonic and voice-leading demands of the passage (the ‘maximal shimmer’ chord occupies nearly the full tessitura of the orchestra from the double basses low C to a very top A-flat), not to mention the narrative weight of this highly dramatic and uncanny moment in the poem, which had profound (or, given the profile of the premiere, somewhat terrifying) implications for ‘getting it wrong’.

[1] This refers to bb. 404-410; the “three-chord” iteration of the breathing chord gesture (see [Figure 4](#)). ↩

← [Previous: Integrated Narrative, Storyworld and Topical Analysis](#)

[Next: Epilogue: Reflections and Responses](#) →

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Epilogue: Reflections and Responses

Nevertheless, the slow but eventual emergence of the piece's final structure thankfully resulted in some important longer-term discoveries and learning points for me, despite the many discomforts I encountered along the way (no doubt exacerbated by the trials of the coronavirus pandemic and some unconnected personal challenges during that period). As my longest work to date, the drawn-out process of slowly assembling such a large structure was a vividly unfamiliar and often unnerving experience for me. Even on a more mundane practical note, as my first orchestral work written in vocal score (for rehearsal reasons), I struggled with being unable to busy myself with local details of the orchestration, the sound of which was such an important part of my concept for the piece. Ultimately, however, facing down these challenges has left me with a newfound ability to notate orchestral music in reduced form, enabling me to aurally imagine (and physically see) much larger swathes of music in one go, and to have greater confidence in my intuitive perception of its narrative arc and underpinning harmonic structure. (Having worked in this way, the completion of the orchestration itself, once the vocal score had been submitted, was comparatively swift (taking only two months), with only the occasional need for minor corrections to the provisional vocal score.)

Crucially, I now feel a little more cognizant of the relationship between my intuition and technique, and through this project (and the use of similar methods to document my working process in my other recent narrative projects), recognize that experiencing tension between them is in fact an integral part of realizing my aims. I more readily accept that my creative work involves the interaction of both conscious and unconscious processes, much as the relationship between tacit, embodied, and explicit knowledge are considered crucial to other fields of artistic practice and P-R (see Nelson 2013: 37–47). Anticipating the dilemmas these two apparently conflicting impulses can cause might, I hope, permit me to find the creative process of writing larger works more comfortable in future.

Nonetheless, even with the more open sharing of some of the messiness of the creative process, I must still acknowledge the inherent danger, in any account of the completion of a large-scale research project, of the tendency toward a conventional heroic portrayal of the composer (even a quasi-Beethovenian one; see Goehr 1994: 205–42). Yet this would genuinely be a misrepresentation of my creative experiences. Owing to the drawn-out nature of the work, undertaken during a difficult time for so many, I would characterize the completion of the piece as far less of a 'heroic return' and much more a drawn-out accumulation of new

artistic self-knowledge, which on some level, would seem to parallel the journey of the Jeweller himself, who likewise does not emerge victorious in a post-romantic sense. (Indeed, Pearl spends much of their interaction chastising him for his lack of faith in the Christian God's salvation of the dead in the full-length poem. His inability to restrain his futile urges to ford the river and join her is perhaps testament to his fundamentally flawed character.) Thus the romantic image of the composer as the (sometimes even unwitting) recipient of divine inspiration, as critiqued by Lydia Goehr (1994) and many others (Born 2005; Leech-Wilkinson 2020, etc.), perhaps unsurprisingly bears little resemblance to mine, nor the Jeweller's, experience. Moreover, laying aside the (inevitably limited) latter comparison, the familiar sense of gradual 'problem accumulation' leading to intense moments of creative 'flow', that I had encountered so frequently on other projects, never materialized in this case, however naively I had expected it to. [1]

In his book on *Music and Inspiration*, composer Jonathan Harvey reflects on the more complex 'truth' of the phenomenon of inspiration, describing in one example the 'unconscious inspiration' that 'guides the composer's work throughout', through a 'gradual, "clarifying" process' of 'discovery' (1999: 35–36). However, even that sense of 'clarification' would imply a final feeling of achievement at having reached a solution to a problem. Though the latter is certainly something I believe I have experienced in some way working on other pieces, in this case, I feel it simply never came. As I believe my journal entries indicate, I felt as though I got the piece 'wrong' far too many times to experience anything more than relief that I didn't need to continue working on a particular problem, and could move onto the next. So rather than emerging victorious from the compositional journey, my main sense now is more that I simply survived it, but not unscathed: in the process I cannot help but feel I did lose something of my previous, more optimistic, creative self.

Furthermore, to make this story a more personal one, I also now find it impossible to reflect on the piece (and its portrayal of grief and consolation) without linking it to the tragic suicide of my great friend and colleague, the composer [Alastair Putt](#), who attended the premiere and joined me, the performers, close friends and family in a small gathering after the concert, just two days before his death. So while my overriding impression is that it was very hard work to achieve what I did (which is far from a perfect realization of my vision; I am a terrible perfectionist), and as grateful as I am for the immense privileges of a major commission for the BBC Proms for such huge forces, taken in balance, I cannot help but suspect I might have lost as much as I gained in the process, and that things will never feel quite the same going forward. I do not feel I am the hero of this story of the piece's creation nor, indeed, do I believe that artists are heroes at all: we are simply practitioners grappling with life, work and the many highs, lows, but also feelings of ambivalence, ambiguity, often even confusion and disillusionment that they bring. Or, framed a little more positively, perhaps this newfound attitude also represents the attainment of a certain kind of realism and maturity that comes through greater experience that may prove beneficial in the long run, even if some of my memories in relation to the work will forever remain ambivalent and unresolved.

Looking beyond myself, and as for any artist, critical responses and feedback can act as a grounding (even humbling) antidote to any sense of heroism that can arise after a successful premiere (although I take care to avoid engaging too seriously with those that I believe to have misunderstood the premise of the work and judged it on terms other than its own). One extensive review for the *Musical Quarterly*, while praising the pictorialism of the work expressed a significant reservation in its final paragraph, noting: '[t]here's a lot of text to get through and *Pearl* sometimes feels hampered' (Stein 2022: 54). To a degree, I suspect that this assessment was partly due to the nature of it being a first performance, which owing to the practical realities, was rehearsed by the orchestra on a very tight schedule, and while impressive and incredibly accurate, was perhaps a little tentative. If it does prove possible in future to get further performances, especially if they are repeated, I suspect that might permit the orchestra to gain a stronger sense of the work's shape. (This has certainly been the case in other works of mine, and certainly not a negative reflection on the orchestral players; it is a mere practical reality of the current professional landscape of the classical music industry in the UK and its effects on the performance of new works.)

Happily, a number of reviewers did comment on the use of topical gestures in the score (even if they were cued to a degree by my programme notes and interviews with BBC Radio 3; see Jeal 2022; Stein 2022; Westbrook 2022). Indeed, items in the bulleted list covered above in my [Storytelling Aims](#) were discussion points in many of the published and private responses I received. Moreover, it was of great value to me personally when Christopher Wintle contacted me after the premiere of *Pearl* to say 'the piece has a deep harmonic *Zusammenhang*'. [2] As I noted in my reply, I believe I owe much of my understanding of long-range harmonic structure to Wintle and his work, and therefore considered this significant praise, particularly as he sensed this from listening to the broadcast only (private email to the author, 12 August 2022, quoted with permission).

Rather than attempting to 'defend' the work, however, I would simply posit that a faster moving, musically more dramatic score would have been a different piece, and one that conveyed a story other than that of the poem. Indeed, while Stein states early on the poem is 'profoundly undramatic' in nature, he acknowledges that my work is capable of 'lightness, surprise and deftness' in other cases (Stein 2022: 53–54). Put simply then, I would argue that *Pearl* was conceived quite deliberately as a peculiar and subtle musical world that responds as closely as I felt possible to the nuances of its hauntingly beautiful yet strange poetic text, which on the face of it, involves no more than a mournful protagonist falling asleep and waking up transformed by an otherworldly dream. Whatever its resonances for me and others now, it is an important milestone in my ongoing creative journey and has resulted in several significant artistic discoveries in terms of my work in the area of musical narrative and broader understanding of myself as a practitioner.

Lastly, as a *researcher-practitioner*, I hope that sharing the piece and unpacking its creative development here might encourage others to respond and reflect on its resonances and implications for themselves, and through its methodological eclecticism provide the type of 'new story' that Stewart advocates to 'uncover, record, interpret and position, from an insider's perspective and experience, the processes [I] use within the context of contemporary practices

in the field', as a 'portrait-of-self that mirrors and situates [my] experience' (2007: 126). (As noted in the [Introduction](#), my application of narratological and adaptive analytical techniques may have wider theoretical and practical applications, especially in collaborative contexts, as a means to articulate and negotiate narrative thinking across varied media.) Above all, I hope that, alongside other instances in this journal, it sheds some light on one of the many diverse ways of being an artistic practitioner today, and within my own field, that it might encourage colleagues to consider doing the same, as P-R in Composition continues to establish itself. [\[3\]](#)

[1] See Pohjannoro (2016). I also attempt to pinpoint and unpack this phenomenon further in Kaner (2022a: 148-153). [↩](#)

[2] 'Connectedness' (literally, 'hanging together'). [↩](#)

[3] Writing in 2018, Leedham and Scheuregger note that, despite the publication of several eloquent rebuttals (e.g. Pace 2015; Reeves 2015), Croft's now notorious claim that 'the very idea that musical composition is a form of research is a category error' (2015) still chimes for many colleagues 'at least in some respects with their first-hand experience—that the relationship between their compositional and written outputs is often uneasy at best, and completely arbitrary at worst: mere “academic butt-covering”, to borrow Ian Pace's colourful phrase'. Colleagues continue to feel the pressure to 'skew their writings about their own work towards a kind of quasi-scientific framework', such that 'more exploratory, wide-ranging and—perhaps more honest and informative—methodologies of self- reflection and examination of process are neglected' (2018).

Since their conference paper (and later follow-up chapter; 2020), publications employing the approaches founded in the techniques of other P-R disciplines that they advocate are beginning to appear with more frequency (some notable examples include Hunt 2020; Mclaughlin 2021; Gardner 2022; Lolovar 2022). However, when compared with, for example, the array of overtly P-R publications on the musical performance (e.g. in *Music and Practice*), the number is comparatively still very small. [↩](#)

[← Previous: Part 2: Creative Journey](#)

[Next: References →](#)

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