

Inverting an interval as a composition strategy in Britten's 'Hymn to the Virgin'

The beginning of Benjamin Britten's 'Hymn to the Virgin' (1930) shows an easy and very interesting composition technique in the upper voice. In short, after the diminution of the structural interval fourth, Britten inverted the fourth into a fifth. The interval fifth has also a structural function and has also been diminished. It's an example of a varied repetition in order to create three phrases.

Fourth

of one that is so fair and bright Ve - lut Ma - ria stell - a

The melody employs simple diminution on main tone A, with neighbour (N) and passing (P) tones (note C is interpreted as an embellishing tone of A like an extended neighbour tone). Notice the melody of the phrase 'Velut...' fills the interval fourth with the passing tones G and F.

After a more or less literal repetition of this, Britten explores a higher register by inverting the fourth E-A into the fifth A-E.

Fifth

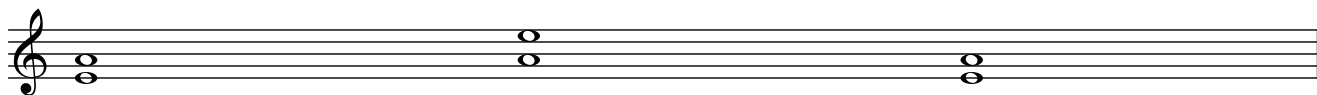
I cry to thee, thou see to me, La - dy, pray thy Son for me.

Then Britten returns back and embellishes the fourth interval again.

Fourth

Tam pi - a That I may come to thee. Ma - ri - - - a!

The melodic structure of these phrases in terms of main tones can be summarized as:



Benjamin Britten not only gives us a beautiful piece of music, but shows also that the idea of an old contrapuntal technique of voice exchange -already found in medieval music-, is still a valid strategy to make compositional decisions.