

# **A young person's (or anyone's really) Guide to the music of Benjamin Britten in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom***

**“Growing old is compulsory, growing up is optional”**

Wes Anderson's recipe for a film compiled of long camera shots, specific colour palettes, and brilliantly witty screenwriting could not be complete without the choice of soundtrack.

Anderson typically associates each of his eight films with an artist or band, however in the case of his recent film *Moonrise Kingdom*, he chooses to use several works by British composer Benjamin Britten and binds the music to various major plot points throughout the film.



Born in Suffolk, England in 1913, Edward Benjamin Britten grew up surrounded by a family of amateur musicians. His musical abilities aroused from an early age: he began learning viola and piano in primary school and his earliest compositions were written when he was just five years old. As a teenager, notable composer Frank Bridge tutored him in

composition before Britten gained a place to study composition with John Ireland at the Royal College of Music. His dedication to composition and versatility in the practice led him to become one of England's most prolific and best-loved modern composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Britten had always been fond of children: he found them to be “highly receptive” and enjoyable to work with. Much of the music incorporated in *Moonrise Kingdom* forms a large repertoire of compositions written for children to perform or be educated by. This is purposely done, for *Moonrise Kingdom*'s major theme is based around growing up.

The plot is essentially a love story between two 12 year olds, an orphan khaki scout named Sam, and Suzy, a troubled bookworm.

Through an exchange of letters, the misfits plan and embark on running away together. Thinking that their child has been kidnapped, a goose chase conducted by chief officer, her parents and his scout groups begins.



Sam shows off his orienteering skills to Suzy

Set on the fictional island of New Penzaz, Britten was still alive during the film's time period: 1965. His music is incorporated in the film right from the opening scene with *A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra: Variations on a theme by Henry Purcell*

This was first shown on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1946. Commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Britten was asked to write for a film aimed at teaching children about the symphony orchestra.

The music features a main theme taken from the second movement of (as the young male narrator in Suzy's record puts it) the much older English composer Henry Purcell's *Abdelazer Suite* followed by variations played on each instrument.

*A Young Person's Guide* is often associated with Saint Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* of which the *Voliere* (translated to *Aviary* from French) movement is also featured in *Moonrise Kingdom*.

It is suggested that Britten was a household name (he did live in America from 1939-1942) from the recording of his *Young Person's guide to the Orchestra* played on a record player belonging to one of Suzy's three younger brothers.



The music does not sound like it is coming out of the record player for long and transforms into the soundtrack as Suzy looks out of the window with her binoculars and the camera zooms out. The title of the film appears whilst Purcell's hornpipe theme ends with a cadence emphasized by a crash of symbols in sync to the sound of thunder. This is

effectively used to foreshadow the storm ahead.

The music once again emerges from the record player as the camera looms around the interior of Suzy's house whilst the variations on Purcell's theme are played on each section of the orchestra. Each variation complements and emphasizes every section's instrumental abilities with a focus on diversifying the original theme in terms of melody, timbre, and rhythm.

The last variation features the percussion section and plays as Suzy retrieves a letter from the mailbox. She looks up at the camera in time to the return of the main theme and the camera zooms out once again. As you can see, the music is well coordinated to suit the film, and continues to do so.

In the following scene, Britten's *Playful Pizzicato* movement from the *Simple Symphony* is used to soundtrack the narration and description of the island of New Penzaz. This movement originated from one of his earliest compositions written at the mature age of ten. Originally scored for piano, it was arranged for a string orchestra in 1934. The music is, as the title suggests, primitive in melody with some repetition in various parts and an ABA structure.

During that year, Britten also composed a collection of 12 songs titled *Friday Afternoons* for unison choir and piano for the schoolchildren at the school where his brother was a headmaster. The songs *Cuckoo* and *Old Abrahm Brown* are also featured briefly in *Moonrise Kingdom*.

As you can see from the latter examples, Britten composed works for both amateur and professional

musicians, thus enhancing his relationship with the public rather than just those involved in the music world.

Composed in 1958, *Noye's Fludde* is perhaps Britten's most popular work for children, and retells the biblical story of Noah's Ark.

The opera was initially composed for and to be performed by the youngsters of Suffolk who would enjoy dressing up in various animal costumes. This tradition has since spread internationally, so much so that when interviewed about the film, Wes Anderson stated that he first came across Britten's music via a production of the one-act opera at his elementary school.



Britten helps the children prepare for *Noye's Fludde*

Fulfilling the desire to recreate his memories in the film, Anderson includes a scene where Suzy and her school friends are performing the opera at the local church. More significantly, it is the event where Sam first meets Suzy as she is sorting out her bird costume in the dressing room.

During this first encounter, the music of *Noye's Fludde* can be heard from the performance afar rather than as a soundtrack, making Sam and Suzy's

encounter more natural. A brief scene featuring the *Kyrie Leison* finale of the performance follows this.



The finale of *Noye's Fludde* appears once again during the climax of the film as a backing track with the *Alleluia* chorus, played in the same church as the first performance of the opera. Once again Suzy and Sam are in the place where they first met, yet this time they fear they may be apart forever. The music is rather ironic here *Halleluia* refers to rejoicing whereas this scene is nothing but.

Going back a few scenes, the montage featuring Suzy and Sam's exchange of letters uses *On the ground, Sleep Sound* from the end of act two in Britten's opera *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Shakespeare play focuses on the relationship between dreaming and reality, which complements the idea of growing up and the awareness of the real world.



In the original opera, the fairies sing this therapeutic lullaby in unison. The music is calm and serene, with an ascending melody in the strings and

harp, creating a fantasy-like sound. This is somewhat ironic because it forms the backdrop to scenes of conflict between school children and Suzy or Sam, as narrated in the letters. This is an example of one of Wes Anderson's use of bittersweet comic moments.

Skipping forward to the final scene, we have the return of *The Young Person's Guide*. The young narrator in the record introduces the fugal finale. The scene (which is the exact same room as the beginning of the film) comes to a close as the fugue begins and the credits roll on. It has a merry, triumphant piccolo tune that brings in the rest of the orchestra bit by bit.

Before you Google it, I should claim my full awareness that Britten was not Anderson's only choice for the soundtrack to *Moonrise Kingdom*. Anderson also collaborates once again with composer Alexander Desplat as he has done so before in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*.

Desplat's own contribution is titled *The Heroic Weather-Conditions of the Universe* and is played in various point of the film. Towards the end of the credits, we see that Desplat has taken a leaf out of Britten's manuscript and composed his own *Young Person's Guide* in part seven of his contribution. Once again, a young boy introduces various individual instruments. Rather than having their own variation, they provide to create a repetitive, simple, and melodic work.

And so concludes the guide to Britten and *Moonrise Kingdom*'s wonderfully diverse, magical, and complementary soundtrack.

It is not easy to deny how Britten's musical originality goes hand in hand with the distinctive quirks of Wes Anderson's directing and writing style, create a gem of a film.

This leaves us to marvel at how the music has purposely correlated to each scene, whether its in an ironic way or to emphasize a theme; be it family, young love and the inevitability of leaving childhood behind.

