Many of the images in Sitwell’s early poetry appear to be inspired by her childhood, lonely and rich, growing up in a huge estate where her mostly absent parents, unhappy with her appearance, made her spend hours locked in an iron brace to straighten her spine. Sitwell had Marfan Syndrome and grew to be six feet tall. She wore voluminous clothing, including capes and coats and huge rings on her fingers, always topped by enormous hats or turbans. Her goal in this poetry was to explore the “effect on rhythm and speed of the use of rhymes, assonances, and dissonances.”¹ She used the voice like a musical instrument, rather than as a solo voice, rapping out rhythms which were designed to sound like various dance forms of the day. In the first public performance, in June of 1923, Sitwell recited the poems herself, seated behind a screen with a painted face on it, through a special megaphone stuck through the screen (a Sengerphone, which was made of papier-maché). The effect was to obliterate the personality of the speaker and to glorify the rhythm of the words. Walton’s music is gleefully “music hall” and full of the dance rhythms Sitwell chose – as well as some sly musical jokes.

2. Hornpipe
This poem is filled with images of the ocean – and, of course, the Hornpipe is a sailor’s tune. Sitwell loved the sea and said of herself “I was born by the wildest seas that England knows (Scarborough). My earliest recollection is of the tides, the wild rush of waves.”² In this poem, an indignant Queen Victoria complains to poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, about the attention being given to a “new-arisen Madam Venus” by the exotic rulers of parts of her empire. The opening of this poem is based on the sounds of “om” and “um”. William Walton slyly used the rhythm of “Rule, Britannia” in the percussion opening of the song.³ The opening lines of poetry are exactly in the rhythm of the Hornpipe tune. Pamela Martin opines that the Sitwell children were mesmerized by several huge Brussels tapestries in their home, which all depicted exotic scenes, with animals and people from far-off lands. She sees that influence in “Hornpipe”.⁴

¹ Palmer, Christopher, Program Notes to a Chandos recording of Façade I and II, Complete; conducted by Richard Hickox, 1990, p. 4-5.
² Palmer, p. 5.
⁴ Palmer, p. 5.
2. Hornpipe
Sailors come
To the drum
Out of Babylon;
Hobby-horses
Foam, the dumb
Sky rhinoceros-glum

Watched the courses of the breakers' rocking-horses and with Glaucis,
Lady Venus on the settee of the horsehair sea!
Where Lord Tennyson in laurels wrote a gloria free,
In a borealic iceberg came Victoria; she
Knew Prince Albert's tall memorial took the colours of the floreal
And the borealic iceberg; floating on they see
New-arisen Madam Venus for whose sake from far
Came the fat and zebra'd emperor from Zanzibar
Where like golden bouquets lay far Asia, Africa, Cathay,
All laid before that shady lady by the fibroid Shah.
Captain Fracasse stout as any water-butt came, stood
With Sir Bacchus both a-drinking the black tarr’d grapes' blood
Plucked among the tartan leafage
By the furry wind whose grief age
Could not wither - like a squirrel with a gold star-nut.
Queen Victoria sitting shocked upon a rocking horse
Of a wave said to the Laureate, "This minx of course
Is as sharp as any lynx and blacker - deeper than the drinks and quite as
Hot as any Hottentot, without remorse!
For the minx,"
Said she,
"And the drinks,
You can see
Are hot as any Hottentot and not the goods for me!"

3. Mariner Man
The “Mariner Man” is possibly an allusion to Henry Moat, Edith’s father’s valet, whose family came from a long line of whalers, and whose seafaring stories Edith loved. This poem makes prominent use of “ee” sounds, possibly to mimic the distant whistle of a train.

"What are you staring at, mariner man
Wrinkled as sea-sand and old as the sea?"

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5 From Pamela Hunter, Façade specialist, in notes on a Chandos recording CHAN 6689.
6 Lasansky, p. 36
"Those trains will run over their tails, if they can,
Snorting and sporting like porpoises. Flee—
The burly, the whirligig wheels of the train.
As round as the world and as large again,
Running half the way over to Babylon, down
Through fields of clover to gay Troy town——
A-puffing their smoke as grey as the curl
On my forehead as wrinkled as sands of the sea!——
But what can that matter to you, my girl?
(And what can that matter to me?)"

7. Lullaby for Jumbo
Pamela Hunter wrote that Edith Sitwell traveled frequently by sea, and as a child always imagined the steamer ship to be an elephant, huge and strong, with its horn as the elephant’s trumpet and funnels serving as trunks. Lullaby for Jumbo has a “slow-blues” feel, with its use of the flattened third and seventh degrees in the melody and its leisurely tempo. The rhythm rocks slowly, like a ship at anchor. The odd characters of Don Pasquito and his bride appeared in the previous poem in the cycle, Tango-Pasodoble, where they appeared to be vacationing at the sea-shore.

Jumbo asleep!
Grey leaves thick-furred
As his ears keep
Conversations blurred.
Thicker than hide
Is the trumpeting water;
Don Pasquito’s bride
And his youngest daughter
Watch the leaves
Elephantine grey:

What is it grieves
In the torrid day?
Is it the animal
World that snores
Harsh and inimical
In sleepy pores—
And why should the spined flowers
Red as a soldier
Make Don Pasquito
Seem still mouldier?

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17. Swiss Jodelling Song

This hilarious Alpine-inspired song is full of both spoken and musical allusions to things Swiss. The opening saxophone solo contains a famous yodeling theme. When the name of Swiss hero William Tell is mentioned, there are two different themes from Rossini’s William Tell overture parodied at the same time in the instruments. Edelweiss, mountain djinns (spirits), cowbells; all the ingredients are there for this silly parody of “Alpen-ness”. For those who would look to Façade for serious counter-culture musical revolt, this song comes down decidedly on the side of fun, rather than gravitas.8

“We bear velvet cream,
Green and babyish
Small leaves seem; each stream
Horses' tails that swish,

And the chimes remind
Us of sweet birds singing,
Like the jangling bells
On rose trees ringing.

Man must say farewell
To parents now,
And to William Tell,
And Mrs. Cow.

Man must say farewells
To storks and Bettes,
And to roses' bells,
And statuettes.

Forests white and black
In spring are blue
With forget-me-nots,
And to lovers true

Still the sweet bird begs
And tries to cozen
Them: “Buy angels' eggs
Sold by the dozen.”

Gone are clouds like inns
On the gardens' brinks,

And the mountain djinns—
Ganymede sells drinks;

While the days seem gray,
And his heart of ice,
Gray as chamois, or
The edelweiss,

And the mountain streams
Like cowbells sound—
Tirra lirra, drowned
In the waiter's dreams

Who has gone beyond
The forest waves,
While his true and fond
Ones seek their graves.’

8 For all her enfant terrible bravado, Sitwell . . . wished her audience to be entertained. “It has now at last dawned on these people that Façade is a work for the most part of gaiety,” she significantly remarks forty years after Façade’s premiere and well past her youthful appetite for controversy; “the audience is meant to laugh.” Lasansky, p. 108.
20. Fox Trot (Old Sir Faulk)

Sitwell herself seems to have considered "Foxtrot" the most elaborate example of her rhythmic experiments. She describes it as “an experiment in the effect, on rhythm and on speed, of certain arrangements of assonances and dissonances, and of certain arrangements of intertwining, one syllabled, two syllabled and three syllabled words.” Obviously, Sitwell was familiar with jazz rhythms and their constant use of syncopation, and this poem is filled with syncopated figures. Many images here are illusions to young childhood: nursemaids, nursery tea, boiled eggs, tea kettles, sitting under the trees. Pamela Martin says that the title character here represents the father of Edith’s two best friends when she was 4 or 5. He was “tall as a stork” – and that this is an account of a day when Edith visited them right after their mother died.⁹

Old Sir Faulk
Tall as a stork
Before the honeyed fruits of dawn were ripe, would walk
And stalk with a gun
The reynard-colored sun
Among the pheasant-feathered corn the unicorn has torn, forlorn
Smock-faced sheep
Sit
And Sleep
Periwigged as William and Mary, weep...
'Sally, Mary, Mattie, what's the matter, why cry?'
The huntsman and the reynard-colored sun and I sigh
'Oh, the nursery-maid Meg
With a leg like a peg
Chased the feathered dreams like hens, and when they laid
an egg
In the sheepskin
Meadows
Where
The serene King James would steer
Horse and hounds, then he
From the shade of a tree
Picked it up as spoil to boil 'for nursery tea' said the mourners
In the
Corn, towers strain,
Feathered tall as a crane,

⁹ Palmer, p. 6.
And whistling down the feathered rain, old Noah goes again—
An old dull mome
With a head like a pome
Seeing the world as a bare egg
Laid by the feathered air: Meg
Would beg three of these
For the nursery teas
Of Japhet, Shem and Ham; she gave it
Underneath the trees
Where the boiling
  Water
  Hissed
Like the goose-king’s feathered daughter—kissed
Pot and pan and copper kettle
Put upon their proper mettle,
Lest the Flood – the Flood – the Flood begin again through these!

21. When Sir Beelzebub.
Sitwell and Walton chose to end Façade with one of the most hilarious, upbeat items in the entire work. The devil calls for a rum drink at his hotel in hell – which never arrives. Someone who does arrive is the poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose poetry is sarcastically parodied. At least four poems are alluded to: Crossing the Bar, In Memoriam A.H.H., Demeter and Prosephine, and The Charge of the Light Brigade. Sitwell takes delight in plunging all of them into the nether regions, including Sir Alfred himself (in classical metres!). The music-hall atmosphere is as prevalent as ever.

When
Sir
Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell
   Where Proserpine first fell,
Blue as the gendarmerie were the waves of the sea,
   (Rocking and shocking the bar-maid)
Nobody comes to give him his rum but the
Rim of the sky hippopotamus-glum
Enhances the chances to bless with a benison
Alfred Lord Tennyson crossing the bar laid
With cold vegetation from pale deputations
Of temperance workers (all signed in Memoriam)
Hoping with glory to trip up the Laureate’s feet,
   (Moving in classical metres)...
Like Balaclava, the lava came down from the
Roof, and the sea’s blue wooden gendarmerie
Took them in charge while Beelzebub roared for his rum.
   ...None of them come!