

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

The Image of True Death – An Analysis of Benjamin Britten’s Variations

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By

Adrian Martinez

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The graduate project of Adrian Martinez is approved:

Dr. Bryan Fasola

Date

Dr. Liviu Marinescu

Date

Dr. Steven Thachuk, Chair

Date

California State University Northridge

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Abstract

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This thesis presents extended program notes on my graduate recital. I will be providing detailed historical background and analysis of the following works: Jean-Philippe Rameau (September 25, 1683 – September 12, 1764), *Les Tendres Plaintes*, *Les Sauvages*, and *Sarabande in A minor*; Nikita Koshkin (February 28, 1956), *Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp minor*, and *Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor*; John Dowland (January 2, 1563 – February 20, 1626), *Preludium*, *The Most Sacred Queen Elizabeth*, *Her Galliard*, *The Frog Galliard*, and *Fantasia no. 7*; Benjamin Britten (November 22, 1913 – December 4, 1976), *Nocturnal after John Dowland*. The repertoire performed not only displays a contrasting style between music in different countries. In *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, Benjamin Britten uses a theme and variations of John Dowland’s “Come Heavy Sleep,” a song that was written about death. I will argue how Benjamin Britten not only uses *Nocturnal after John Dowland* as a musical mechanism to bridge the gap between Dowland’s theme of death in *Come Heavy Sleep* but also harness its energy and translate that into terms that the listener can interpret and understand more clearly, sleep.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, death had been portrayed in both art and music in a philosophical way that was able to provoke rhetoric to the masses. It was believed in Western European religions that one's soul would ascend to heaven, or rather a higher plane in the universe once they have deceased. Through this religious vision, music composers have often experimented with the dichotomy between popular music and music that would be deemed appropriate for the church. Some popular themes would include one's feelings of love, heroism, and sacrifice. John Dowland is one renaissance composer who conceptualizes a melancholic persona in both his music and in real life. He gave a voice to an emotion that demanded careful consideration.

Since the 19th century philosophical ideals have changed. Composers who expressed death as a subject matter through both music and art were able to find their niche representing it in a way that was more aligned with modern philosophical views. Benjamin Britten makes no exception in portraying the realism in death with a contemporary view through the music in his composition *Nocturnal after John Dowland*. He explores the different stages of sleep through an extravagant theme and variations using fragments of a popular song by John Dowland. I will use urtext and original scores to compare and contrast John Dowland's *Come Heavy Sleep* and Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland* to argue ways in which Britten was able to use Dowland's theme of death in his musical work and modernize it to something more relative to what we comprehend, sleep. I will also use quotes from both primary and secondary sources to further investigate the subject matter pertaining to the repertoire in my graduate recital, as well as subject matter with supporting evidence for my research in the analyzation of Benjamin Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland*.

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU

Jean-Philippe Rameau was born on the 25th of September 1683 and died on September 12th in 1764. His family had been, for two generations, been churchwardens at the parish of St. Medard. His organ studies through his father granted him to have an opportunity to become an organist at the collegiate church of St. Etienne. Rameau had began learning the keyboard at a young age by a canon organist of the Sainte-Chapelle. Jean continued with his organ studies, eventually becoming an organist for twenty-seven years at both the church of St. Etienne and St. Benigne. He left these posts to seek other opportunity at Notre-Dame in 1790. He had served churches in his native town for over forty years.¹

In Rameau's later years, he had established a reputation for becoming a well-recognized music theorist as well as a leading composer of French *tragedie en musique*, as well as a leading theorist. His viewpoints as both a theorist and composer were very much in line with the French Enlightenment in that they "entail an expansive belief in music's expressive and dramatic capacities, but with considerable attention to the role of reason or rational design, and especially harmonic design."² This meant that while other opera composers of his time were focused on using compositional techniques that were dated, Rameau sought to innovate his views on musical expression while not completely abandoning tradition.

Nouvelles suites de pieces de Clavecin: III. Sarabande

Sometime between 1726 and 1727, Jean-Philippe Rameau had composed a book called *Nouvelles Suites de Pieces de Clavecin*, which contained two suites – one in A minor, and the

¹ Girdlestone. "Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work." Dover Publications, Incorporated. 2014. Pp. 1.

² Verba. "Dramatic Expression in Rameau's Tragedie en Musique." Cambridge University Press. 2013. Pp. 1.

other in both G major and minor.³ “In the *Sarabande* the chords are written out in the original as rapid arpeggios. Like much in Rameau this piece looks to past and future; it might have been conceived for some gigantic lute; still more does it resemble an amplifying of *luthe* writing for the yet unborn pianoforte – a Bach-Busonizing of Denis Gaultier or Mezangeau.”⁴ Much like the *Fanfarinette* and *La Triomphante*, the Saraband in A major is thought to have possibly been intended to be played on the lute due to the rapidly arpeggiated chords found throughout the piece. His books called *Pieces de Clavecin* and *Nouvelles Suites de Pieces de Clavecin* have harpsichord works that were transcribed to act as airs in his later operas.

The *Sarabande* in A major, found in his third book, was a harpsichord work that was used as an air in his opera *Zoroastre*. This opera was first performed in 1749 then revised in 1756 due to a lack of interest by audience. Even though this new revision would receive critical acclaim, it did not stand in the same light his other operas.

Pieces de Clavecin, Suite No. 3 in D Major: I. Rondeau. Les Tendres Plaintes

Les Tendres Plaintes like the *Sarabande* was a harpsichord piece that was part of his *Pieces de Clavecin III* that was then later transposed for his opera *Zoroastre* and renamed to *Air Tendre en Rondeau*. One thing that is notable about his rendition of *Les Tendres Plaintes* for his opera is that there is no inclusion of the harpsichord in the basso continuo. He does this with a few other works for harpsichord that have been repurposed for use in his operas.

Elsewhere the best in Rameau is called forth by those moments in the dram where the mood is elegiac or voluptuous, or the theme is tender anguish, chaste love and the triumph of good. The first of these moods prevails in that part of Act I where Amelite is on the stage. The *choeur graciux* “Rassurez-vous, tendre Amelite” is typical of Rameau’s treatment of this theme and has an independent accompaniment with prominent flute parts. “Rassurez-vous” the chorus has just

³ Girdlestone. “*Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work.*” Dover Publications, Incorporated. 2014. Pp. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30

sung to Amelite and, though Zoroastre's absence makes her sad, she knows no reason for fear, trusting as she does in Abramane's protection and Erinice's friendship. But we, who are in the secret of the two accomplices, know otherwise; and we feel that the mood which results from the mixture of gentle lovesickness and innocent trust with a hint of treacherous cruelty to come, is reflected in them and in the duet which is sung to the second one.⁵

Rameau uses two *symphonies* to set the mood for these moments of drama – *La Livri*, a harpsichord work with a haunting melody from his book *Pieces en concert* and the gentler *Les Tendres Plaintes* of the *Pieces de Clavecin* book for solo harpsichord. Cuthbert Girdlestone suggests that the piece may have been performed with a softer feeling than what performers throughout time perceive it to be played. This may be a clue as to why Rameau chose not to have a harpsichord in the continuo of *Air Tendre en Rondeau*.

Nouvelles suites de pieces de Clavecin: XIII. Les Sauvages

Les Sauvages is one of the few pieces that he had composed for another opera *Les Indes Galantes* to harpsichord. It has been documented that Rameau's inspiration came from witnessing a display of two North American Indians at Fair theatre.⁶ While he was at the Fair theatres, he had met someone by the name of Louis Fuzelier, who would turn out to become his future librettist. Through their collaboration, they were able to create the opera *Les Indes Galantes*.⁷

⁵ Girdlestone. "*Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work.*" Dover Publications, Incorporated. 2014. Pp. 284-285.

⁶ Reinhard. "*Les Sauvages. Music in Utopia, and the Decline of the Courtly Pastoral.*" *Il Saggiatore Musicale* Vol. 11, No. 1. 2004. Pp. 1.

⁷ Girdlestone. "*Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work.*" Dover Publications, Incorporated. 2014. Pp. 8.

NIKITA KOSHKIN

Nikita Koshkin is a contemporary composer who was born February 28, 1956. He is both a classical guitarist and composers for the guitar who, in his early life had been influenced by great composers such as Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Prokofiev. Though Nikita had composed ensemble works, his most notable works have been those composed for solo guitar. He had first landed success in his career as a composer when his composition *Prince's Toys* had been performed publicly by Vladimir Mikulka.⁸ This composition had an array of extended guitar techniques that drew the attention of both guitarists and music appreciators in general. Nikita continued to have great success in his *Usher-Waltz*, “a piece inspired by the Edgar Allan Poe story *The Fall of the House of Usher*.”⁹ The classical guitarist John Williams had made this piece famous through his *Seville Concert CD* that featured the *Usher-Waltz*.

Two Prelude and Fugues (C-sharp minor / F-sharp minor)

Nikita Koshkin's 24 Preludes and Fugues are a two-volume set of preludes and fugues was published in 2017. The inspiration to write twenty-four preludes and fugues dates back to Johann Sebastian Bach's composition *The Well-Tempered Clavier* which also is a two-volume compilation of twenty-four preludes and fugues written in every key. Notable composers who have written a set of twenty-four preludes and fugues since the time of J.S. Bach include Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and Dimitri Shostakovich. Russian guitarist Asya Selyutina premiered the complete set on YouTube in 2011 as a teaser for the release on publisher Edition Margaux.

The prelude in the *Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor* has a haunting passacaglia that slowly intensifies. The ground and melody line are distinct but seem to have a growing

⁸ LaFave. “Nikita Koshkin – Composer & Guitarist.” www.physiology.med.unc.edu.

⁹ Dendromer. “Nikita Koshkin Biography.” www.last.fm.

relationship with each other. The progression is linear and climaxes, only to abruptly disappear with a set of loudly strummed staccato chords, followed by a set of harmonics. The piece then decompresses back to a lull with a combination of harmonics and continuo. The fugue, although fascinating to listen to, is riddled with chords that would not normally feel natural for guitarists to play. This is interesting considering that Koshkin primarily writes for the guitar. Though, it should be noted that many of the preludes and fugues written in the past for other instruments are not necessarily the most comfortable to play.

The prelude in F-sharp minor is unique to the rest of the preludes in Koshkin's *24 Preludes and Fugues*. Throughout the majority of the piece, the bassline is played in staccato while the melody is to be played legato-like – this usage of staccato can be heard throughout many other pieces. There are staccato markings throughout *Usher Waltz* but particularly in the middle portion of the piece which sounds like the end of the development, where the music is at its highest intensity. It then proceeds to follow another section using harmonics which resembles a transition used in his prelude in C-sharp minor.

The allegro which is a fugue in F-sharp minor wastes no time with its introduction. It gets right into an exciting rollercoaster of musical development. With how rapid this piece is intended to be played, there is hardly any moment for a break. It is only at the very end of the piece that we see the only break and only set of chords to close the piece. Because of this, it is easy to lose oneself should there be a memory slip or a technical mistake.

JOHN DOWLAND

John Dowland was born in 1563 then died in February of 1626. Though not much is known about his early life, it is assumed that he might have been born in London. Many researchers argue that during a time when ‘melancholy’ was a common complaint in England that both philosophers and physicians attempted to find cures for, Dowland capitalized on developing very melancholic persona as an artist.¹⁰ John's Dowland had much success performing and teaching across the Western European countries. He knew people in high places such as the king of Denmark offering high pensions to keep him as a resident musician there at his court; he had the pope of Italy lavishing him with gifts and promises of an extravagant lifestyle if he would stay at their courts.¹¹ This would have been a great opportunity for Dowland to continue his madrigal studies with Lorenzo Maurizio. Above all this, it is perceived that much of what Dowland ever wanted was to be accepted and appreciated in the English court, where he felt he belonged.

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, many countries shared an interest in each other's culture, music, and art. These countries were often times at war with each other, and for that reason always sought to take advantages by learning about their enemies' forces through covert tactics. Famous musicians of these times were often employed spies for the ruler of the country in which they hail from. Some notable musicians who acted on behalf of Sir Francis Walsingham, Robert Devereaux, the Earl of Essex, or Sir Robert Cecil include Thomas Morley, Anthony Holborne, Alfonso Ferrabosco, Angel Notari, and Peter Philips.¹² These types of musicians who are very often employed are often capable of both reading and writing, as well as

¹⁰ Goss. "Come, Heavy Sleep: Motive and Metaphor in Britten's Nocturnal, Opus 70." Pp. 55.

¹¹ Poulton. "Dowland's Darkness." Early Music Vol. 11, No. 4, Rameau Tercentenary Issue. 1983. Pp. 518.

¹² Hauge. "Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe." Brill. 2011, pp. 193.

being able to speak many other languages. John Dowland was no exception to this, as his extensive travel in Europe with services for nobles in France, Italy, Germany, then Denmark. November 18th 1598 is when Dowland had received his contract which revealed his high yearly salary of 500 for his services at Copenhagen. This salary would roughly estimate to fifteen times the average salary of a carpenter there.¹³ This could act as possible evidence that he in fact posed as an agent in Denmark.

Some of the day-to-day duties he might have been responsible for was hiring dancers as well as musicians for the purpose of entertainment at the court. He once fell into financial hardship with the purchase of a harp, presumably for court use, and had trouble paying a dancer's wage when he did not have the money. Dowland's bill of exchange from English merchants of the 'Mellsingsche' company in 1602 could easily be interpreted as money borrowed to satisfy the arrangements, he had with said dancer and musician until whatever work he may have had together would have paid off the debt.¹⁴

With a goal in mind to favor the Queen Elizabeth in pursuing a post as a lutenist at the English court, he had applied to had a post as a musician at the queen's court but was rejected. This was likely due to admitting to the conversion to Catholicism during his visit to France.¹⁵ There was likely discrimination against him seeing that other Catholic musicians like William Byrd had served in her court as well. In another attempt to please the queen's court, Dowland had been working on a collection of consort music called *Lachrimae or Seaven Teares*. This collection of twenty-one works is considered to be some of Dowland's best works, originally destined to be dedicated to the Queen Elizabeth herself. Unfortunate circumstances caused the

¹³ Hauge. "Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe." Brill. 2011. Pp. 198.

¹⁴ Ibid., Pp. 202.

¹⁵ Poulton. "Dowland's Darkness." Early Music Vol. 11, No. 4, Rameau Tercentenary Issue. 1983. Pp. 518.

Queen Elizabeth to die in 1603, a year shy of the completion of this collection. Since Dowland had existing reputation and rapport established in Denmark, he might have seen this as a new opportunity to win favor by dedicating it to Queen Anne.

1597 to 1603 are the dates that all three collections of songs titled *Book of Songes or Ayers* were composed. The majority of the songs found in these books uncover the melancholic persona that Dowland had grown a reputation for. Many of the songs love lost, longing for someone, and of course death. A selection of these works in the collections have been transposed for solo lute and were given different names – possibly to benefit off of the proceeds from sales. Some of the transpositions for lute that derived from these songs will be discussed, a few of which will include *Now, o Now I needs must part* and *Come Heavy Sleep*.

Preludium

Though most of the published works by Dowland were printed collections such as his *Book of Songes or Ayers*, there were many more for solo lute that had only existed in written or manuscript form through the British Isles.¹⁶ Not much research has been uncovered that states commentary directly from Dowland regarding his short lute piece, *Preludium*, though it is historically certain that Dowland has been known to have change from six course stringed lutes to nine courses, with the preferred one being his seven-course. These kinds of historical details offer a great deal of insight as to what this piece may have been composed for.

Lutenist and historian, Nigel North, suggest that by examining the urtext score closely, it can be identified that they piece may in fact have been written as an exercise to practice right

¹⁶ Walker. *"The Fantasias of John Dowland: An Analysis."* Masters Thesis. North Texas State University. 1986. Pp. 27.

hand thumb placement, as well as when to use our middle and index fingers while playing.¹⁷ An observation that can be made about this piece in contrast to many of his others is the lack of chordal harmony. While other virtuosic works by Dowland may contain similar sounding passages, they often have more depth and development to them which *Preludium* lacks.

The Most Sacred Queen Elizabeth, Her Galliard

The Most Sacred Queen Elizabeth, Her Galliard, often called Queen Elizabeth's Galliard is a short lute piece published in 1610 by John Dowland in honor of the queen. Before the Elizabethan era, musicians were often seen to have severely low wages that would often times cause them to become poor and homeless. "Many writers and composers had trouble financing their careers through their printed works."¹⁸ Queen Elizabeth I made an effort to promote music, as she herself was a musician who specialized in the lute and virginal, and as a result, many musicians paid their respects by dedicating their works to the queen herself. Some of the ways in which they would pay respects to the queen would be to write about her in songs, include her name which would oftentimes be in the form of Eliza, as well as title the work after her.

The Frog Galliard

The Frog Galliard is a song for lute and voice which was then rewritten for solo lute that was first published as a song in 1597. This was taken from the song *Now, o Now I needs Must Part* from a collection of songs titled *The First Book of Songes or Ayers*. Dowland was man who was known for prioritizing money and favor as much as he was allowed, and if able to benefit from profiting twice from a single project, he would. Throughout the list of compositions by John Dowland, it is evident that when he has had a great idea for a song, he tends to maximize its

¹⁷ North. "Searching for Dowland." *Early Music* Vol. 41, No. 2. 2013. Pp. 302.

¹⁸ Stevens. "Music in Honour of Queen Elizabeth I." *The Musical Times* Vol. 101, No. 1413. 1960. Pp. 698-699.

use by transposing it for solo lute and repackaging it for maximizing profits through publishing sales, or to dedicate it to a noble and win their favor. We have seen sort of behavior from his alleged double agency in both England and Denmark in other instances such as in his earlier work *The Battle Galliard*, later renamed *The King of Denmark's Galliard*, positioned at number eleven of a list his twenty-one-song set dedicated to Queen Anne of Denmark.¹⁹

How the solo lute piece was named *Frog Galliard* is surprising to say the least. Though no one can be certain, many scholars suggest that the work could have been a dedication to the Duc d'Alencon. During the Elizabethan era, the term "frog" and "toad" were terms that were "used deliberately during those years as a code for strong political opposition to the proposed marriage of Queen Elizabeth and the Duc d'Alencon."²⁰ A dotted rhythm in the in the bassline of the music suggests that this song could have possibly been one that was danced to.²¹

Fantasia P1

The Fantasia or Fancy, as it known in England, was a form that developed using the Italian 'recercare.' Though few English fancies do exist, the majority of them composed have Italian influences that can be heard. Compositional influence can be heard through Italian composers such as Francesco da Milano, Laurencini, and Luis de Narvaez. Aside from the composers listed, there remain about thirty more fantasias that are anonymous written.²² Some of the earliest evidences of musical counterpoint that could have influenced the compositional style of a fantasia can be found in the works of both Claudin de Sermisy in his *Missa ad placitum*,²³

¹⁹ Hauge. "Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe." Brill. 2011, pp. 208.

²⁰ Adler. "Imaginary Toads in Real Gardens." English Literary Renaissance Vol. 11, No. 3. 1981. Pp. 236.

²¹ Jorgens. "The Well-Tun'd Word: Musical Interpretations of English Poetry, 1597-1651." University of Minnesota Press. 1982. Pp. 33.

²² Lam. "Review: John Dowland and English Lute Music." Early Music Vol. 3, No. 2. 1975. Pp. 116.

²³ Butler. "The Fantasia as Musical Image." The Musical Quarterly Vol. 60, No. 4. 1974. Pp. 604.

and Gioseffo Zarlino in *Le Institutioni Harmoniche*.²⁴ They both demonstrate the skeletal framework in which the fantasias are composed.

The English had adopted the fantasia as a staple in their musical repertoire. A couple of notable English composers of the time who had adopted this style are Thomas Morley and Thomas Ravenscroft, both composers and theorists during the Elizabethan era. It is true that though Ravenscroft valued Morley's compositional techniques, he felt that his niche fit in better with the popular song as opposed to the 'superiority of the older style.'²⁵ Though John Dowland's focus in writing was primarily for lute and voice, he often drew ideas for his own music in other works, taking inspiration from composers who not only wrote for both lute and voice but as well as those that wrote for keyboard and viol consort. "The Fantasia P1a follows melodic textures that are quite spot on to Thomas Ravenscroft's *Coochow as I me walked*.²⁶

It is uncertain why, but Dowland chose to write his fantasias in only four of the existing twelve modes available to him. "It might be said that late sixteenth-century composers were losing the sensitivity to the individual ethos that the Greek, Medieval and early Renaissance musicians felt and wrote about."²⁷ Those four forms that he has chosen to write in are Dorian, Aeolian, Mixolydian, or Ionian which is what this particular piece was written in. Of all the fantasies that Dowland has written, this appears to be unique in the sense that he has given it a much lighter mood without his melancholy treatment. Moreover, the P1 fantasia deserves the attention and scholarly study for its of imitation and counterpoint for his time.

²⁴ Butler. "The Fantasia as Musical Image." *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 60, No. 4. 1974. Pp. 606.

²⁵ Bidgood. "The Significance of Thomas Ravenscroft." *Folk Music Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1. 1980. Pp. 28.

²⁶ O'Dette. "Dowland's iPod: Some Possible Models for John Dowland's Lute Fantasias." Oxford University Press. Pp. 1.

²⁷ Walker. "The Fantasias of John Dowland: An Analysis." Masters Thesis. North Texas State University. 1986. Pp. 37.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Benjamin Britten, born on November 22nd 1913 and died December 4th 1976, was always a romantic at heart. One thing that he has in common with many romantic composers like Beethoven, Chopin, and others romantic composers of all types wrote about intangible things, struggles in life, sadness, sorrow, even loneliness. Benjamin grew up in a family that was divided for the most part. At a young age, Benjamin, along with his brother Robert Harry Marsh who was a Ragtime musician. Benjamin, however, was more enamored with the tonal qualities of classical music. His mother Edith for the most part supported Benjamin throughout his musical journeys in his childhood by hosting small concerts for him to play. His father Victor on the other hand was much harder on, somewhat emotionally scarring Benjamin with his lack of support in the musical field. It wasn't that his father did not believe him to be a great musician but that there was a lack of confidence in Benjamin's ability to make a living off of music. Benjamin fondly remembers performing his favorite music which included romantic composers like Schubert²⁸

Benjamin Britten had a hard time living just after the age when homosexuality was socially acceptable. It wasn't until world war I that the idea of it all grew out of fashion. In fact, many homosexuals there in the time began to be the victims of stigmatization. Benjamin was no better off living in the UK than he was in the US, but he wanted to get away from the war and all the political problems that the UK was dealing with during the time. It was Peter Pears who extended an opportunity for Britten to move to America with him. This caused a separation between he and his previous lover, advancing a rebounding relationship with Pears through their musical collaborations together. Though Britten and Pears were happily together in the US, their

²⁸ Kildea. *Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century.* Penguin Books Limited. 2013. Pp. 27.

marriage had to be kept in secret, in fear of being discriminated against. The areas in which Benjamin Britten can be perceived as a romantic is through his expressive writing. In many of his works, the pain and anguish speaks of his life experience.

Nocturnal after John Dowland

Nocturnal after John Dowland was written for Julian Bream, both a guitarist and lutenist friend of Benjamin Britten. Bream has collaborated on projects together with Peter Pears, one of which is record album by the name of *Music for Voice and Guitar*, which contained Benjamin Britten's *Songs from the Chinese*, William Walton: *Anon in Love*, and Matyas Seiber: *Four French Folk Songs*, as well as Peter Racine Fricker's *O Mistress Mine*. Bream had collaborated together with Britten on the finalization of his production of *Nocturnal after John Dowland*, rightfully, since the piece would be written for him.²⁹

While a “nocturne” is a style of character piece first created in the 19th century by John Field, the word itself had first appeared in works by Haydn, Mozart, and other Italian and German composers under the name of *notturmi* and *Nachtmusiken* which means “night music.”³⁰ It is said that through the works of those composers, a dreamy poetry could be felt which may have acted as an influence to John Field's nocturnes. Much like many of other nocturnes, Field's Nocturne No. 1 in E flat suggests the “*bel canto* of an Italian singer, an accompaniment in widely spaced triplets demanding a highly-developed pedaling technique, a preference for decoration and variation rather than development, lack of contrast and key variety, and a formal scheme of extreme simplicity.”³¹ This contrasting style of composition is what drew later composers like Frederic Chopin, Gabriel Faure, Alexander Scriabin, and Erik Satie to follow the tradition of

²⁹ Frackenpohl. “*Analysis of Nocturnal Op. 70 by Benjamin Britten.*” Northern Texas State University. Pp.5.

³⁰ Piggot. “John Field and the Nocturne.” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association 95th Sess.* 1968-1969. Pp. 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Pp. 56.

writing nocturnes.

While the night music of Bartok depicts the feeling of insomnia, the structure behind Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland* is a piece that takes John Dowland's idea behind his *Come Heavy Sleep* and modernize it in a way that resembles a more realistic approach to death, or as Britten states clearly in his interview with Donald Mitchell, sleep.³² Britten admits to depending on dreams to help his creative output, and that "dreams are the wellspring of unconscious activity and imagery that kept his composing fresh and vital,"³³ hinting that he believes the conscious mind is not as adept to providing him the creative energy he needs. He has also stated that through his dreams, he was able to construct abstract sounds and harmonies to use for his music. Observation reveals that while nocturnes in their most common fashion, carry a dreamlike quality to them, Britten's nocturnal has instances of sleepless and restlessness, representing something more on the lines of what Bartok had envisioned in his. One could imagine that this could be associated with the pains of dying, as well as sleeping. The lyrics read:

Come heavy sleep, the image of true death,
And close up these my weary weeping eyes,
Whose spring of tears doth stop my vital breath,
And tears my heart with Sorrow's sigh-swollen cries,
Come and possess my tired through-worn soul,
That living dies till though on me be stole.

Through the first stanza of these lyrics, John Dowland expresses both sleep and death as if there is a connection between each other. Henry W. Johnstone Jr. argues in his article, "Sleep and Death," that the crucial thing between sleep and death is that death is a permanent "cessation

³² Frackenpohl. "Analysis of Nocturnal Op. 70 by Benjamin Britten." Northern Texas State University. pp.10.

³³ Goss. "Come, Heavy Sleep: Motive and Metaphor in Britten's Nocturnal, Opus 70." Pp. 54.

of experience” in which a person cannot witness after the point of cessation, but that one can imagine himself asleep.³⁴ Every day is another day to be thankful to be alive and well enough to experience more that life has to offer. Though, every day is another day that death is one step closer at knocking on one’s door, to beckon them so to speak. The lyrics in *Come Heavy Sleep* depict an image of someone who has given up on life, possibly someone who is old in age, already tired of living. This is a person that welcomes death into their own home to possess their tired and worn soul. Britten takes the sleep aspect of Dowland’s song and creates a set of variations that share similarities to the various styles of night music created by Britten’s predecessors.

Britten uses a compositional technique similar to his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* where each movement hints to the theme that is to come at the end, and again with the slow movement of his Piano Concerto (1938). “When it arrives it makes sense of everything that has gone before it, demanding that we start again from the beginning, hearing the work once more, this time with our ears alert.”³⁵ Each movement in *Nocturnal after John Dowland* represents a step further into a dark and lonely feeling that one would experience when slipping into the unconsciousness. The eight movements are *Musingly, Very Agitated, Restless, Uneasy, March-like, Dreaming, Gently Rocking*, and the final movement being the *Passacaglia*. It isn’t until the very end of the piece that Dowland’s theme which Britten is basing this piece on “emerges from the belly of a melancholic passacaglia,”³⁶ and puts this piece to a peaceful end.

³⁴ Johnstone. *Sleep and Death*. The Monist, Vol. 59, No. 2, Philosophical Problems of Death. Apr., 1976. Pp. 220.

³⁵ Kildea. “*Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*.” Penguin Books Limited. 2013. Pp. 85-86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 86.

Op. 70

I Musingly (♩)
(Meditativo)

GUITAR

pp very freely (molto liberamente)

Figure 1. First two lines of the first movement of *Nocturnal after John Dowland* by Benjamin Britten.

XX. CANTUS.

One heavy sleepe, y Image of true death:

And close vp these my weary weeping eyes, whose spring of tears doth stop my

Figure 2. First 3 measures of *Come Heavy Sleep* by John Dowland.

Britten quotes Dowland's music in many ways as well as uses the concept of sleep. There are a few movements in the nocturnal in which Britten does so – namely *Musingly*, *Very Agitated*, *Restless*, and the *Passacaglia*. The descending perfect fourth, or *tear motive* as it was often

referred to, is a compositional technique that existed in the renaissance times that created a sound of sadness and despair. Stephen Goss suggests that the ascending semitone creates the sense of yearning, anguished hope or striving for *true death* while the descending tone evokes the feeling of grief, lament, mourning, and acceptance of death.³⁷ One example of this that Britten has provided us in in the first couple of measures of the movement *Musingly*, shown in figure 1, are the first four notes that set the tone of the movement, then an ascending semitone from B to C, and a descending perfect fourth back down G followed by a descending tone down to F sharp.

Britten also quotes the opening vocal melody in *Come Heavy Sleep*. He refers to Dowland’s vocal melody starting from note B. He moves a half step up in motion, down a fourth just like Dowland has, but completes the phrase with a semitone down. This can be compared through the melodic line in figure 1 to the vocal line in figure 2. The lack of rhythm in this movement provokes thought and rhetoric, though Britten leaves that emphasis up to the performer’s interpretation of yearning, lament, grief, and anguish. Upon listening, one can get the sense of thoughts that cloud the mind just before they fall asleep.



Figure 3. First line of the second movement of *Nocturnal after John Dowland* by Benjamin Britten.

The second movement *Very Agitated* is a violent contrast to the first movement. The

³⁷ Goss. “*Come, Heavy Sleep: Motive and Metaphor in Britten’s Nocturnal, Opus 70.*” Pp. 60.

dynamics and rhythm send the nocturnal full swing into direction until it reaches another resting point in the movement *Dreaming*. “These dynamic swings are reminiscent of cycles of depth of sleep; the alternation of *orthodox* (deep) and *paradoxical* (shallow or dreaming) sleep that occurs several times during a night’s sleep. As the night progresses the depth of orthodox sleep gradually reduces until it merges with the cycles of paradoxical sleep just before waking.”³⁸ Each of the phrases found in this movement contain groupings of eighth notes that both expand and compress, shifting time and causing the listener to lose themselves in the music. “The phrases are measured in quarter notes, the groupings in eight note triplets.”³⁹ The first grouping of eighth notes measured at five and a half is followed by a half note length chord that completes the phrase. The following phrases have groupings of six, eight, six, nine, seventeen, nine, eleven, with the final set being the longest at twenty-three.

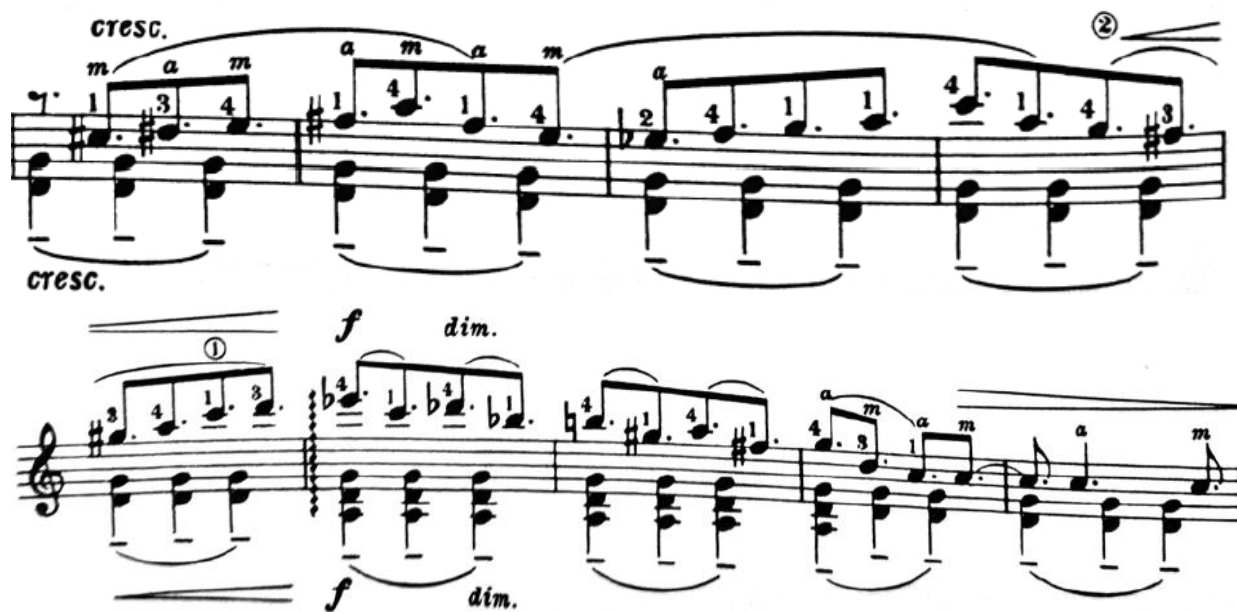


Figure 4. The climax section of the third movement of *Nocturnal after John Dowland* by Benjamin Britten.

³⁸ Goss. “Come, Heavy Sleep: Motive and Metaphor in Britten’s *Nocturnal*, Opus 70.” Pp. 62.

³⁹ Frackenpohl. “Analysis of *Nocturnal Op. 70* by Benjamin Britten.” Northern Texas State University. pp.19.

The third movement, *Restless*, is written entirely in a compound over duple meter. It starts off quiet, contrasting the previous movement. The movement acts as a tense build up to the eight bars shown in the figure above that delivers a haunting sensation or a feeling of paranoia upon listening, only to return to calm and quiet state that the piece started in. When speaking about restlessness, the movement *Musiques Nocturnes*, of Bela Bartok's *Out of Doors* comes to mind. The sonorities and inability to keep track of time may represent a feeling of insomnia similarly to who Bartok may have expressed in his night music. Though Britten was familiar with and respected the work of Bartok, it is uncertain whether or not he drew inspiration from his nocturnes. He did however become attracted to the "Romantic potential of night, aware also of the nightmarish possibilities of sleep."⁴⁰ Britten demonstrates this in the Dirge movement of his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*.



Figure 5. Fourth movement of *Out of Doors* by Bela Bartok.

Just ten years before Britten's composition, Bela Bartok had created his set of five pieces titled *Out of Doors*. Though the nocturne found in the fourth movement is intended to be played at a slower pace, there is a similarity between it and Britten's *Restless* movement in the nocturnal. The music in these two pieces have a steady rhythm with a hypnotic feel to them. The difference

⁴⁰ Kildea. "Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century." Penguin Books Limited. 2013. Pp. 226.

being the harmonic progression found in Britten's nocturnal. Bartok's nocturne gives the feeling of insomnia and alertness of the surrounding environment. While the motif in the bottom-line repeats constantly without much change, there are several other motifs in it that repeat sporadically. It is not hard to imagine that the constant repetition of the motifs conjures up memories of a leaky faucet or other disturbances when trying to sleep.

Britten's usage of perfect fourths which was a compositional tool to express sadness, often called a *tear motive*. Throughout each movement Britten's nocturnal you can hear the *tear motive* throughout various voice ranges. The motive itself is most noticeable in the passacaglia of the sixth movement of *Nocturnal after John Dowland*.



Figure 6. First line of the eighth movement of *Nocturnal after John Dowland* by Benjamin Britten.

In figure 7, the tear motive found in the melodic line in the voice starts on the first note down to the fourth. Even though the scale falls diatonically, both the beginnings and the ends of each passage are a fourth apart. This is found again in the next set of four notes. In the second measure it is the first two notes that we see another repetition of this tear motive. In figure 6, Britten creatively challenges the direction of the tear motive by emphasizing ascending fourth notes instead of descending ones that are commonly seen in much of Dowland's music – *Flow*

My Tears being an example of that in figure 7. The song *Come Heavy Sleep* that Britten is basing his nocturnal on has many instances where the tear motive is also used. “*Come Heavy Sleep* is saturated with falling fourths, not only in the vocal melody, but also in the bass line. It also contains many rhetorical figures associated with melancholy.”⁴¹

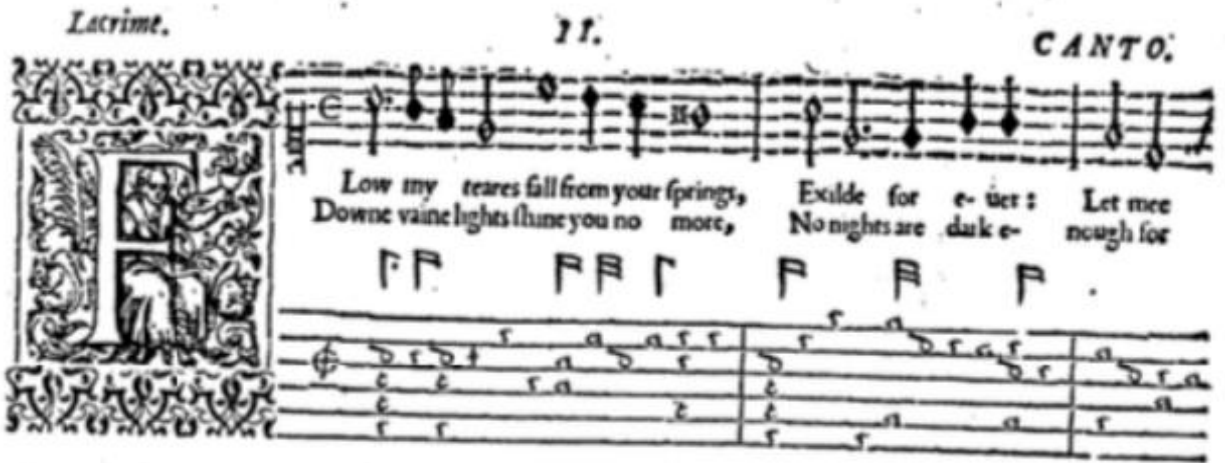


Figure 7. First few measures of *Flow My Tears* by John Dowland.

Britten is one of the most composers in the twentieth century who have made considerable use of the passacaglia. He has often used it as a tonal center for other movements in a given work to gravitate to. “More important, he has found its tension-building qualities a good means for expressing and intensifying certain moods in his operas and vocal works, where the passacaglia’s persistent ground becomes a kind of animated pedal-point that supports the unfolding of the dramatic situations.”⁴² Britten often uses the passacaglia to create a crucial point of dramaticism to reflect on a tragic moment that often have an association with the subject of death.

The well-known passacaglia in *Peter Grimes*, an instrumental interlude between scenes, depicts the derangement of Grimes and is, as it were, oppressed with the

⁴¹ Goss. “*Come, Heavy Sleep: Motive and Metaphor in Britten’s Nocturnal, Opus 70.*” Pp. 58.

⁴² Handel. “*Britten’s Use of the Passacaglia.*” Tempo No. 94. 1970. Pp.2.

sense of him impending death. In *The Rape of Lucretia* there is a dramatic passacaglia after Lucretia's suicide, in which the other characters express their feelings on the finality of death. The last variation in *The Turn of the Screw* conveys a growing tension culminating in the death of Miles. The cabin scene from *Billy Budd* is accompanied by a ground built from an orderly succession of expanding and contracting intervals serving to heighten the dialogue, in much the same way as the passacaglia in *Wozzeck* does. In 'Death be not Proud' in *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* an exuberant ground sustains the vocal line in its quest to conquer death.⁴³

The *Passacaglia* in his nocturnal serves as a means to connect the previous variations and the emerging song that the nocturnal is based upon. The theme takes the first six notes starting from the second pulse in the first musical cell of *Come Heavy Sleep*. It is not used as a ground for harmony like a traditional passacaglia would, instead it is used to close each passage that slowly grows with intensity between the bi-tonality and juxtaposition of the thematic material. The movement has a broken with a pizzicato section just after it has reached its peak intensity. It then slowly builds up again with the ever so haunting passacaglia theme. It reaches one more peak of intensity then begins to break away. It is at this point that *Come Heavy Sleep* starts to emerge and the tonal center starts to shift to an E-major key signature. Dowland's theme is born and expected to be played soft and slowly, as if the listener has reached their final resting point whether it'd be sleep or a peaceful death.

Dowland was a composer able to express his melancholic persona through his music using themes like death. No amount of research in Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland* truly expresses the hard work put into conceptualizing Dowland's theme of death in his *Come Heavy Sleep*, and translate it into more relevant terms, sleep. Though both composers were cut from different cloths, it is through the power of music that Britten was able to renew the legacy of Dowland, and remind a newer audience of what precious musical gems exist in the old world.

⁴³ Handel. "Britten's Use of the Passacaglia." Tempo No. 94. 1970. Pp.2.

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