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*Come, heavy Sleep: motive & metaphor
in Britten's Nocturnal, opus 70*

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Articulation & the Myth of Difficulty

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Come, heavy Sleep: motive & metaphor in Britten's Nocturnal, opus 70

STEPHEN GOSS

I AN IDEAL INSOMNIA: RECEPTION

The prevailing melancholy [of Britten's *Nocturnal*] is as natural to the guitar's sonorities as it is appropriate in a tribute to John Dowland.

Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: Dent, 1979), p 333.

Such summary remarks characterise what little has been written about Britten's *Nocturnal*. The reader's reaction might be one of passive agreement or mild irritation, but there is rarely dialogue because there is limited discourse: *Nocturnal after John Dowland* is often passed over by Britten scholars with scant discussion or no mention at all. Certainly, little has been added to Evans' reliable commentary, written only three years after Britten's death. Are these scholars, one asks, ignoring the music or the medium?

Benjamin Britten, *Nocturnal after John Dowland for Guitar*, op. 70 (London: Faber, 1965; New York: Schirmer, 1965).

For all its expediency, Evans' remark begs a number of fruitful questions. In how many senses, then, is Britten's work *after* John Dowland? How is *Nocturnal* melancholic? – in fact, what are the constructs of melancholy in music in general and in the music of Britten and Dowland in particular? And how may we locate the sonority of the guitar in the discourse?

The starting point for the answers is well known. *Nocturnal* is a set of variations on Dowland's lutesong 'Come, heavy Sleep', delaying literal statement of the theme until the end to give what might be called *reverse variation form*. Its numbered sections are non-tonal but otherwise rather faithful to the structure and motivic material of the song. The surface workings of Britten's variation technique are clear enough, I feel, that it is not my intention to give a detailed account of them here. Moreover, Britten's reluctance to specify the genre in his title – the work is not called *Variations on 'Come, heavy Sleep'* – points to other driving forces in this music, and additional relationships between the lutesong and the preceding sections.

John Dowland, 'Come, heavy Sleep', *The First Booke of Songes or Ayres* (1597), n^o 20. See bibliography for various editions, and p 74 for a transcription of the cantus and lute parts.

In this article, then, I intend to examine *melancholy* as a topic (the *topos* of classical rhetoric), suggesting that it saturates the score of *Nocturnal* at every structural level. I shall refer to several of the movements of *Nocturnal*, but the focus of my argument will be a detailed comparison between the opening variation, *Musingly*, and Britten's transcription of Dowland's song, 'Come, heavy Sleep', that appears on the final page of the score. I shall search for motivic coherence beneath the surface of the music, and attempt to display melancholic

motivic archetypes working at several levels of compositional organisation in *Musingly*. In the last two sections I turn to the implications of the reverse variation form, and attempt to define how two independent idioms – Dowland’s, the guitar’s – become identified with Britten’s. For it is one of the unique achievements of this masterpiece that neither idiom is pushed into the background. On the contrary: the more nakedly they are disclosed in the music – the quotation of an entire song, a chord on the open strings – the more movingly are we made aware that it is Britten’s hand that strikes the open strings, and Britten’s voice that sings Dowland to us.

Despite its comparative critical neglect, *Nocturnal* (1963) occupies a pivotal position in Britten’s output. It refers back to the many works concerned with sleep and dreams, from the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* (1943) through *Nocturne* (1958) to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1960); and it looks forward to the heterophonic melodic style and melancholic atmosphere of later works such as *Curlew River* (1964) and *Death in Venice* (1973). Evans concedes that *Nocturnal* has been somewhat overlooked:

Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p 333.

[The piece] deserves a far higher place in the common view of Britten’s achievement than it has yet gained.

The few Britten scholars who mention *Nocturnal* at all often refer to insomnia rather than sleep and dreams as the psychological orbit of the piece:

Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Faber, 1992), p 422.

‘Come Heavy Sleep’ ... is not heard in full till the end, suggesting that sleep does not come for a long while. The preceding movements are undoubtedly meant to portray the various stages of insomnia.

Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p 331.

So when at last we achieve the simple statement, the song seems to represent the repose of sleep, and the preceding eight variations the changing, often tormented, moods through which the poet has groped towards it.

Donald Mitchell, ‘Mapreading: Benjamin Britten in conversation’, from Christopher Palmer (ed.), *The Britten Companion* (London: Faber 1984), pp 92–93.

Insomnia giving way to sleep: a tempting programme, so long as the song at the end is heard without the words (*Come, heavy sleep...*). But Britten’s own statements about the piece and about dreaming in general are ambiguous. Britten admitted, in a 1969 interview with Donald Mitchell, that *Nocturnal* ‘had some very, to me, disturbing images in it’. He did not say what they were but went on to link these images with ‘the Dowland song, which of course itself has very strange undertones in it. Dowland was a person who perhaps even consciously realised the importance of dreams.’ Elsewhere in the interview, Britten emphasised the importance of dreaming in his creative work: ‘it gives a chance for your subconscious mind to work when your conscious mind is happily asleep ... if I don’t sleep, I find that ... in the morning [I am] unprepared for my next day’s work.’ However, he warned that dreams ‘release many things which one thinks had better not be released’.

Evidently Britten depended on dreams in two ways. In the first place, sleep and dreams provided a wellspring of unconscious activity and imagery that kept his composing fresh and vital. In the second place, he depended to some extent on dreaming, rather than waking life, to keep the creative source at bay: some images might be disturbing, but they remained the province of his unconscious mind, to be sublimated in pieces like *Nocturnal* but never spoken of

in words. Indeed, Britten reserved some of his most imaginative and obscure sonorities for his dreamscapes. The dream music of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* combines the otherworldly sound of the countertenor voice with harp, harpsichord and celesta to evoke the supernatural. The nightmarish imagery of *Nocturne* led Britten to predict that the piece would not 'be madly popular because it is the strangest and remotest thing – but then dreams are strange and remote'.

It might be best, then, to speak of *Nocturnal* not so much as an evocation of insomnia, as in Bartók's own genre of *night music*, as of the unconscious mind. The extent to which this is the world of sleeping or waking depends on the subject. Hardly surprising, on this view, that guitarists are so often tempted to turn to the models of depth psychology in forming an interpretation of the work.

II SEMPER DOLENS: MOTIVIC CONSTRUCTS OF MELANCHOLY

i Dowland: classical rhetoric

*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-swoll'n cries.
Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul,
That living dies, till thou on me be stole.*

By displaying the first stanza of Dowland's song as an epigraph to his score, Britten emphasises the importance of the relationship between the text and his music. It is evident that he thought that the performer should be fully familiar with the text, even though it is never sung aloud in *Nocturnal*, and, by implication, its melancholic mood and meaning.

The text is emotionally charged and saturated with dark, melancholic imagery. This reflects not only the contemporary vogue for melancholy, but also Dowland's own melancholic disposition:

Dowland certainly cultivated a melancholy public persona. He signed himself 'Jo: dolandi de Lachrimae', gave his pieces titles such as 'Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens', 'Melancholy Galliard' and 'Forlorn Hope Fancy' and peppered his publications with Latin mottoes such as 'The arts which help all mankind cannot help their master' (the title page of *The First Booke*) and 'whom Fortune has not blessed, he either rages or weeps' (the title page of *Lachrimae* [1604]).

... it must be remembered that 'melancholy' was such a common complaint and so grave a problem at this time that it occupied a large part of the attention of both physicians and philosophers, who attempted to find its cause and to prescribe remedies either physical or spiritual.

In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) Robert Burton identifies no fewer than eighty-eight 'degrees' of melancholy. He goes on to suggest various conditions that contribute to the Elizabethan melancholic state – social change, political uncertainty, challenges to religious and intellectual certainties, frustrated ambi-

The part of Oberon that Britten wrote for Alfred Deller is very much informed by Deller's performance of early music, particularly Purcell, and Britten would have heard Deller sing Dowland with the lutenist Desmond Dupré.

From a letter to Marion Harewood, 20th August 1958, quoted in Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, p 387.

In private conversation, for example, Ricardo Iznaola has outlined a 'Jungian' interpretation of *Nocturnal*, identifying for each section in turn one of Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious.

'Come, heavy Sleep' is quoted here as it appears in Britten's score on the verso of the title page. Britten drew his text from E.H. Fellowes' 1920 edition of the *First Book of Songs or Ayres* (London: Stainer & Bell); but in *John Dowland* (London: Faber, 2nd ed. 1982), Diana Poulton argues convincingly that line 5 should read, as in the original, 'tired thoughts, worne soule', the word *and* being understood: 'If the line as it stands is spoken aloud with that idea in mind ... both the adjectives *tired* and *worn* will be slightly stressed, which agrees completely with the musical setting. Since ... the same reading was carried through to the edition of 1613, though other texts were emended, it would seem that [Dowland] was satisfied with the words as they stand and had no wish to change them.' (pp 242–244)

In part III, it will be evident that to *sing* the final section, as is very occasionally done by guitarists competent to do so, is to misrepresent the work. But it is tempting to imagine the effect of a recitation of this six-line stanza just before playing. In that case, Dowland's song would be heard as it is presented in the score: once without the music, and once without the text.

Peter Holman, *Dowland: Lachrimae (1604)* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p 51.

Poulton, *John Dowland*, pp 76–77.

Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* [1621], ed. T.C. Faulkner, N.K. Kiessling & R.L. Blair (Oxford, 1989–94).

Following are sources for the songs and lute pieces by Dowland extracted in Example 1: 'Flow my teares fall from your springs', II/2
 'In darknesse let me dwell', MB/10
 'When the poore Cripple', III/16
 'I saw my Lady Weepe', II/1
Melancoly Galliard, CLM/25
Farwell, CLM/3
Forlorn Hope Fancye, CLM/2
 'Weepe you no more sad Fountaines', III/15

Abbreviations (details in Bibliography):
 I *First Booke of Songes or Ayres*
 II *Second Booke of Songes or Ayres*
 III *Third and Last Booke of Songes or Ayres*
 MB Robert Dowland, *A Musicall Banquet*
 CLM *Collected Lute Music of John Dowland*

In the songs, the spelling of the title (taken from the contents page of the source) may be at odds with the text underlay. Barring and key signatures of songs as in sources. Dorian signatures have been chosen for the solo lute pieces.

Author and editor are most grateful to Anthony Rooley who generously provided copies of primary-source material for this musical example.

a) 'Flow my teares'

Flow my - teares fall from your springs.

b) 'In darknesse let me dwell'

In dark - nesse let - mee dwell,

c) 'When the poore Cripple'

When the poore Cri - ple by the Poole did lye,

d) 'I saw my Lady Weepe'

I saw my La - dy weepe,

e) *Melancoly Galliard*

f) *Farwell*

g) *Forlorn Hope Fancye*

h) 'Weepe you no more sad Fountaines'

That nowe lie[s] slee - ping, that nowe lie[s] slee - ping, soft - ly, soft - ly,

i) 'In darknesse let me dwell'

Till death, till death doe come,

Example 1 Representations of melancholy in Dowland

tion, or just *fin-de-siècle* malaise. Burton and his contemporaries also recognised that melancholy was a peculiarly English complaint that seemed not to affect 'those rich United Provinces of Holland, Zealand, &c'. The Elizabethans believed that 'melancholy' or 'black bile' was one of the four liquids or humours found in the body that corresponded with the four elements of inanimate matter. Black bile was considered to be thick and heavy and therefore encouraged dark moods tormented by morbid fears and deep sorrows; it was connected with the element earth, with winter, and with old age.

a) [Ex. 1a] b) [Exs 1d, e] c) [Exs 1a, c] d) [Ex. 1f] e) [Ex. 1g] f) [Exs 1b, d] g) [Exs 1h, i]

Example 2 Melancholic motivic contours

How does this melancholy manifest itself in Dowland's music? Some of Dowland's melancholic song texts share similar phrases and images. Poulton draws attention to some striking similarities between Dowland's celebrated 'Flow my Tears' and the texts of 'Mourne mourne, day is with darkness fled' and 'In Darkness let me Dwell'. She suggests that the poems may have been written by a single author and lists a number of close parallels of which the following example is typical:

you shadowes that in darcknesse dwell	'Flow my Tears'
in darcknesse learne to dwell	'Mourne mourne, day is with darkness fled'
in darkness let mee dwell	'In darkness let me dwell'

Whilst many of Dowland's songs were settings of pre-existing poems there were notable exceptions, 'Flow my Tears', for instance, is an adaptation of Dowland's already popular *Lachrimae Pavan* and Poulton believes the text to have been written to fit the music. This practice was not uncommon at the time.

Poulton, *John Dowland*, p 256.

It is perhaps, hardly surprising that certain emotionally powerful images recur in some of Dowland's melancholic songs. Indeed, it is the frequency of these images that helps to crystallise the specific literary style of the poems. Given such parallelisms between the texts of Dowland's melancholic songs, are there, one is led to ask, similar melodic or motivic parallelisms that suggest melancholy in the music? A survey of Dowland's songs and lute music reveals a wealth of motivic connections. Example 1 illustrates certain recurring melodic fragments that are associated with melancholy. From these examples, I have extracted various motivic archetypes that might suggest different aspects of melancholy (Example 2).

Could there be a deeper semantic system in operation here or are these parallelisms merely coincidental? Perhaps the most appropriate answer to this question is couched not in the notions of linguistics, but in the historical art of rhetoric. To a degree scarcely imaginable today, rhetoric, in deference to classical traditions, remained central to the aesthetic and theoretical concepts of Western art music throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque. This was partly due to the fact that, for a long time, notated music was predominantly vocal and thus inextricably bound up with text. Even after the rise of independent instrumental music, rhetorical principles still dominated compositional technique until around 1800. In 1627 Francis Bacon wrote that 'There be in Musick certaine Figures, or Tropes; almost agreeing with the Figures of Rhetoricke; and with the Affections of the Minde, and other Senses.' In Elizabethan England, the portrayal of melancholy occupied a central role in musical rhetoric; many of the above motivic archetypes were in common usage by composers of the day.

Francis Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum* (1627),
quoted in Holman, *Lachrimae*, p 43.

The *tear motive* (a descent of a perfect fourth whether accomplished by leap or by diatonic or chromatic steps) has long been associated with lachrymose emotions. Holman describes it as 'a standard emblem of grief' and goes on to explore the etymology of the motive drawing attention to a number of important models. Dowland uses the motive in a variety of ways, as can be seen in the examples above. The chromatic versions make use of the rhetorical figure

Tear motive is Holman's own term:
although the figure was well used and well
known it never attracted a formal Latin
label. See Holman, *ibid.* pp 40–42.

Following are some sources for the Latin and Greek rhetorical terms used in the text:

Pathopœia: J. Burmeister, *Musica autoschediastike* (Rostock, 1601).

Mutatio toni: C. Bernhard, *Tractatus compositionis augmentatis* (MS c. 1650).

Ecphonesis: Henry Peachum, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577). Holman (*Dowland: Lachrimae*) gives several examples of Elizabethan composers who set important words or expletives in this way. He traces the sacred overtones of the motive described in the text and identifies its source as the 'Sacred End' pavan by Thomas Morley.

Parrhesia: Anon., *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

Auxesis (anabasis): Henry Peachum, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577).

Aposiopesis: Peachum, *ibid*.

Burmeister and Bernhard are referenced in George J. Beulow, 'Rhetoric in Music', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (see following note), pp 260–270.

Peachum and the anonymous author of *Rhetorica* are referenced by Holman in *Dowland: Lachrimae*. For a fuller investigation of musical rhetoric, I direct the reader towards R. Toft, *Tune thy Musicke to thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597–1622* (Toronto, 1993), and to W. Taylor, *Tudor Figures of Rhetoric* (Whitewater, Wisc., 1972).

Blake Wilson, 'Rhetoric in Music' (Introduction), in Stanley Sadie & John Tyrroll (eds), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, vol. 21 (London: MacMillan, 2001), p 260.

Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford University Press, 1959).

The arbitrariness of the sign became an axiom of modern linguistics after it was posited by Saussure, but Cooke denies its applicability to music.

John A. Sloboda, *The Musical Mind* (Oxford Science Publications, 1985), p 62.

pathopœia – movement through semitonal steps to express affections such as sadness, fear and terror. Whilst all the above musical examples could be subjected to a detailed rhetorical analysis, I shall move on to a consideration of the use of rhetorical figures in Dowland's song 'Come, heavy Sleep' as it appears in Britten's *Nocturnal*. (A score of the song follows this article.)

'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. Bar 9 offers a model example of *mutatio toni* – the abrupt change in harmonic direction for expressive purposes. This coincides with a melody intensified by the use of *ecphonesis* or *exclamatio* – a sharp figure, normally constructed with a syncopated long note followed by a falling fourth and then shorter notes, capable of stirring up vehement emotions. The false relations in bars 7–8 and 10–11 of are examples of *parrhesia* – the use of pungent language to reprehend hearers for some fault. The sequential build to the climax in bars 11–12 (called variously *gradatio*, *climax* or *anabasis*) is the musical equivalent of the basic rhetorical device *auxesis*, which Henry Peachum senior describes as being 'when we make our saying grow and increase by an orderly placing of words, making the latter word always exceede the former, in force of signification'. Finally, Britten's adaptation of the repeat of the reprise generates the effect of an *aposiopesis*, when as Peachum says, 'through some affection, as of feare, anger, sorrow, bashfulnesse, and such like, we break off our speech, before it all be ended'.

ii Britten: *The Language of Music*

It was only in the early twentieth century that music historians rediscovered the importance of rhetoric ... in earlier music. An entire discipline that had once been the common property of every educated man has had to be rediscovered and reconstructed during the intervening decades, and only now is it beginning to be understood.

While the early music movement was rediscovering the constructs of musical rhetoric, Britten was turning to the rhetorically based music of Dowland and Purcell to provide models for his own work. Perhaps then, it was no surprise that Deryck Cooke's seminal work on musical hermeneutics, *The Language of Music*, coincided with this reconsideration of old music.

In fact, if Cooke was aware of the precedent of classical and neoclassical rhetoric, he makes no mention of it. He argues that each chromatic step of the diatonic scale is charged with specific, inherent emotional qualities (e.g. major sixth, *pleasure, hope*; minor sixth, *pain, despair, lament*) and he goes on to isolate several basic melodic combinations of these intervals that consistently recur in specific emotional contexts throughout tonal music. Paradoxically, Cooke suggests that music is not a language at all – if language is the arbitrary, but agreed, association of symbols (signifiers) with objects and concepts (the signified) – but something natural and objective; not metaphorical, but empirical; not left brain, but right brain. In *The Musical Mind*, John Sloboda discusses musical semantics at length and he succinctly summarises Cooke's ideas:

Cooke invites us to reject the notion of intrinsic neutrality for music. He argues that certain motifs are more suitable than others for suggesting particular emotions by virtue of the tonal relationships that hold between their members.

Cooke's findings, then, more or less coincide with the models provided by the theories of musical rhetoric. Whether the emotional connotations of certain melodic shapes are natural or culture-bound, the strength and depth of Cooke's research suggests that an unwritten emotional lingua franca has developed in Western tonal art music.

It would appear that all the melancholic motives that I have identified feature prominently in Cooke's argument. Example 2a, for instance ($\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ in a minor key), is often used in the context of a lament:

To fall from the tonic to the dominant, taking in the 'mournful' minor seventh and 'anguished' minor sixth, is clearly to express an incoming painful emotion, an acceptance of, or yielding to grief: passive suffering; and the despair connected with death.

Cooke, *The Language of Music*, p 163.

The descending figure $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ (Example 2b) also appears to have melancholic implications, particularly when preceded by the lower dominant ($\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$, Example 2c):

To rise from the lower dominant over the tonic to the minor third, and fall back to the tonic ... conveys the feeling of a passionate outburst of painful emotion, which does not protest further, but falls back into acceptance – a flow and ebb of grief. Being neither complete protest nor complete acceptance, it has an effect of restless sorrow.

Sloboda (*The Musical Mind*) tabulates a number of examples of the figure $\hat{5}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ taken from a wide historical range of vocal music.

The Language of Music, pp 137–138.

All Cooke's observations and conclusions are backed up with a plethora of musical examples taken from well-known canonic works from the last five hundred years.

Besides the melodic representations of melancholy discussed above, Cooke also discusses the melancholic effect generated by particular note pairings. He compares the metaphorical implications of the minor sixth falling to the dominant and the minor second falling to the tonic (*cf.* Example 2f) in these terms:

[The minor second's] tension is obviously akin to that of the minor sixth: it is an acute dissonance in relation to the minor triad, but whereas the minor sixth is drawn by semitonal tension down to the dominant, the minor second is drawn by semitonal tension down to the tonic. This means that whereas the minor sixth is an expression of anguish in a context of flux, the minor second is an expression of anguish in a context of finality; in other words, the minor sixth expresses an active anguish, the minor second a hopeless anguish.

These pairings have particular relevance in the context of the phrygian mode.

Ibid. p 78.

Even outside these specific tonal contexts, the semitone has a key expressive role in the portrayal of musical melancholy. Cooke describes the effect produced when diatonic descents (such as $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$) are filled in chromatically (Example 2e):

The effect of filling in the gaps is to make the 'despairing' descent more weary, and to increase the element of pain by every possible chromatic tension.

Ibid. p 165.

One has only to think of the bass line of *Dido's Lament* from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* or the opening of Dowland's *Forlorn Hope Fancy* (Example 1g) to appreciate Cooke's point.

Cooke's thesis addresses tonal music only. It is time to return to *Nocturnal* and ask, can his ideas be translated into Britten's post-tonal idiom? Example 3 attempts to find an answer. At the heart of this example is a search for the underlying motivic structures which form an expressive undertow to *Musingly*. But its starting point is to be found in the first two staves, which show how the melodic line (and occasionally the rhythm) of *Musingly* is derived from that of *Slow and quiet*. We shall pursue this topic more fully in part III, but the following preliminary observations are well worth noting:

From this point onwards, I shall often refer to Dowland's song as it appears on p 15 of Britten's score, rather than to the original song. To avoid confusion I shall refer to this version as *Slow and quiet* (the marking in Britten's score), reserving the title 'Come, heavy Sleep' for Dowland's original song.

The implications for performance of these two sections are challenging. How to convey distinctly the two, almost impossibly quiet, dynamic levels marked, and how to make the hairpin dynamics sound within the indicated *pianissimo*? Clearly much is to be gained from practising the two sections side by side.

- In its basic contour, Britten's line keeps to within a tone and a half of the original. The exception is the approach to the two cadences on c¹ at bars 15 and 26 (we shall see why in part III, §v).
- Bars 1–12 are set an octave lower than the rest of *Musingly*. The four notes of 'And tears my heart' are expanded in bar 13 to effect a transfer to the register of *Slow and quiet*.
- Bars 22–24 are based on the same material as bars 20–22, extending the effect of *anabasis* already described in the rhetorical summary of 'Come, heavy Sleep'.
- Although *Slow and quiet* fades away, its extra bar, by comparison with *Musingly*, is crucial to the close of the work.
- Both movements are set *pp* – and in both movements the distinctive homophonic passages are set apart to be played *ppp*.

In *Musingly*, Britten freely adapts the rhythm and carefully manipulates the tones and semitones of melodic line of 'Come, heavy Sleep' to increase temporal and tonal ambiguity. He processes the pitches by dividing the octave equally into minor thirds, giving what we may call a 'diminished-seventh' filter. This filter replaces the confident stability of Dowland's diatonic line with the tonal flux of uncertain exploratory musings. Example 4 shows diminished filters at work in the opening measures of *Musingly*, *Very Agitated* and *March-like*, whereas Example 3 follows the diminished filters all the way through *Musingly*. Essentially, Britten uses these filters to translate the musical language from a tonal to a post-tonal idiom.

One of the keys to Britten's post-tonal style is his ability to transform tonal fragments into motivic cells for non-tonal exploitation (more of this in part III). Therefore, even outside a tonal context the motivic intervallic shapes that Britten uses correspond to the melancholic melodic fragments discussed above. And they can trigger similar emotional responses.

Musingly is suffused with melancholic imagery and is controlled by motives constructed from three intervals taken from Dowland's song – the falling fourth and falling tone of 'heavy sleep' and the rising semitone of 'true Death'. Table 1 suggests an implicit emotional metaphor for each of the intervals and a corresponding rhetorical figure.

Example 3 shows how these motivic cells operate at a variety of depths of compositional construction. At the surface level it is possible to trace Britten's

Sleep was an Elizabethan metaphor for death and it is possible that the arrival of the song heralds not the repose of sleep, but the finality of death after tormented sleep.

I *Musingly*, bars 1–2 II *Very agitated*, bars 1–3 V *March-like*, bars 2–5

Example 4 Diminished filters

Slow and quiet

Musingly

Chromatic ascents

Whole-tone descents

Diminished-triad filters

Cadence points

Semitones

Falling 4th

ppp

ppp

pp very freely (*molto liberamente*)

ppp

pp

poco cresc. ed accel.

pp

ppp

dim. e rall.

Example 3 Benjamin Britten, *Nocturnal* op. 70, first movement, *Musingly*

Table 1

Interval	Classical rhetoric	<i>The Language of Music</i>
Ascending semitone	<i>pathopœia</i>	yearning, anguished hope or striving for <i>true Death</i> – closely related to the sighing, anguished, descending semitone
Descending tone	<i>catabasis</i>	grief, lament, mourning, acceptance of death
Descending perfect fourth	‘tear motive’ (<i>Lachrimae</i>)	despair – close relationship with $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$

Catabasis is the opposite of *anabasis*. See A. Kircher, *Musurgia universalis* (Rome, 1650), referenced in Beulow, ‘Rhetoric in Music’, p 263: ‘This occurs when a voice part or musical passage reflects the textual connotation of descending.’

recomposition of Dowland’s vocal line note by note (lines 1 and 2). The next layer reveals chromatic ascents and whole-tone descents that are localised enough to be audible beneath melodic decoration (lines 3 and 4). Line 5 shows the diminished filters discussed above, which pervade the latter part of the movement. Below that, the final cadence notes of each phrase can be isolated, like an acrostic, to suggest the contour of the ‘Come, heavy Sleep’ motive (line 6). At a deeper level (line 7), I have uncovered long-term semitone sighs that map the underlying motivic structure and sit over the gently rocking fossilised fourth that remembers the bipartite division of *Musingly*. Melancholy inflects all levels, from surface to structure alike. All are wounded; all weep.

III THAT DYING LIVES: DOWLAND RECOMPOSING BRITTEN

i Variation form

As in several of Britten’s other variation sets, *Nocturnal* places the starting point – the theme – at the end. Other examples include *Lachrimae* for viola and piano, also based on a Dowland lutesong, and the Third Cello Suite, based on a Russian folksong. In all three cases the final theme is not Britten’s and is tonal.

Of course, it is no easy matter for a post-tonal composer to quote tonal music without anomaly, and Britten’s reversed form is a response to this difficulty. There is a rupture between Dowland’s language and Britten’s which would be all too apparent had *Nocturnal* followed the traditional ordering. Admittedly, in the tonal variation sets of earlier epochs, there could also be stylistic discrepancies, but the fact of tonality assured a certain unity, against which differences in style could be celebrated without any fundamental contradiction.

Composers frequently based a set of variations on another composer’s theme (Beethoven’s ‘Diabelli’ Variations, op. 120, Britten’s early *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, op. 10) or a theme in a self-enclosed style (Bach’s ‘Goldberg’ Variations, BWV 988). The critical feature of these themes is their epigrammatic nature. They are miniatures which achieve full closure. The variations do not continue the music, standing as they do on a quite different level to the theme – not continuation but repetition and commentary. In these

The graphic notation used in Example 3 uses beams to group notes together into salient motions. It is not a Schenkerian graph of the piece, above all because it is not and never could be a tonal harmonic analysis. This is one reason why the deeper levels are shown at the bottom rather than the top, turning the typical Schenker graph on its head: there is no underlying background which could be posited as a theoretical kernel, fleshed out by the surface of the music. In Schenker’s tonal model, the surface of the music synthesises the remoter levels; in Example 3, the deeper levels merely analyse – underlie – the surface.

Other post-tonal solutions have been to quote the theme piecemeal throughout (Nicholas Maw’s *Music of Memory* for guitar), or to add a post-tonal accompaniment to the statement of a tonal theme (Martinu’s *Variations on a Theme of Rossini* H290, (1942) for cello and piano and Peter Dickinson’s *Cellars Clough Duo* (1988) for two guitars.

The Aria on which Bach’s variations are based is so self-consciously French in manner that its authorship was even questioned a couple of decades ago.

To speak of working *against* a traditional form is to put things very much in the manner of Hans Keller, and it is not surprising that Britten was for Keller one of the few twentieth-century composers to solve formal problems in an utterly natural way. He paid Britten's Second Quartet the compliment of composing a 'Functional Analysis' of it (a wordless, performable analysis in notated music alone), and his essay on the Third Quartet is couched in the terms just described: 'Britten's Last Masterpiece', in *Essays on Music*, ed. Christopher Wintle (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp 111–113.

In *Slow and quiet*, the lute is absent: according to Julian Bream, Britten wanted to 'write a lute piece' rather than the guitar piece that Bream eventually prevailed upon him to write (quoted in Tony Palmer, *Julian Bream: A Life on the Road* [London: Macdonald & Co, 1982], p 87).

See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a theory of poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

works, the sense of quotation marks surrounding the theme, of the examination question followed by a brilliant and lengthy response, is unmistakable.

Nocturnal is composed *against* the background of this traditional variation form. The most important effect of this is that the opening section and first 'variation', *Musingly*, becomes a provisional theme for what follows. The equivalence is clear in the way Britten chooses the same dynamic levels for each, *pp* and *ppp*, and asks for these dynamics at corresponding places. The symbiotic relationship between *Musingly* and *Slow and quiet* implies a cyclical rather than linear structure to the whole work.

The first part of *Nocturnal* is a set of variations that move away from *Musingly*, whereas the second part moves towards *Slow and quiet*. The initial violent contrast of dynamic energy generated by the juxtaposition of *Musingly* and *Very agitated* propels the work forwards. The wave-like dynamic swings between subsequent variations gradually subside until the work reaches its still centre, *Dreaming* and *Gently rocking*. 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.

Following this still centre, the balance of power shifts decisively from *Musingly* to *Slow and quiet*. The passacaglia ground, absent throughout the first five variations, is adumbrated at the beginning of *Dreaming* (albeit in a middle voice and in a non-tonal, filtered context) and *Gently rocking* uses an unfiltered version of Dowland's opening melodic phrase for the first time. The dynamic swings of the opening variations are reflected by the Passacaglia, which gradually energises a similar, but inverted, dynamic discourse. This time, therefore, the moment of most extreme contrast comes not at the beginning but at the end, between the death-rattle of the final climactic wave of the Passacaglia and the serene tranquillity of *Slow and quiet*.

To close a variation set, the tradition was to round off with a final variation demonstrating a complex discipline, usually a fugue: Britten touches base with this tradition by casting the last variation of *Nocturnal* in his signature form, the passacaglia. A final statement of the variation theme as an apotheosis is not uncommon in the traditional form: one thinks of Bach's Goldberg Variations (where the theme is repeated at the end, *verbatim* but experientially transformed), and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations (whose final minuet seems to represent a sublimated version of Diabelli's original waltz). In *Nocturnal*, when we arrive at Dowland's song, at Dowland's style, after the variations, the effect is rather different. The theme is not heard, but overheard: it is to be played 'slow and quiet', as if from a distance. It is not sung but played; the instrument is not lute but guitar; and finally the music drifts away at the end, left incomplete and hanging on the tonality most remote from home. If there is an analogous structure, it is Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, but in Britten's form it is the original rather than the translation which is the goal of the music.

In short, *Nocturnal* makes itself heard not as a set of variations on a theme, but as a theme on a set of variations. The result is startling: a sense of what Harold Bloom calls 'the return from the dead': in this anachronistic sequence, is Britten recomposing Dowland, or Dowland recomposing and distilling Britten? To ask this seemingly absurd question is to arrive at the heart of the

Passacaglia ground

Slow and quiet (*Molto tranquillo*)

pp *marked*

Example 5 The passacaglia ground and its derivation

question of style, for Britten was, to borrow Bloom's terminology, a *strong* composer: one who embraced influences with such confidence that sometimes it is hard not to hear the original in light of the 'remake'. Are there not moments when Bach seems to borrow from Brahms, Mahler from Shostakovich, and Purcell, in his passacaglias, from Britten?

We shall pursue this question by exploring what elements of Dowland's song are already *in style*, ready-made for Britten's language, so that the reversal of roles in the work becomes natural. Of course, the variations themselves will tell us what these elements are. The key to the matter is the difference between *intervallic* and *tonal* writing. The writing is intervallic rather than tonal when a motive is used in various contexts and transpositions, but the exact intervals from note to note remain fixed. Very little of 'Come, heavy Sleep' can be imported into Britten's music without some filtering. But in a few components Britten recognised particular intervallic properties that allowed him to use them unaltered.

ii The passacaglia ground

A hermeneutic account of the Passacaglia would be an invidious undertaking. To some listeners it is the most disturbing movement in the work, to others the most beautiful. To bring the two reactions together is to call the movement epiphanic: certainly, there is a moment of epiphany when the obsessive repetitions of the passacaglia ground dissolve into a benign accompanimental figure in *Slow and quiet* (Example 5).

When the Passacaglia begins, it is the first time that this motive is heard in its unfiltered version. There is a surface similarity with two of Cooke's melancholic semantic units (Examples 2a and 2c). However, the tonal implications are not clear and A minor is the least important of three possible tonalities at work. In 'Come, heavy Sleep' the motive is contextualised as $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ in the major (ionian) mode, but in the Passacaglia the impression of $\hat{6}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ in the phrygian mode dominates; the pattern of tones and semitones is identical in all three cases. Peter Evans alludes to a tonal conflict between C major and E phrygian:

In its original rhythm (see full version of Dowland's song on p 74), the motive begins as a major-key version of the *Lachrimae* motive (the original pavan for lute had been written by the time Dowland published *The First Booke of Songes*). It is obvious, however, that the original rhythm would make nonsense of the Passacaglia as it stands, and Britten was obliged to change it.

It should be noted that although Britten calls this a passacaglia it is not a passacaglia in strict definition of the word, as Evans explains:

'Whereas most ground-bass treatments are studies in simultaneity – counterpoints against the ground, new harmonisations of it, developing rhythmic activity above it, and so on – the nature of guitar technique makes this passacaglia something nearer a dialogue. Since the ground is so persistently at variance with the unfolding argument it interrupts, the piece acquires a dramaticism that may well be unique in the repertoire of this instrument.' (*The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p 332)

it falls from C to E through the ‘white’ notes, creating by simple means a conflict between ‘tonic’ and ‘final’ that prepares for a greater tonal conflict, of a kind familiar from many dramatic Britten contexts.

In serial terms, its prime form and retrograde inversion are identical (if suitably transposed).

The culmination of this conflict occurs at bar 35 of the Passacaglia, when the bass note C competes with an E major chord to sound the climax of the entire work.

The passacaglia ground has a simple symmetry about it: two semitones flanking a whole-tone fragment. Taking it from Dowland’s song, Britten has no need to pass it through the filter of his own language. Again, the closing section provides a striking demonstration of this (bars 35–41), when the theme, breaking free at last from the bonds of incessant repetition, is stated at many different pitches in prime form and in inversion, and sometimes in a chain. Throughout this passage its intervallic structure is never altered (Example 6).

The ground bass in the final movement of Britten’s Third String Quartet is likewise symmetrically constructed, moving entirely in whole-tone steps. It can be seen in Example 7 that its second half is a strict intervallic inversion of the first. The whole-tone steps (later extended to include A, B, C#/C#) could exist in a number of tonal contexts: C# phrygian, E mixolydian, A ionian and D lydian. These tonal ambiguities are never satisfactorily resolved and the ending of the work is notoriously enigmatic (Example 8). The much-discussed last chord could be a C# minor triad with a phrygian second in the bass or, more plausibly, a polytonal cadence with each instrument cadencing in its own tonality – violin 1, E (major); violin 2, C# (minor); viola, A (major); cello, D (major/lydian). Each of these tonalities could be implied by the exclusive and independent use of scale degrees $\hat{1}$, $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{3}$ in each part. Hans Keller, the dedicatee of the Third Quartet, has tried to unravel the tonal threads of the final cadence.

When I lectured on [the Third Quartet] at Snape ... I analysed the heavily charged end, or non-end, against the harmonic background of the traditional interrupted cadence, and ventured that the only possible verbal translation of these last unfinal notes was, ‘This is not the end.’ Whereupon Donald Mitchell, the composer’s authorised biographer, recounted that in reply to the question what this end meant, Britten had said, ‘I’m not dead yet.’

iii ‘Come, heavy Sleep’

The opening four notes of Dowland’s melody hold the key to much of *Nocturnal*. Example 9a shows the intervallic relationships that dominate the score. The prominent sighing falling fourth, on the word *heavy*, is a particularly significant gesture and one that haunts the refrain of the Dowland song and permeates many of Britten’s variations. This short phrase provides the kernel for the specific, idiomatic harmonic language that Britten has chosen for his guitar piece. Example 9b shows the derivation of the open-string chord which features prominently in many of the movements (II, V and VI in particular) (Example 10).

From this open-string chord, Britten develops an informal lexicon of chords for *Nocturnal*, based on the coincidences between Dowland’s song and the intervallic quirks of guitar tuning. He has taken the rogue major third in the guitar’s otherwise quartal tuning and made a feature of it – Britten composes the guitar.

a) bar 1

b) bar 35

c) bar 37

Example 6 Fixed intervals in the passacaglia ground

Example 7 Benjamin Britten, String Quartet n° 3, op. 94, fifth movement, Recitative and Passacaglia (*La Serenissima*), ground bass.

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rall.....

Example 8 Benjamin Britten, String Quartet n° 3, fifth movement, closing bars

a) 'Come, heavy Sleep'

b) transposition and registral displacement

Example 9 Derivation of the open-string chord from the 'Come, heavy Sleep' motive

II Very agitated
 III Restless
 IV Uneasy
 V March-like
 VI Dreaming
 VIII Passacaglia

Example 10 Quartal harmonies, strict and informal

The i - mage of true Death
 I Musingly, bars 3-4
 IV Uneasy, bar 3
 x inverted

Example 11 'The image of true Death'

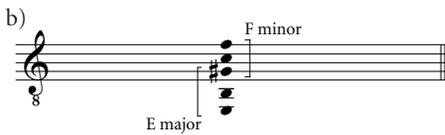
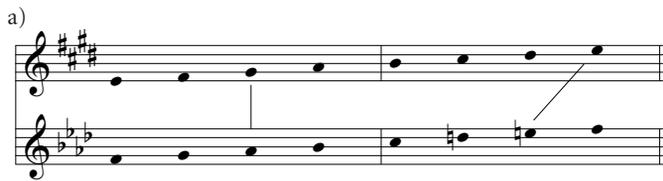
iv 'The image of true Death'

Whereas the *Come, heavy Sleep* motive undergoes much transformation and filtering throughout *Nocturnal*, Britten frequently uses the *image of true Death* motive in its original, unfiltered form (Example 11).

Even at the outset this unfiltered phrase does not seem anomalous when Britten reproduces it in bars 3-4 of *Musingly* within the context of otherwise filtered music. In fact, it would be better to say that this one phrase defines much of Britten's melodic style for *Musingly*, and *Nocturnal* in general: to use segments from diatonic scales, but to vary constantly the accidentals between ascending and descending so that no tonal centre predominates.

v Harmony

So far I have referred to Dowland's music as tonal, and Britten's as post-tonal. Both terms are loose: Dowland stands at a transitional moment in history between the Renaissance modes and Baroque tonality; Britten's music makes frequent use of tonal vocabulary but to very varied ends, depending on the



Example 12 Fusion of E major and F minor



Example 13 Benjamin Britten, *Billy Budd*, op. 50, opening bar

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expressive context. Triads are frequently heard in *Nocturnal*, along with the quartal harmonies we have already examined, but there is rarely a prolonged tonal centre. Nevertheless, if in purely tonal variation sets the harmonic structure was paramount, even here it is not forgotten: Britten's response to the harmonic relationships in 'Come, heavy Sleep' is one of the most imaginative features of the work.

Let us first look at an example of Britten's use of triads at its most characteristic. In *Musingly*, bar 16, he fuses together two triads, E major and F minor. Understood as a fusion of keys, we can see that all the scale pitches from E major and F minor (melodic ascending) complete a full chromatic set with two notes repeated, E natural and G# (Ab) (Example 12a). In the vertical arrangement of the chord in bar 16, there is a perfect symmetry around the G#/Ab which acts a fulcrum between the two tonalities (Example 12b). The tonal tension between F and E, and C and B, looks ahead to the phrygian passacaglia ground.

There are many examples of this kind of bitonality in Britten; *Billy Budd* is drenched in these minor-within-major relationships. Peter Evans cites Erwin Stein's notion of an *Urmotiv* in the work:

Stein was able to demonstrate how many [melodic] shapes [in the opera] could be referred back to an *Urmotiv* (of which, it appears, the composer was not fully conscious) consisting of [amongst other things] the minor-within-major third of the opera's opening bars. [Example 13]

The celesta ostinato that accompanies Oberon's music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is built on totally symmetrical segments of Eb major and E minor, while the remaining four pitches of the complete chromatic set are gradually added by the glockenspiel. However, perhaps the most striking and directly relevant

I am grateful to Dr Christopher Mark for pointing out a multitude of such examples to me, from every phase of Britten's compositional career.

The Music of Benjamin Britten, p 166. See also Erwin Stein, 'Billy Budd', in Mitchell & Keller (eds), *Benjamin Britten: a commentary on his works from a group of specialists* (London, 1952), pp 201ff.

Example 14 Duplicated harmonic progressions in *Slow and quiet* and *Musingly* (bars 13–18)

This E held special significance for Britten as it was his favourite note in Peter Pears' vocal range. Britten exploited it to great effect in the many songs and operatic parts that he wrote for Pears.

example is taken from the end of the prologue to *Peter Grimes*, where Peter and Ellen Orford are left alone on the stage after the courtroom empties. Ellen sings in optimistic E major, her line outlining the tonic triad with a little decoration, while Peter sings in dark F minor. Both voices use G# (Ab) as the registral floor and ceiling of their phrases, and they finish on a unison E.

The use of the E major chord in bar 16 of *Musingly* is striking for several reasons; it marks the end of the opening monody, it receives the softest dynamic so far, *ppp*, and it contradicts the sonority contrast that Dowland uses in his song (see below). The quaver delay of the F minor superimposition allows time for E major to be heard with pure clarity before its sonority is muddled. The moment is also rhythmically very important as Evans remarks:

The Music of Benjamin Britten, p 332.

the opening of the second strain preserves the drumming homophony that is so marked a feature of the song.

So much for Britten's own harmonic 'style'. To what extent was he able to import harmonic progressions, 'camera-ready', from Dowland's song? As a matter of fact this same phrase (bars 16–18), borrows, of all things, the fifth relationship that forms the terminal harmonies of the phrase it is based on, 'Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul' (see Example 14). In *Musingly* the result is a simple V–I cadence, but in the upper voice the F from the F minor–E major fusion persists, keeping traditional tonality at bay by a hairsbreadth.

Dominant to tonic is the defining relationship of traditional tonality. Britten's subversion of the progression here is managed with the confidence of mastery, but at only one other place in the work does he attempt to repeat the progression. The place is *Gently rocking*, bar 15, which is likewise a paraphrase of 'Come and possess my tired thought-worn soul'. For two bars the music oscillates between C minor and its dominant, G major, while open strings continue the bitonal commentary that characterises this variation.

There is one more harmonic borrowing in the passage under discussion in *Musingly*. We have seen (in Example 3) that Britten's melody line keeps to within a tone and a half of the original, straying only to complete the first strain on C (bar 15). The result is a $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ cadential descent in C major, which is instantly contradicted by the E major chord in the next bar. This passage replicates the pivotal tertiary jolt that occurs at the equivalent point in Dowland's song, where there is the juxtaposition of a G major cadence at the end of the verse and a B major chord that begins the refrain. Diana Poulton draws atten-

Example 15 Passacaglia, bar 16, fusion of E and G#

Example 16 Passacaglia, bars 35ff, anchor notes

tion to the subtle colour change that takes place at this point:

here Dowland makes use of his knowledge of the special sonorities of the lute with moving effect ... The last words of line four, 'sorrows sigh swoln cries', end on a full close with a chord of G major; a chord which on the lute is mainly composed of notes on the open strings, giving a clear ringing quality. This will support a considerable volume of tone from the singer. The next line begins on a B major chord which, by the position of the notes on the strings of the instrument, has a somewhat more muted tone colour. If the singer drops his voice to match the natural change of quality in the accompaniment the repeated notes of the invocation to sleep then take on a kind of hushed urgency, exceptionally expressive of the emotionally charged sentence:

Com & posses my tired thoughts, worne soule,
That liuing dies, till thou on me bestoule.

Britten transposed the song down to E (from lute pitch to guitar pitch) to mirror this idiomatic effect in the guitar version of the song on the final page of *Nocturnal*. This kind of sudden tertiary harmonic jolt was a recognised feature of syntax in Dowland's musical language as well as Britten's.

The resultant juxtaposition of the triads of E and G# (in *Slow and quiet*) informs the Passacaglia, as in Example 15, when it manifests itself as a vertical fusion. More complex is Example 16, which illustrates the final climax of the work. To understand this passage fully, we need to add the triad of C major to those of E and G#. The example suggests that the different member notes of the three triads act as an armature for the apparently wild transpositions of the

John Dowland, p 242.

But in *Musingly* the harmonic progression is again transposed, moving from C to E (Example 14). Since the appearance of this E heralds the first time any chord is played in the work, the result is a reversal of the effect described by Poulton.

Similar examples of these tertiary harmonic shifts can be found in numerous lute pieces and songs, for example, 'Flow my Tears', *Farewell*, 'I saw my Lady Weep' and *A Pavan* (no 16 in the *Collected Lute Music of John Dowland*).

a)

b)

Passacaglia ground 'Come, heavy Sleep'

Example 17 Passacaglia ground and governing harmonies from work as a whole

In this descending passage between the high B and the following E major chord, Britten could not have kept to the armature defined by the complex of triads without repeating the approach to $g\sharp^2$ from c^2 used already between bars 35 and 36, which would weaken the critical ascent to the pillar-like E major chord.

passacaglia ground. In the first bar of the passage (bar 35) the various statements of the hexachord take their cue from the climactic chord itself (see the dotted slurs). Thereafter, the three triads provide anchoring pitches as far as the highpoint of the section (b^3). The following three hexachords form a bridge to the next E major chord, leaping down by major and minor ninths from statement to statement. Once the E major chord has been reached the $G\sharp-E-C$ armature comes back into force, extending into *Slow and quiet*.

The addition of C major to the complex of triads is anything but arbitrary. First of all, it will be remembered that the tertiary harmonic progression from E to $G\sharp$ belongs to *Slow and quiet*; in *Musingly* it is presented as C to E (bars 15–16 in Example 14). Secondly – and this too we have already seen – a friction between C and E is implicit in the passacaglia ground. Example 17 completes the picture that has been emerging throughout this section. The ground embodies the relationship between C and E, just as its origin in 'Come, heavy Sleep' embodies the relationship between E and $G\sharp$. The last bar of the Passacaglia and the first bar of *Slow and quiet* make up a crucial moment when the two relationships are at last heard in succession. As Example 17b suggests, the two hexachords presented in this order can be thought of – indeed, *heard* – as a continuous scale with a registral transfer from e to e^2 . Lastly, each of these triads lies a major third away from the other two, all three dividing the octave equally. This is a characteristic example of Britten's way of partitioning tonal space in a non-tonal fashion, by fixed intervals. The result is a cyclical harmonic structure which, by governing as it does the outer sections, can be said to encompass the whole work.

IV TILL DEATH ON ME BE STOLE: CLIMAX, CLOSURE

The transition from the Passacaglia to *Slow and quiet* is not only the passing of one section into the next – it is the passing of all the variations into the theme, and indeed of Britten's music into Dowland's. It is here that Britten works against his own background, as the previous sections have established it. For in the bridging-over between sections there have been two elements: (1) a linking idea, always consisting of pitches, but frequently incorporating rhythm also; and (2) a pause or comma, separating one variation from the next.

Of course, the entire Passacaglia is *about* nothing but the link between itself and *Slow and quiet* – the ground bass. Having converted it at the climax into continuous semiquavers in all registers, Britten takes a whole page to return it

The link between *Uneasy* and *March-like* is ostensibly rhythmic, but pitch is involved in the accumulation of open strings and hence quartal harmony from one section to the next. A similar accumulation takes place between *Very agitated* and *Restless*.

to its original register and rhythmic contour, together with its associated E major chord.

Throughout the variations Britten has used the guitar's characteristic rolling of chords as a motivic element, and this repeated E major chord receives the most elaborate arpeggiation of all – after all, it is the only perfect triad that is ever heard (as a vertical sonority, without the interference of other notes) in the variations; it was the first chord to be heard in *Musingly*, and it is the last to be heard in the Passacaglia. Now, as it bridges into the music of Dowland, Britten at last omits the pause. The notation here is telling: Britten does not mark *Slow and quiet* as a separate section, with the titling roman numeral and preceding double bar that set apart all the preceding sections. Rather, it seems that we are to understand the Passacaglia and Dowland's song as one continuous section. And all of this does more than contradict our accumulated expectations of Britten's form: it contradicts the traditional boundaries of variation form to the maximum, closing the four centuries' gap between two composers.

[‘Come, heavy Sleep’] has two strains, of which the second should be repeated, but each variation leaves incomplete this repeat, falling away as though in despair, and passing to the new approach of the following variation. When the repeat of Dowland's own second strain fades out, however, to the end of the whole work, it is the achievement of oblivion.

We saw earlier that Britten signals the close of the work quite precisely, by adding an extra bar by comparison with *Musingly*. This final bar of the work is so idealised as to be virtually unperformable. Perhaps, in the hard medium of recording, it cannot be realised at all. As Britten's dotted lines indicate, the music has been slowing continuously for seven bars, and the dynamic level has sunk below *ppp*. The notated *glissando* is almost impossible to achieve at this tempo and dynamic, and the final note, set in parenthesis, is perhaps only imaginary, a visual residue, the medium having dissolved into silence before the note could sound.

Underneath the double barline Britten indicates, as always, the provenance of the work: ‘Aldeburgh – Nov. 11th, 1963.’ The reference to the seaside town which Britten made his home reminds us that neither melancholy, nor sleep and dreams, can encompass the range of topics that this music evokes. There are many others: the cradle (*Gently rocking*), the battlefield (*March-like*). Pushed furthest into the background is the sound of the sea.

Britten became known as the greatest English composer since Purcell partly because he drew attention away from the picturesque notion of pastoral music, towards another aspect of national identity: music of the coastline, islanded music – sea music. It is not for nothing that *Peter Grimes* remains his most famous work, and perhaps there is no music of Britten's which does not have the sound of the sea somewhere in its background. In *Nocturnal*, too, it can sometimes be heard: in the curving, ornamented lines of the Passacaglia, and in the same movement's organisation into three climactic waves, like the Passacaglia of *Peter Grimes*.

In the Passacaglia, the use of a ground bass refers to Purcell, before moving deeper into the past towards Dowland, towards melancholy pure and distilled. The ornaments in the opening refer as much to Purcell as to the sea. Of course, there is night music, too: perhaps the most disturbing moment in *Nocturnal*

See in particular *Uneasy* and *Dreaming* for the motivic use of the rolled chord.

It is true that performers often pause on the initial E of *Slow and quiet*. To do so not only denies the structural point of Britten's omission of the *fermata*, but also removes the syncopation from the entrance of the upper voice, creating the impression of a 5/4 bar. Connected with this tendency is the tradition, surely mistaken, of beginning the final outburst of the Passacaglia (‘with force’) at a suddenly faster tempo, making it necessary to disobey Britten's instruction that it is only necessary to slow down in the last bar preceding *Slow and quiet*.

Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, p 331.

In *Peter Grimes*, too, the phrygian mode is used to represent the sea.

I would like to thank Jonathan Leathwood for his considerable contribution to this article, particularly with reference to the analytical points discussed. The text has undergone much transformation since the first draft, in the light of a lively dialogue during which Jonathan shared a number of his personal insights into the piece. Without this input, the article would be very different.

comes at the intrusion of the ghostly *pizzicato* passage at the climax of the second wave. It is evident that for Britten, the night, the past, and the sea represent a complex of creative sources. All three are metaphors for the submerged, for the unconscious in its different aspects. They are hard to separate, for that is a property of unconscious content. If in this article, I have been purposefully partial by exploring *Nocturnal's* relationship with Dowland and the past, it is because even in a dream, themes must be isolated to be discussed. They may be put to test in the next playing of the piece: then the dream is endured once more, new resonances sound, and new themes may emerge, to be considered later, in the light of day.



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Come, heavy Sleep

JOHN DOWLAND
*The First Booke of Songes
or Ayres (1597), N° 20*

The musical score is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a voice line (treble clef) and a lute line (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are written below the voice line.

System 1:

Voice: Come, hea - - - vy Sleep, the im - age of true Death, And close up

System 2 (starting at measure 4):

Voice: these my wea - - - - ry weep - ing eyes, Whose spring of tears doth stop my vi - tal breath,

System 3 (starting at measure 8):

Voice: And tears my heart with Sor - row's sigh-swoll'n cries. Come and pos - sess my tir - ed thought - worn soul,

System 4 (starting at measure 11):

Voice: That liv - ing dies, that liv - ing dies, that liv - ing dies, till thou on me be stole.

Come shadow of my end: and shape of rest,
Allied to death, child to this black fast night,
Come thou and charm these rebels in my breast,
Whose waking fancies doth my mind affright.
O come sweet sleep, come or I die forever,
Come ere my last sleep, come or come never.

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