



Britten's 'Nocturne'

Author(s): Imogen Holst

Source: *Tempo*, New Series, No. 50, (Winter, 1959), pp. 14-22

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944012>

Accessed: 21/07/2008 10:14

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

statement is taken up by the lower strings, the 'ground' being transferred to the horns, in the middle of the texture, and the soloist mounting still higher. The chorale-like chords are a constant factor throughout most of this expansion. The climax comes with the seventh rotation of the 'ground', which is played in octaves by the soloist, a further 'variation' appearing on the lower strings. Such description inevitably reads heavily, but it may give some idea of the melodic richness and resourcefulness of this very remarkable movement.

Like that earlier masterpiece, the Piano Quintet, the Violin Concerto cannot be placed in any particular category. The Piano Concerto, however, is predominantly neo-classical, somewhat in the manner of the outer movements of the Ninth Symphony. A witty, crisp invention, not so much parody as a thing of merriment and high spirits, is happily sustained, and in the slow movement there is a simple, unaffected tenderness. The solo part requires agility and a mastery of such fundamentals as scales, arpeggios, rapid successions of octaves, etc., but it is the sort of music which a young player of skill and spirit will surely delight in—and at the same time it will delight his audience.

BRITTEN'S 'NOCTURNE'

by Imogen Holst

Britten's *Nocturne* for tenor and small orchestra was written during August and September 1958 and was first performed at the Leeds Festival on October 16th, with Peter Pears singing the solo and Rudolph Schwarz conducting. The first London performance, conducted by the composer, was given on January 30th, 1959, at Friends' House, Euston Road, as a tribute to the memory of the late Erwin Stein.

The work is an unbroken sequence of eight songs by different poets. Each poem is concerned with some aspect of sleep or dreams: this single thread of thought draws the separate verses together with a tenuous link in spite of sudden and extreme contrasts of mood and style.

Musically there is nothing in the least tenuous about the links that bind the songs into a single whole. The *Nocturne* owes its unity to the fact that it has the right notes in the right places. As Peter Pears once said of Britten's *Serenade*: 'the skilled use of planned sound becomes the basis on which the imagination can build'.¹

The form of the *Serenade* and the *Nocturne*—a form in which Britten is so assuredly at home—is one that he has inherited from Purcell. He himself has described² this 'form which Purcell perfected—the continuous movement made up of independent, short sections mysteriously linked by subtle contrasts of key, mood, and rhythm', and he has spoken of the 'firm and secure musical structure which can safely hold together and make sense of one's wildest fantasies'.

If the unity of the *Nocturne* is far more astonishing than the unity of the

¹ *Benjamin Britten*. Ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, Rockliff, 1952.

² Quoted by permission of the Oxford University Press from *Henry Purcell, Essays on his Music*. Ed. Imogen Holst. To be published in March, 1959.

Serenade it is because Britten has had fifteen years between the two works in which to increase his skill in planning his sounds. It has been enthralling, during these years, to hear his music moving further and further away from the conditions where the word 'sequence' means 'one thing after another'.

In the *Nocturne* there is no room for ordinary time-by-the-clock, which means that there is no need to set each new scene. Without any suggestion of incongruity the mewling of the cats on the roof in a minor Elizabethan comedy merges into Wordsworth's terror at the evils of the French Revolution. The result is overwhelming. As listeners, we are at long last growing out of the old habit of waiting for a bridge passage to carry us from one idea to the next. And there is nothing in the least exhausting in the process. Britten's own problems of construction may be getting more and more difficult to solve as the years go by, but his music is becoming clearer than ever to listen to.

The *Nocturne* begins with a setting of a poem from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*:

On a poet's lips I slept
 Dreaming like a love-adept
 In the sound his breathing kept . . .

Muted strings, *divisi*, breathe gently in and out as they weave their quiet texture (Ex. 1):



This is the murmuring undercurrent that links the 'shapes that haunt thought's wildernesses' in the contrasting poems of the *Nocturne*. The 'shapes', having been created by poets, are more vividly real than anything to be seen in ordinary daylight; we become aware of their immortality in a phrase that is quoted throughout the work (Ex. 2):

Ex. 2



Each song has its own characteristic solo instrument for obbligato. The first dreamlike shape to emerge is Tennyson's Kraken:

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
 Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
 His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
 The Kraken sleepeth.

The solo bassoon's ostinato brings the strange phantom startlingly to life (Ex. 3):



At the end of the short poem, when 'the latter fire' has brought about the end of the world and the Kraken has risen to the surface to die, the thin, high, insubstantial notes of the bassoon sound like nothing that has ever been heard before.

There is a murmur of legato twelve-sixteen from the muted strings, and then the harp, in the rippling obbligato of a slow waltz, brings in the new dream-figure from Coleridge's *The Wanderings of Cain*:

Encinctured with a twine of leaves,
That leafy twine his only dress!
A lovely Boy was plucking fruits
By moonlight, in a wilderness.

The song has a characteristically simple and expressive tune (Ex. 4):

Ex. 4

It was a cili-mate where, they say, The night is
more be-loved than day. etc.

The lyrical lightness of the texture is overshadowed by anxiety, for the lovely boy is Enoch, the son of Cain, and it is the guilty raving of his father that has driven him out, alone, into the bright moonlight. The last anxious question 'Has he no friend, no loving mother near?' is still sounding when the scene changes: the strings keep up a murmuring background of their gentle breathing while 'midnight's bell goes ting, ting, ting, ting, ting' on the low, deliberate quavers of the solo horn. Middleton's 'Night Song' from 'Blurt, Master Constable' is concerned with the various noises made by the birds and beasts at midnight. The horn changes, in the twinkling of an eye, from a dog to a nightingale, from an owl to a raven, excelling himself in the whirring hop of the cricket. 'The nibbling mouse is not asleep, But he goes peep, peep, peep, peep, peep' says Middleton, and tenor and horn enjoy their duet as they delicately pick their way from one high staccato semiquaver to the next in friendly and unanxious rivalry. (If this is 'naive', Britten is in good company, for it is as naive as Purcell's 'Tune all your strings!' which sends the violins busily scraping their way across open E's and A's and D's and G's; and as naive as Bach's rising and falling arpeggios for 'ascendit in coelum' and 'descendit de coelis'.)

Middleton's cats, perpetually crying 'mew, mew, mew,' are immortalized by being given Ex. 2 to mew on. As the last 'mew' dies away, we realize that the low repeated notes of midnight's bell have become transformed into the nightmare sound of the distant drum-beats of an approaching army on the march:

But that night
When on my bed I lay, I was most mov'd
And felt most deeply in what world I was.

It is the world of Paris during the Revolution; and the youthful Wordsworth

This image shows a page of a handwritten musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Nocturne*. The score is written on five systems of staves. The top system includes a vocal line with the lyrics "shoyle wild emere" and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the vocal line with "He will wild him down to glow the late reflector" and the piano accompaniment. The third system continues the vocal line with "in illum me yellow hies the w- y hor." and the piano accompaniment. The score is written in a clear, legible hand, with various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings (e.g., *ppp*, *p*) visible. The paper shows signs of age, with some discoloration and a large, faint scribble on the right side of the page.

A page of the MS. sketch for Britten's *Nocturne*

of the earliest version of the *Prelude* is feeling the 'substantial dread' of the timpani obbligato (Ex. 5):



At the lines

The horse is taught his manage, and the wind
Of heaven wheels round and treads in his own steps,

the strings rear and whirl: the nightmare semiquavers of the chromatic timpani come closer and closer with their deafening crescendo; in the sudden silence the warning voice cries to the whole city, 'Sleep no more!' Relentless hammer-strokes beat out with immense deliberation the notes that were once heard as midnight's bell: the sound gradually quietens as the horror of desolation is transformed to the slow, regular pulse of the funeral dirge of Wilfred Owen's lament for the war-victims of 1914-18:

She sleeps on soft last breaths; but no ghost looms
Out of the stillness of her palace wall,
Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms.

Dry pizzicato strings keep their unvarying tread to the mournful obbligato of the solo cor anglais (Ex. 6):



It is from Bach that this lament has learnt to balance such poignant expressiveness with such intense calm (Ex. 7):

Ex. 7

The shades keep down which well might roam her hall.

The quiet foot-fall comes closer than the beating of the heart and gradually fades until it melts into the muted opening of Ex. 1. There is a faint echo of midnight's bell, and then suddenly the solo flute cascades into the quietness with Keats' 'wild, thrilling liquidity of dewy piping':

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
What is more soothing than the pretty hummer
That stays one moment in an open flower,
And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?

The solo clarinet joins the flute; they toss phrases to each other, twisting them inside out and upside down with the rapid cross-rhythm of close imitation, while the singer lifts each question into the air with a carefree grace. There is

nothing to cast a shadow over the happiness, yet the impact of the song is most moving. Is it perhaps because we know that in the long poem 'Sleep and Poetry', from which the song's few lines are taken, the twenty-two-year-old Keats cries: 'O for ten years!' and gets less than five? It is more likely that it is because the timing and placing of the notes are so exactly right that, as often with Mozart, the quick movement seems even more poignant than the slow ones that have gone before it.

With the last two lines of the song the music returns to the opening of the *Nocturne* and we hear Ex. 2 as

the morning blesses
Thee for enlivening all the cheerful eyes
That glance so brightly at the new sun-rise.

The solo instruments, that have so far remained silent after their own songs, now enter in sustained harmonies, forming a chorus to the last song, a setting of the Shakespeare sonnet, 'When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see'.

The strings are now in unison, their slow, continuous quavers moving from one octave to another and carrying the voice from phrase to phrase (Ex. 8):



The working out of the paradox of 'darkly bright' and 'bright in dark' is a summing-up of all that has gone before. It reconciles the different moods of anxiety and nightmare and desolation, bringing a sense of confidence to the dreamer. Every detail helps, particularly the inevitable continuity of those expressive but strongly marked quavers; and the *Nocturne* is rounded off with a stillness that gives courage to meet the new sunrise.

STRAWINSKY'S PERFORMANCE OF 'AGON': A REPORT

by Hans Keller

There is criticism and there is reporting, or at any rate there ought to be. I do not mean the kind of thing we read in the newspapers, where writers criticize things they have heard and report things they haven't, in order to conceal the fact. Thus, as criticism and reportage are understood today, the former is the more responsible task, but it should really be the other way round whenever the facts are more important than the critic's opinions, which is not seldom. At the same time, opinions do enjoy greater popularity with both the reader and the critic himself: they are easier to get for either. The unpopular truth is