Benjamin Britten and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

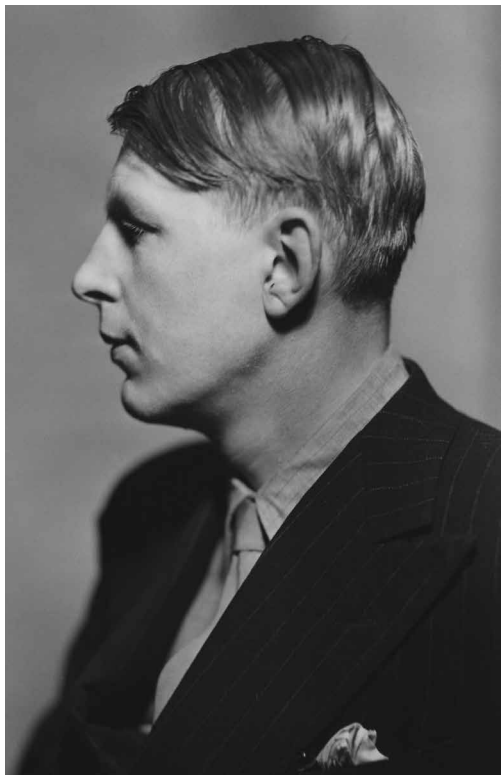
George Caird
Birmingham Conservatoire, England

In this second of two articles (first article see *The Double Reed* Vol. 29, No.3) George Caird discusses the literary and artistic influences on the *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*, Op 49 and how these have informed recorded performances.

Panthaios, c. 520BC. Pottery, black-figured hydria from Attica, discovered in Naples: *Dionysos with satyrs and maenads; on the shoulder, chariots and animals*. © The Trustees of The British Museum.

What led Benjamin Britten to turn to a classical poet as his muse in composing the *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op 49*? It is not surprising that such a literary composer as Britten should draw on the classics, but to use Ovid's *Metamorphose*s as inspiration for a solo instrumental work is surely original in itself. Paul Kildea (1999, 36-53) discusses Britten's growing literary understanding in the 1930's and 1940's especially under the important influence of W.H. Auden and cites examples of the composer's wide-ranging reading during that time. This literary awareness also fuelled the sense of 'otherness', shared with Auden, which separated such artists from society. Auden himself made use of classical mythology to illustrate the pain and separation of the artist:

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position: how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;.....



Portrait of W.H. Auden, 1937 by Howard Coster. National Portrait Gallery, London.

> In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
> But for him it was not an important failure, the sun shone
> As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
> Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.
> (Auden 1940, 746)

Boris Ford (1993/6, xii) also makes the point that poetry mattered greatly to the composer: 'Rosamund Strode has said that he never travelled anywhere without packing an anthology'. It could be, then, that Britten had his copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with him when he visited Vienna at the beginning of April 1951, six weeks before the first performance of the *Metamorphoses,* to perform there with Peter Pears. The Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh has two copies of *The Selected Works of Ovid* in the *Everyman* series (Golding 1943).

In fact, Peter Pears was himself a strong literary influence on the composer. Pears was a classical scholar at Lancing and, despite an early departure from Oxford University, had a lifelong interest in the classics, poetry and literature. Even at school he had become aware that his emotional development had resonances with classical thought: 'I realised, too, that the love I had discovered belonged to Classical times of Greece rather than to Christianity of today' (Headington 1992, 15).

This remarkable comment by Pears points to two important themes running through Britten's life and work: the Christian tradition and classical mythology. Donald Mitchell (Palmer 1984, 211) has seen Britten as 'a peculiarly thematic composer. I am not thinking of the fertility of his melody or of the prominent role that themes and thematic organisation play in his music, but of themes in a broader sense – concerns, commitments, attitudes and sources of stimulation which have been long-standing pre-occupations and which are variously reflected in his art'. Graham Elliott (2006, 38-40) draws on this view in his exposition of Britten's 'spiritual dimension', further referring to Auden's idea of 'parable-art' as a major form in Britten's output:

> There must always be two kinds of art, escape art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love.
> (Auden 1935)

Elliott makes a strong case for the Christian theme running through so many of Britten's works from his liturgical music to the Canticles, Church Parables and *War Requiem.* But an equal case can be made for classical mythology which pervaded Britten's work from *Young Apollo* (1939) to *Phaedra* (1975).

Arnold Whittall (1999, 96) makes the point that Britten had already written incidental music for Edward Sackville-West's radio play, *The Rescue*, based on Homer's *Odyssey* in 1943, providing a precedent for his accepting Eric Crozier's idea for the opera, *The Rape of Lucretia* (1947): '... offering as it did a small-scale yet strongly dramatic narrative in which a virtuous, sensitive individual is traumatically violated and driven to self-destruction…. Yet Britten's acceptance of the Lucretia story is logical enough, given its direct association with his favoured theme of the

E.M. Forster and Benjamin Britten in a boat at Aldeburgh, 1949 by Kurt Hutton.
Hulton Getty Picture Collection.

conflict between the vulnerable and the vicious…'. Ronald Duncan confirms, too, that Britten was interested in classical literature in searching for universality: 'What is important is that it (Lucretia) has become a European legend. A legend contains universal truth, whereas history at its best is often only accurate in fact' (Duncan 1981, 58). In the light of Graham Elliott's work on the spiritual dimension it is remarkable that, in *Lucretia,* Britten chose to place a classical story within a Christian framework.

Another important literary influence on Britten was the great Cambridge novelist, E.M.Forster who inspired the creation of *Peter Grimes* in the 1940's and who was to be a major collaborator in the creation of *Billy Budd.* Work on this second grand opera brought the two men into close contact from 1948 onwards as first the libretto and then the opera itself took shape. This was an extremely taxing process for Britten and at times brought periods of doubt and depression about the project. Forster, together with his co-librettist, Eric Crozier, seems to have provided strength in the creation of the libretto and no more so than with the character of Captain Vere. Forster's renowned Prologue for Vere could provide a clue to Britten's interest in antiquity, and hence Ovid. Coming at the very beginning of the opera, as 'Captain Vere is revealed as an old man' the Prologue sets the scene for this great story of Good and Evil as exemplified by Billy Budd and Claggart:

> I am an old man who has experienced much. I have been a man of action and fought for my King and Country at sea. I have also read books and studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truths. Much good has been shown to me and much evil. The evil has sometimes been absolute. And the good has never been perfect.
> (Forster 1949, Act 1, Prologue)

Vere's studying is further illustrated in Act I, Scene 2 where the Captain is found sitting in his cabin, reading. He sings: 'Plutarch – the Greeks and Romans - their troubles and ours are the same. May their virtues be ours and their courage! O God, grant me light to guide us all' (Britten, Forster, Crozier 1951). As the Greeks and Romans are referred to, the Plutarch volume is likely to be one from his *Parallel Lives* where outstanding figures from the two cultures are compared. Rex Warner (Warner 1958, 7-10) points out: 'What really interests him (Plutarch) is character, the effects of birth or education, the drama of an individual's success or failure, and the various moral reflections which can be made on these subjects'. All very apposite for the plot of *Billy Budd,* the dramatic interests of its librettists and composer and for Britten's interest in one of Plutarch's greatest predecessors, Ovid.

The reference to Plutarch does not come directly from Hermann Melville's original novella but must have been created by the librettists to flesh out the character of Captain Vere. Nonetheless, two passages in Chapter 7 are the pointers to Plutarch: '…his (Vere's) bias was toward….books treating of actual men and events no matter of what era – history, biography....' and 'but in illustrating of any point touching the stirring personages and events of the time he would be as apt to cite some historic character or incident of antiquity as he would be to cite from the moderns' (Melville 1891, 340).

Vere's erudition is in fact an extension of Melville's own character and approach to his writing. By any standards, Melville was a highly literary writer. *Billy Budd,* his last work, is full of references – to Montaigne, Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Diderot, Andrew Marvell and many more. It is almost as though Melville needed to demonstrate his immense knowledge as well as his volcanic imagination. It is important for this discourse that in the first chapter of the story, Billy is greeted on board with his travelling chest with the words 'Apollo with his portmanteau' (Melville 1891, 326), a reference to the writer's own researches in Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* which revealed that the Celtic equivalent of *Apollo*, 'Hu', was known also as *Beli* and *Budd* (Beaver 1967, 457). This is surely no coincidence and highly significant. Apollo was the god of music, poetry and medicine and the brother of Diana. He was the father of Phaeton, though he is often confused with the Sun God and with Hyperion in this respect. In relation to the sun, he often carries the name Phoebus Apollo. He took revenge on Niobe, competed in music with Pan and was compared by Ovid with the beauty of Bacchus and Narcissus. These interweaving classical themes are a strong connection between Melville, Forster, Crozier and Britten himself.

In fact, Britten had already taken inspiration from Keats' *Hyperion* in entitling his *Young Apollo* (1939) for piano and string orchestra. Keats' 'fragment' has a ravishing section in which Clymene, Phaeton's mother, makes music with a seashell. More importantly, the poem ends with Apollo being addressed by memory (Mnemosyne):

> Thou has't dreamed of me; and awaking up
> Did'st find a lyre all golden by thy side
> Whose strings touched by thy fingers, all the vast
> Unwearied ear of the whole universe
> Listen'd in pain and pleasure at the birth
> Of such new tuneful wonder. Is't not strange
> That thou should'st weep, so gifted?
> (Keats 1819, III, 61-68)

The connection between Apollo and talent is important here and it is of further note that Britten returned to the Nietsche-inspired theme of Apollo in his last great opera, *Death in Venice*. Clifford Hindley (1999, 157) traces the connection between 'the intellectual quest for formal perfection (through an Apollonian order of self-discipline) and, on the other hand, the Dionysian forces which emerge from passion and the submission to collective feeling' in Britten's portrayal of the relationship between Ascenbach and Tadzio. The relationship between the artist (Apollo/Britten) and observed intense relationships is paramount to this debate on the *Metamorphoses*.

Donald Mitchell (1979/1991, 111-134) argues that the character of Vere in *Billy Budd* is central to the most profound theme in the opera: 'two conflicting types of authority are contained within the tormented psyche of one human being – his (Claggart's) antagonist, Vere'. This theme, together with Claggart's and Vere's appreciation of beauty (Billy Budd) underpins the development of this great opera which reaches its climax in the famous 'Interview chords' illustrating the unspoken interaction between Vere and Billy before the latter's death. This musical stroke of genius, Mitchell points out, allows 'the composer, in releasing Vere's voice from captivity, from its suppression, also releases his own; as Vere speaks to Billy, so does Britten speak to us.' It could be argued that, in the *Metamorphoses,* Britten is being Vere-like and speaking to us on behalf of classical mythology.

These insights set the scene for Britten's departure

from working on *Billy Budd* in the summer of 1951 to prepare for the Festival and particularly to write the solo oboe work for **Joy Boughton**. This, the composer probably did after the premiere on 1 May of his and Imogen Holst's edition of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* though the diary entry for March with a sketch for the opening of *Niobe* indicates the composer was thinking about the work at that time (Caird, 2006). Here again Britten had been working with a libretto drawn from classical times with a reference to Ovid's 'mini-Aenead' in the *Metamorphoses* (Raeburn 2004, XIV, 78-81). It is remarkable that this section in Ovid contains the reference to Scylla and Charybdis, the monster and whirlpool at the straits of Messina which Britten apparently insisted on incorporating into Vere's climactic aria in *Billy Budd* when the captain has to condemn Billy to death (Britten et al 1951, Act II, 73). Even more remarkable is the fact that in September 1950, Britten and Pears had taken a holiday in Sicily and wrote a postcard from Messina to Erwin and Sophie Stein (Britten and Pears 1950).

The enormous effort put in by Britten to composing music to define the extraordinary relationships between the principal characters in *Billy Budd* seems to have led the composer to look at relationships as portrayed by eternal classical myths. Certainly, the *Six Metamorphoses* is a work in which the composer looks at human relationships and thereby at 'eternal'truths'. Whilst Ovid (Innes 1955, 29) sets out to 'tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind' his great work describes a vast range of human experience from the creation of the world in Book I to the deification of the Emperor Augustus in Book XV. This final book contains the magnificent philosophical utterances attributed by Ovid to Pythagoras including the author's *raison d'etre* for metamorphosis:

> My vessel is launched on the boundless main and my sails are spread
> to the wind! In the whole world there is nothing that stays unchanged.
> All is in flux. Any shape that is formed is constantly shifting.
> Time itself flows steadily by in perpetual motion.
> (Raeburn 2004, XIV, 176ff)

This understanding may have influenced Britten musically in his approach to melodic development (Cook 1987, 253-9). Nevertheless, the relationships between gods, heroes and mortals play a significant role in the *Metamorphoses* and Britten will have been attracted to this aspect of Ovid's writing. Its connection to Plutarch should be noted, not least in the remarkable sweep of stories in Books IX and X from that of Byblis who falls in love with her twin brother and Iphis who was a girl brought up as a boy and later betrothed to a girl, through to the magnificent songs of Orpheus (again a musical god to influence the composer), including the stories of Pygmalion and Myrrha whose incestuous love for her own father gets special attention from Ovid. Melville himself would have approved of Britten's attraction to these tales, as he peppers his writing with references, in *Billy Budd* for instance, writing 'With mankind', he (Vere) would say, 'forms, measured forms, are everything: and this is the import couched in the story of Orpheus with his lyre spellbinding the wild denizens of the wood' (Melville 1891, 404).

However, Britten seems to have concentrated on characters signifying particular relationships for his own purpose and these are taken from Books I (*Pan* and *Syrinx*), II (*Phaeton*), III (*Echo and Narcissus*), IV (*Bacchus and the daughters of Minyas*), V (*Arethusa*) and VI (*Niobe*). It should be made clear that Britten's copy of the *Selected Works of Ovid* (Golding 1943, 159-230) contains a fine choice of Ovid's writing in translation, beginning with the moving Elegy on 'how the poet was constrained by Cupid to write of Love rather than War'. The metamorphoses in this volume represent a rich selection from the original fifteen books in the renowned translation in rhyming iambic heptameters by the 16th Century Arthur Golding. The selection contains 'purple passages' and notably pulls out the six stories in Britten's work in close order: *Pan and Syrinx, Phaeton, Echo and Narcissus, Bacchus, Arethusa* and then *Niobe* as part of the story of *Latona.* Nevertheless, many stories (e.g. *Andromeda)* are rejected for this purpose.

Britten's cycle opens with the god Pan, known for his lustfulness, who is depicted dealing with his unrequited love for Syrinx. Phaeton represents a father-son relationship whilst the third metamorphosis depicts a mother's grief for her stricken children. The most complex story in the cycle is that of Bacchus which appears to concentrate here on the influence of Bacchus on women who are or are not transformed by his festivities (Dalby 2003, 119-121). Narcissus' story represents an unrequited love of Echo for the beautiful and innocent boy, Narcissus, and then his own downfall as he falls in love with his own image. Finally the cycle returns to the boy-girl relationship here eternally converting Arethusa to water as she tries and fails to escape the attentions of Alpheus.

Pan's connection with music makes an obvious

choice as an opener for this cycle of relationships. It is interesting to note that the second story to include this god in the *Metamorphoses* (Raeburn 2004, XI, 140-177), involves the music competition presided over by Tmolus, between Pan and Apollo which is lost by the pipe-playing Pan in favour of the lyre of Apollo. Could Pan have some of that 'otherness' which separates him from the higher ranking gods of Mount Olympus? Elaine Fantham (Fantham 2004, 51-60) argues that mortal artists were always in conflict with the jealousy of the gods and here the lesser divine (Pan) would be sure to suffer against the superiority of the great Apollo, especially as it was also possible to sing whilst playing the lyre where Pan could only play.

Certainly, Bacchus seems to have that 'otherness' as he is depicted in many sources as coming from Asia Minor and outside the Greek conciousness (Dalby 2003, 71-79). But in *Phaeton* and *Niobe,* could Britten wish deliberately and in sequence to express aspects of the father-child and mother-child relationships and thereby celebrate his own relationships with his parents? The beautifully written *Niobe* could easily be a reversed lament for his own mother perhaps. The story of Narcissus is a most subtle one but the self-awareness of beauty, a central theme in *Billy Budd,* must have been a sure choice for this collection. And finally Arethusa who first makes her appearance advising Ceres that her daughter, abducted by Pluto, is indeed in the underworld.

It should also be noted that Britten may have been influenced, especially through Pears' interest in art, by the many interpretations of these ancient stories by artists through the ages. The magnificent pictures of Bacchic ritual and revelry as seen in stone carvings such as the Nereid Monument in the British Museum and countless early earthenware jars as typified by the Attic jar signed by Panthaios (no date) must surely give pictorial inspiration to this movement in the *Six Metamorphoses.* Equally Poussin's glorious paintings of Pan worship and Bacchic festivals (Poussin 1625-7) serve as excellent examples from the 17th century and probably known to Britten (Fantham 2004, 133-151). Christopher Allen (2002, 336-367) traces the influence of Ovid as a 'vital source – a fount of inspiration' for artists through the ages, from Pollaiuolo's early and restrained *Apollo and Daphne* (Pollaiuolo), through the more flamboyant works of Bernini, Poussin, Botticelli, Titian (notably *The Death of Actaeon)* and Rubens to the nineteenth century where English artists, George Watts' *Minotaur* for example, exert much influence. Mention should be made of the pre-Raphaelites and especially Rossetti, whose poem and painting, *The Blessed Damozel* inspired Debussy profoundly. The link between Debussy's *Syrinx* has already been made (Caird 2006) and the pre-Raphaelite connection will be discussed more in connection with Bacchus.

In addition, the influence of the visual arts should be mentioned in connection with symbolism. Another important dimension in the selection of characters for the *Six Metamorphoses* involves the elements. From the beginning of classical times the four elements of fire, air, earth and water pervaded philosophical thinking. It is natural that Ovid's masterpiece reflects the underlying importance of these elements in his writing. The Pythagorean section of Book XV contains a defining passage on the elements which has direct relevance to the elemental themes within the stories of Britten's work:

> This law of impermanence also applies to what we call elements.
> Pay attention, and I shall explain the changes they pass through.
> The world eternal contains four bodies which generate matter.
> Two of them, earth and water, are heavy and gravitate downwards;
> The other two, air and fire, which is even purer, are weightless
> And tend to make their way up, if nothing is pressing them down.
> Although these elements occupy different positions in space,
> They form the source and the end of all matter.
> (D. Raeburn 2004, Book XV, 236ff)

Here in Britten's selection there is a broad spread of elemental influence: Pan and Syrinx are representative of earth and water, Phaeton of air and fire quenched by water, Niobe of water (tears) and earth, Narcissus of water and earth and Arethusa of water. Bacchus is surely very earthy but his story involves the flight of bats and thereby air.

Throughout the history of art, the elements have been much used symbolically with air representing spirit, fire representing passion and not least in the use of the fountain as a symbol for love. The overall wateriness of the *Metamorphoses,* another connection with *Billy Budd*, is magnificently consummated in the fountain images of *Arethusa*. Matilde Battistini (2005) draws on a wide bibliography to illustrate the major archetypal symbolic themes in art. For example, the mountain is often seen to be the meeting place of heaven and earth and thus the home of deities (as in Mount Olympus). Niobe's metamorphosis

Architrave frieze, *Men rushing forward to a festival*, from the Nereid Monument at Xanthos, 380 BC. © The Trustees of The British Museum.

might have a more profound connection in this respect. The mirror (as in Narcissus' story), however, has two conflicting interpretations being an image of lust, vanity and pride but also of inner knowledge. This double meaning offers us a choice of interpretation for *Narcissus.* The symbol of the fountain is of great importance in art usually representing the source of life and perpetual renewal. For Ovid and Britten, this symbol involving water is of the greatest significance, starting with Syrinx and culminating in the eternal cascades of *Arethusa.*

Lucia Impelluso (2003) gives specific examples of all Britten's characters in art. Pan is depicted in Annibale Caracci's *Pan and Diana* (c 1597-1604) and Rubens' copy of Jan Brueghel's *Pan and Syrinx* (no date). In this work note should be made of Pan's fierce and savage face. The spectacular *Fall of Phaeton* by Sebastiano Ricci (1703-4) is one of a number of cited portrayals of this story. Abraham Bloemaert's *The Death of Niobe's Children* (1591) shows Apollo and Diana dispatching the seven sons and seven daughters. Apollo is never far away in these stories. There are many depictions of *Bacchus* including famous images by Caravaggio (1596-7), Bellini (1505-10) and the sensational *The Triumph of Bacchus* by Caracci (1597-1604). *Narcissus* receives much attention, too, notably from Caravaggio (1599-1600) and Poussin (1625-7). Arethusa, whilst less acknowledged by artists, receives ravishing attention from Arthur Bowen Davies (1901).

It is debatable how much notice Britten may have taken of such artistic sources in his instrumental music, though Graham Elliott (2006, 123) reports that the composer was inspired by a capital in Autun cathedral in the creation of the *Burning Fiery Furnace.* Donald Mitchell (1993, 111) also refers to Britten's strong pictorial image of the music he wrote especially in opera: ' 'Concrete in its statements and ….positive in its effects'. A key phrase (from John Piper), that, because I am quite sure it precisely reflects how Britten 'saw' his operas while he was composing them – in very considerable visual detail…'.

The images used by Britten are, in some cases, clearly intelligible from his music but in other cases it is harder to ascertain the level at which the music is being influenced by the literary or artistic image. It is important to note that whilst some characters such as Niobe have a single entry in the Ovid classic, others such as Bacchus are part of more than one story and it is difficult to discern whether Britten has used all of Ovid's references, although Britten's copy of Ovid does imply a more limited range of reference. Another complexity is that Ovid himself made use of earlier versions for many of his stories, notably from Homer and Virgil but also from other writers like Aischylos and Euripides. There was, then, a passed-on tradition of stories which influenced everyone's knowledge of classical mythology and which Britten himself may have drawn on from his own reading.

And so to Britten's settings of the Ovid stories and selected recorded performances of these. The intention here is to discuss different possible interpretations and even meanings of Britten's music in relation to the stories themselves without necessarily arriving at a 'right' version. It could be that the arguments put forward in this article point in a certain direction, but it would be undesirable for this to stifle interpretative invention but rather to encourage even more invention by performers. Koen van Slogteren (1990, 1992) stands

Nicolas Poussin, 1636. *The Triumph of Pan*. National Gallery, London.

out as a performer and writer who supports the idea of researching Ovid as an essential route to interpretation of the *Metamorphoses* presenting the choice between an informed interpretation and a freer reading based on imagination alone.

There are a great many very fine performances available and this writer has been astonished at the quality of playing and imagination. Two performances on alto and tenor saxophone (Bergeron 1996 and Spaneas, no date) are interesting in demonstrating the music's possibilities especially in relation to tonal colour and range. Otherwise the performances considered here are all by oboists. The examples given, however, are chosen when a performer apparently makes a specific narrative point. In this respect it would be true to say that some performances are more significant than others as the originality of the ideas presented are worthy of note. Metronome marks have been used only as indicators of speed; speeds are either captured from the first bar or as a 'mean' of the general tempo of a particular performance. This is because so much of the music demands rubato, however slight.

Pan receives four entries in the *Metamorphoses*, but it is the first of these in Book I which seems to be at the heart of the first of Britten's pieces. The story is well-known: Syrinx was a particularly beautiful wood-nymph living in Arcadia and a follower of the goddess Diana. She was spotted one day by Pan, the god of the woods and fields, who was immediately attracted to her and chased her to the banks of the River Ladon. Like Diana, Syrinx observed chastity and rejected Pan's advances eventually calling on the nymphs of the stream to transform her into marsh reeds. Pan sighed with disappointment but then noticed the sound of the wind whistling in the reeds making a 'thin, low, plaintive sound'. He was captivated by this strange music: 'And so, when he had bound some reeds of unequal length with a coating of wax, a syrinx – the name of his loved one – stayed in his hands' (Raeburn 2004, I, 699-712). Phil McLaughlin (no date) points out that the story makes a pun when describing Pan searching for *thalamos* (sexual union) and being left only with *calamos* (reeds).

Britten's music seems directly descriptive of this story although opinions differ as to detail. It is not even clear whether Britten intended his metamorphosis to be the change of Syrinx into a reed, the reed into a pipe, the pipe in to music or, perhaps, all three. The question of what kind of instrument Pan used is an enigma for Britten's work as the likelihood is that it was the Pan Pipes and not an oboe. Britten's use of the oboe is a good example of the more general approach to the interpretation of antiquity taken by the composer (Caird 2006; Ardito 1999).

The opening of *Pan* is problematic as it doesn't necessarily depict anything. It's open air feel, marked *Senza misura,* might indicate a vision of the open fields, hills and woods of which Pan was god and many interpretations seem to take this as their starting point. But note should be taken of the third Pan story in Ovid (Raeburn 2004, XIV, 516ff), quoted in the Golding translation, where Diomedes chances upon Pan's cave which 'once had belonged to nymphs. One day these nymphs were chased from their cave in a fright by a local shepherd, who scared them at first with his sudden arrival'. This story appears to have given Britten the idea of Pan as a scary being who was prepared to jump out and frighten you (Craxton, no date). This view is supported by Karl Kerényi (1951/1974) whose *The Gods of the Greeks* may have been known to Britten.

Whatever the reading, the opening is more emotive than descriptive and is the first example of music which requires an interpretative decision by the performer. The *Senza misura* marking needs some thought, too, as the pulse fluctuates to create the unsettled effect of this quixotic deity. It is possible to interpret *Pan* as continuous ebbs and flows of 'ping-pong ball rhythm' and its reverse. The shifts between major and minor (bars 1 and 3, for example) also point to a divided personality between overt confidence and self-pity, the two sides of Pan's contribution to this unrequited relationship.

The second section from bar 6 is often thought to depict the playing on the newly fashioned reed-pipe and the growing confidence of the god with his technical prowess. Britten's letter to Friedrich Krebs (1957) endorses this idea of experimentation without giving a literal meaning to the section:

> You are right about the Pipe of Pan. I have no clear pictorial image for the repeated A sharps, except perhaps that they show hesitation. I am sorry they are ponderous on your oboe; the original oboist (Joy Boughton) was able on hers to make them very light and short.
> (Britten 1957)

Another approach to the interpretation of *Pan* is given by Koen van Slogteren (1990) who provides a detailed account of the story within the music written. Here the opening section (bars 1 to 5) describes Pan's pursuit of Syrinx, with the middle section from bar 6 depicting Syrinx resisting his advances.

van Slogteren makes the brilliant suggestion that Syrinx' metamorphosis takes place in bar 8 where an incomplete rising whole-tone scale from B♭' to a♯" lacking g♯" is miraculously and quietly completed by the last three notes in that bar. Only in bar 9 and 10 does Pan make the pipes by binding reeds together and it is in bar 11 and 12 that he actually plays it. The last three notes depict Syrinx' final rejection. Conversely, **Richard Weigall**,[1] thinks this last bar is Pan's humorous thumbing of the nose at the whole affair.

The first broadcast performance of *Pan* by Joy Boughton (Boughton 1952), with an approximate quaver pulse of 100 certainly gives over a sense of urgency at the start which could be interpreted as 'scary' and this quality is also in the performances of **Sarah Francis** (Francis, 1964) and **Janet Craxton**

Maurice Bourgue. Lebrecht Picture Library.

(Craxton, 1976) both of whom adopt a similar tempo. **Heinz Holliger** (1991) adopts nearly as quick a tempo but makes a highly expressive opening resulting in an almost dotted rhythm for the first two notes. **Hansjörg Schellenberger** (1998) however opens the piece at around quaver = 64 with a much more pastoral quality in the playing. This is mirrored by longer pauses than in the first three performances cited. **Maurice Bourgue** (Bourgue, no date) also takes a very pastoral view at quaver = 72 with even longer pauses to highlight spectacular dynamic control. His reading of *Pan,* lasting 2' 36", highlights the difference of approach as it takes over one minute longer than Boughton's version. **Nancy Ambrose King** (1999) also adopts a spacious approach enhanced by a reverberant acoustic. **Gordon Hunt** (Hunt, 1997) takes a middle course between the urgency of Boughton, Francis, Holliger and Craxton and the later more pastoral readings, starting spaciously but moving through the phrases. **Simon Dent**'s (1998) performance of the *Metamorphoses* begins with a slow and pastoral reading of *Pan* emphasising sonority throughout as does **John Mack** (1990) who makes use of a reverberant acoustic to enhance the pastoral effect. **Douglas Boyd**'s equally pastoral performance (1994) makes distinctive use of Britten's 'hairpins' to great dramatic effect.

Both Boyd and **Nicholas Daniel** (1994, 1997) begin the second section with cautious tension in seemingly invoking Pan's amazement at the sounds he is making or, for van Slogteren, in Syrinx' escape from Pan's advances. The wildness of Pan's improvisation is quixotically captured by Daniel in his renowned performance from the BBC Proms (1997) where the vast acoustic of the Royal Albert Hall seems to lend considerable atmosphere to the whole work. Holliger (1997), too, creates great character through pointing of the rhythms in the middle section arriving on a plaintive harmonic a♯", so beautifully quiet. This performance, live from the Barbican Hall in London is superbly effective in the recorded acoustic. The use of more resonant acoustics is noticeably advantageous in some performances, for instance that of Richard Weigall (1998).

The two bars of recapitulation at bars 9 and 10 present performers with a wonderfully expressive opportunity. Clearly marked at different dynamics, they mirror the opening and the lower dynamic of bar 3. **Jonathan Kelly**'s broadcast reading (1996) could be heard to capture 'pastoral' and 'reflective' emotions in these bars, whilst Holliger's performances (no date, 1991, 1997) are more 'dramatic' and 'sad'.

The *Lento ma subito accel.* passage at bar 11 receives a variety of readings, some starting slower than others. Janet Craxton makes the point of accentuating the beginnings of each group, whilst Douglas Boyd uniquely differentiates the semiquavers from the twelfth group onwards. The six staccato a♯"s have many individual interpretations, some slower and in 8, others faster and in one beat. Earlier discussion of Britten's intentions in this bar highlights this ambiguity (Caird, 2006). **Thomas Indermuhle** (1994) makes a strong point of highlighting the a♯-c♯-d motif in the penultimate bar, in keeping with **Nicholas Cook**'s reading of the piece (1987). The final bar often brings humour, though occasionally a tinge of sadness.

The epic of Phaeton is the longest single story in the *Metamorphoses* covering some 338 lines from the end of Book I and into Book II. It tells of the arrogant young boy pleading with his mother, Clymene, to prove that he is indeed the son of the Sun God, her angry

[1] Conversation with George Caird, November 2006

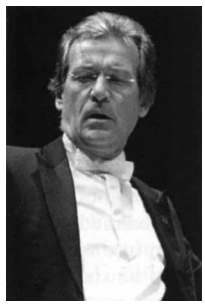
retort that he should go to his father and find out if he was not prepared to believe her and his journey to his father's magnificent palace. His father allows Phaeton any single wish to demonstrate his love for his son and this results in Phaeton's doomed request to drive the chariot of the sun for a day. His father is immediately horrified and remorseful at granting him any such wish and tries to dissuade him but nevertheless cannot go back on his promise. The story takes Phaeton on his infamous ride across the heavens resulting in total havoc and fire and Jupiter's thunderbolt causing the boy's destruction and descent into the River *Eridanus* (Britten and Golding have *Padus*).

Britten's *Phaeton* is magnificently chariot-like with the opening section conveying all the necessary vitality and danger. The sudden switches from chord to chord in this seventh-dominated movement creates tremendous visions of the hair-raising ride with crescendi hurling the boy round corners of the sky. Britten's departure from the use of slurs (Caird, 2006), confirms the composer's view of Phaeton as driven and (as in Ovid) over-confident. Koen van Slogteren (1992) sees the staccato quaver triplets as excellent illustrations of the clatter of hooves, perhaps most vividly interpreted by **Robin Canter** (1982), but goes further to view *Phaeton* as a rhythmic paradigm of adolescent *angst*. The middle section, now with slurs and quiet, gives a fairly obvious image of distance and the listener is easily persuaded to see the chariot from afar perhaps disappearing from time to time behind clouds. Britten (1957) confirms this interpretation:

> The soft C major arpeggios in Phaeton could perhaps suggest a similar movement to the beginning, but at a distance – perhaps even an echo – but something anyhow to give a sense of space.
> (Britten, 1957)

But with the final section we are definitely back in the chariot and experience first hand the final catastrophic fall into the river with bubbly re-emergence to the surface. The quiet ending implies that Britten saw the chariot and horses disappearing into the distance with only Phaeton as casualty. Britten's earlier version of this ending (Caird 2006) should be noted. This must be the case as the sun continues to travel the skies to this day. Stephen Hiramoto (Hiramoto 1999, 23-26) is right to point out that the music seems not to relate a metamorphosis save that of Phaeton being killed in his fateful fall into the river. Ovid's metamorphoses come at the end of the tale with Phaeton's grieving sisters being turned to trees and his friend, Cygnus, becoming a swan. Again, water is the abiding image.

The 'bigger picture' therefore centres on why Britten should wish to pick this theme for his cycle. As indicated, the relationship between father and son is an important theme in Ovid. Many of the stories are to do with the sexual misdemeanours of the gods and the relationships produced by the progeny of such liaisons. But the stories also demonstrate the eternal connection between mortals and gods and here Britten may be highlighting the need for us all to prove ourselves in the face of overwhelming influence and role-modelling from above. Error and disaster are common outcomes of the over-confident youth and here we have a great example of the need to learn from mistakes….before it's too late! Koen van Slogteren's psychological interpretation has much to recommend it here. As stated above, there could also be a trace of Britten wishing to include a father-son relationship in his cycle as a part of his own direct experience. And finally, if metamorphosis is important, the changes of Phateon's sisters to trees and his friend into a swan seem to be nowhere in this portrait, but, in keeping with the flow of Ovid's brilliant narration, could this grieving be the link with Niobe's fate which is the next movement in Britten's cycle? If so, a sophisticated musical story-telling is beginning to emerge. It should be noted that Britten proposed Phaeton as a subject for an opera in 1954 (Mitchell et al), another example of the composer growing his ideas on a theme over time.


Hansjörg Schellenberger

Joy Boughton's recording sets the pace for *Phaeton* at dotted crotchet = 126-132. This is interesting in the light of Britten's eventual metronome mark of 152 indicating tempo inflation in the intervening years. Certainly Schellenberger's 138 is somewhat faster and Holliger's quickest reading faster still at around 144 (Holliger, 1991). Maurice Bourgue (Bourgue, no date) tops the speed charts with a virtuosic 152, rising to 160+ for the *agitato* in a superbly technical version. **François Leleux** and Gordon Hunt also give fast tempi with even quicker readings of the *agitato* section. Nancy Ambrose King makes interesting use of hesitant starts to phrases in the first section to create a sense of danger in Phaeton's ride. In a similar vein, Sarah Francis' 1995 version gets slower at the *agitato*

successfully creating unease and tension through accentuation. A very interesting detail comes at the end of the first section in the Boughton performance where the last bar is clearly played in compound time. (Boughton 1952), a reading echoed by **Lajos Lenscés** (1978). This is not the case with Janet Craxton who recorded the work with the composer but nevertheless we have an example of two unresolved possibilities for this bar. Craxton makes great use of the dynamics in her performance with a beautifully distant middle section at a genuinely ***pp*** dynamic.

The tale of Niobe comes in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses* and, as a tale about pride follows another on the same subject in which Arachne is famously turned into a spider. Niobe is the wife of Amphion, King of Thebes, and whose playing on the lyre was a great source of pride. Again the musical connection is worthy of note and here is another link with Apollo. But Niobe's pride was especially centred on her seven sons and seven daughters: 'Yes, Niobe would have been known as the happiest mother on earth, if only she had not thought it herself' (Raeburn 2004, VI, 154). Niobe's extended and arrogant invocation to Theban women to favour her over the goddess Latona resulted in a fiery outburst. Latona needed to say little to her children, Apollo and Diana, to bring about the downfall of the house of Amphion. All fourteen children were killed by arrows, sons first then daughters and Niobe's invocation to spare her one child went unheeded. To crown it all, Amphion killed himself to overcome his own grief. The story ends with Niobe becoming more and more immobile with blood-flow ceasing. A mighty wind blows her to a mountain top where to this day her tears flow down the crag of her cheeks. The importance of this story in classical mythology is born out by its appearance at the very end of Homer's *Iliad* (Rieu 1950, XXIV, 590) when King Priam exhorts Achilles to share food despite their mutual grief. Koen van Slogteren (1992) describes the story of Niobe as an ethical struggle between 'self' and outside world.

Nancy Ambrose King

Britten's exquisite miniature captures the grief-stricken mood perfectly with the sighing pairs of slurred quavers following the long, heartfelt opening notes of phrases. There is no overt story present save for the still ending portraying the metamorphic process to rock; presumably the moment of metamorphosis takes place from bar 10 or during the *animando* second section with the final section taking one phrase to eradicate all traces of humanity through the eventual direction, *senza espressione.* Emotionally, though, this is a masterpiece, full of tenderness, reflection and grieving. The mother-child relationship and family pride are what are destroyed here and, again, the price of individuality against convention seems to be the issue. All Britten's characters share the characteristic of being beyond the pale of Mount Olympus and their stories are cautionary as a result.

Britten's 1970 metronome mark of crotchet = 60 is faster than virtually all known performances. Boughton's quaver = 92 sets a 'norm' and interpretative differences tend to focus on the amount of rubato. The earlier recordings interestingly are strict to tempo with little 'pulling around', the expression remaining in the sound. **Roy Carter** (Carter, 1995/6) provides a classically beautiful version of this movement very much in the Boughton tradition with a minimal but finely judged *animando.* Maurice Bourgue (no date) starts relatively slowly but moves forward in crotchet beats to create an expressive and free feeling. His *animando* is very marked whilst his still, dead ending produces a remarkable *senza espressione* and *niente.* **Thomas Indermuhle** has an original reading of the opening making distinctive pairings of notes under slurs. Lajos Lenscés makes the point that the metamorphosis must surely be taking place in bars 10 and 11 by a momentary placing of the ***pp*** phrase endings. Lenscés' is a generally powerful reading of the work as a whole allowing scope for beautiful comparison with important quiet passages. The slowest version belongs to François Leleux with a performance lasting nearly a minute longer than, for example, Janet Craxton. The distant beauty of his final phrase is remarkable reflecting Britten's own view that

'Niobe's lamentation becomes granite in the last four bars' (Britten, 1957).

The story of Bacchus is perhaps the most complex of Britten's choice for his cycle. Firstly, he is the one deity of the group who eventually was allowed to join the twelve principal gods of Mount Olympus (together with Hercules). Secondly, his metamorphosis is less obvious unless the act of getting drunk was what was intended. Thirdly, there are a great many stories involving Bacchus in the *Metamorphoses* including his birth as a result of an illicit liason between Jupiter and Semele, his revenge on Pentheus, his seduction of Erigone and his changing Ariadne's crown into a constellation.

Koen van Slogteren (1992) suggests that Britten's brief description of *Bacchus* is not enough to do justice to his characterisation and points to the story of Pentheus as significant (Raeburn 2004, III, 513-731). Here, the raging revelry of Bacchus' festivities involving 'mothers and wives with their sons and husbands' (ibid. 528) and 'curling pipes of animal horn and clashing cymbals' (ibid. 533) caused old Pentheus to object, hastening his death at his own mother's hands. This is a highly charged tale of liberality and reaction in the drama of the relations between men and women. Not for nothing is Bacchus' other name *Liber*.

However, the story which Britten must have had predominantly in mind is fairly easy to recognise and is the story under the title *'The Feast of Bacchus'* which appears in the *Everyman* version that Britten possessed. Moreover, in Golding's translation of lines 27-28 of Book IV we find the phrase 'the noise of gaggling women's tattling tongues and the shouting out of boys'; these are Golding's words not Britten's or Boughton's (Golding 1943, 191). This is the story of the daughters of *Minyas* and it comes at the beginning of Book IV after the stories of Bacchus' double birth to Semele and Jupiter, the extraordinary story of Teiresias and his sex-change experience revealing that women have more pleasure from sex than men, his prophecy for Narcissus, that he would grow to old age 'as long as he never knows himself' and then the rather violent stories surrounding the Lydian sailors and Pentheus' destruction to prove to the Theban women to worship Bacchus.

This is all rather important because Book IV opens with all Thebes under Bacchus' control. However, the daughters of Minyas resisted the revelries of the god whilst many other women abandoned their household duties to wear the fawnskin and carry the thyrsus and presumably to loose their 'tattling tongues'. Their invocations to *Bacchus* included 'wherever you go, young men's voices are raised in cheering, and women's voices join in the chorus, palms beat upon tambourines, hollow cymbals clash, to the sound of the boxwood's shrill piping' (Innes 1955, IV, 28-30). Again music is present in this god's festivities.

The daughters of Minyas, however stayed indoors and continued to spin at their looms. Whilst doing so, they told stories the first of which incidentally was that of Pyramus and Thisbe which Britten would encounter nine years later in working on *A Midsummer Nights' Dream*. The daughters told many stories but eventually the bacchic revelry overtook their retreat, their looms grew leaves and became covered in grapes and, finally, having slunk away into dark corners of the room they were turned into bats. Bacchus won.

Britten's *Bacchus* reflects this tale well. It is the one movement which departs from the simple ABA ternary form with its ABACA rondo-like structure. The rhythmic *Allegro pesante* opening, whilst performable as the staggering gait of a drunken reveller, is more in keeping with the ritual of Bacchic rites as described by Andrew Dalby in *The Story of Bacchus* (Dalby 2003, 81-90): 'They put on wreaths of vine and ivy, and each carried a thyrsus as they set out towards the mountains at nightfall to enact the traditional ritual that young Bacchus and his Maenads had established. The lines of ever-moving torches grew longer and reached higher towards the sky'. There is a magnificent architrave frieze in the Nereid Monument collection of the British Museum, which seems to portray such a ritual. The key thing, perhaps, for the performer of the Britten piece is the sense of movement forwards.

The second section would seem to portray the 'tattling tongues' and somewhere in the first two sections the shouting of boys might be imagined. The next critical point is the spinning as this seems to be the most plausible reason for the *Con moto* section and would naturally lead into the bats which flutter at the end interrupted by the triumphant return of bacchic revelry. If this reading is correct, the moment of metamorphosis must be the first low c and then the subsequent *sforzando* low c's as each of the daughters of Minyas is turned into a bat. That said, many performers appear to have other interpretations perhaps capturing aspects of drunkenness, dancing, revelling and games. Some must surely understand the low c's as preludes to hiccoughs or other digestive returns. Others see these repeated notes as the blare of Bacchus' horn followed by cackling laughter.

All this said, Britten's own view of his *Bacchus* appears to be more simplistic:

> In Bacchus, as before, I find it difficult to give a precise indication of any particular bit, but perhaps it will help to think of "shouting out of boys" as being the piu vivo, and the "tattling tongues" as the C jamor (sic) con moto passage
> (Britten 1957)

But could it be that Britten himself had forgotten the Golding source for this story which provided him with the title? This source, with its powerful imagery of spinning and bats should not be discounted entirely, remembering that Britten's 1957 letter appears to have been written in a hurry: 'please forgive me if the answers are brief because I am about to go away'.

Boughton's version is very faithful to Britten's original markings, maintaining a vigorous allegro at the start although slower than the published tempo. Roy Carter and Janet Craxton also offer strictly rhythmic readings. Other versions, notably that of Maurice Bourgue (no date) and François Leleux (1995) are imaginatively drunken in the opening section and use considerable rubato. Thomas Indermuhle (1990) uses less rubato but appears to espouse the idea of drunkenness. Not so **Jeremy Polmear** (1991) whose impeccable rhythm in this section seems to conjure up the ritual marching of Bacchus' followers. Nicholas Daniel (1994 and 1997) too, is more faithful to the tempo with a marching feel to this first section.

Alan Vogel (1997) brings a quirky originality to the second section perhaps invoking 'the shouting out of boys' or a truly gossipy atmosphere amongst the 'tattling tongues'. Heinz Holliger (no date) treats this section with a quixotic feeling, too, in his first recording becoming more brilliant and rhythmic in his later two (1991 and 1997). Thomas Indermuhle makes more of a dance out of this section with an attractive and rhythmic swing to the music.

The *Con moto* receives a wide range of interpretations from different oboists with Boughton's crotchet = 112 outstripped by Francis, c.120-126, Craxton, c. 132, Hunt and King, c. 160, Bourgue, 176+, Leleux, 192 and Holliger 184+). If the idea of this *con moto* is to illustrate the spinning of the daughters of Minyas, then the slower tempi may have something to say. Curiously, Tom Bergeron's alto saxophone seems to lend itself to such an effect more than the faster, virtuosic readings of this section, and Douglas Boyd chooses a moderate speed to give a good spinning effect. However, this does not invalidate faster readings which may have other images in mind, 'tattling tongues' included.

The final section is also subject to varied readings from strictly in time (Carter, Craxton, Francis) to very free (Leleux, Schellenberger). The metamorphic moments on the long held C's also have a wide range of interpretations. Perhaps, Lajos Lenscés' version should be mentioned for its commanding low Cs followed by really ephemeral arpeggios, as does Holliger's versions which all give structural and apparent metamorphic importance to the low Cs. Nicholas Daniel makes the ending of the piece more and more urgent in his Proms performance (1997).

But there is more to say on *Bacchus*. Note should be made that in many accounts of Bacchus, he spent his childhood in Asia Minor and away from the centre of Greek culture (i.e. he was somewhat strange).

Nicholas Daniel

Most accounts including that of Ovid have him as an extraordinarily beautiful boy with androgynous characteristics. Nonetheless he is of enormous importance to women and an agent of freedom for them. The story of his rescue of Ariadne after her abandonment by Theseus is famous and Britten would have known this from Richard Strauss' opera. All in all, Bacchus is the outsider whose rebelliousness is accepted by the gods and by men. He is therefore an influence for change and clearly an ally of the artistic temperament. His influence over Pan is also of significance especially in relation to Britten's work. Paintings by Botticelli, Poussin, Leighton and Simeon Solomon will illustrate well the view of the artist. But this skates the surface with this remarkable and complicated deity.

The fifth movement in the *Six Metamorphoses* is that of *Narcissus* and, like *Niobe*, is an exquisite piece. His story appears in Book III of the *Metamoprhoses* , just after the description of Bacchus' birth and the story of

Teiresias who, on his own transsexual experience, was blinded by Juno for settling the dispute between her and Jupiter as to which gender enjoyed more pleasure in bed. Teiresias prophesies that Narcissus will 'live to a ripe old age…..so long as he never knows himself' (Raeburn 2004, III, 348). This theme of self-knowledge is very symbolic for this story and perhaps for Britten's intentions for the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. The story is therefore closely related to Bacchus'. The outcome of a rape of a water nymph called Liriope by the river god Cephisus, Narcissus' story is integrally involved with water. It relates his extraordinary beauty such that 'legions of lusty men and bevies of girls desired him'. But he was too unaware to respond. Poor Echo, whom the goddess Juno had condemned to parrot the last words anyone spoke to her fell head-over-heels for Narcissus and this unrequited passion takes up many delightful lines of the story. When they eventually meet, the conversation is touching: 'Hands off! May I die before you enjoy my body', he cries; 'enjoy my body' she replies. Transformed into a stone, Echo survives only in the acoustic form we know today.

There follows the story which Britten's subtitle refers to. Narcissus, tired from hunting rests by a forest pool. He sees his own image in the water and is transfixed and Ovid describes painfully and beautifully Narcissus' desire and self-adoration. He is transformed into a flower 'with a trumpet of gold and pale white petals' after his sad moans and cries are reportedly echoed by his eponymous admirer. Britten may have drawn inspiration from the moving poem, *Ladslove,* from Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* which makes a connection between Narcissus' story and a more highly personalised introspection. This poem was known to Britten in a setting by John Ireland which the composer and Pears performed at the 1959 Aldeburgh Festival with a programme note describing it as 'a crystalline setting of the Narcissus legend' (Britten 1959):

Look not in mine eyes, for fear
They mirror true the sight I see,
And there you find your face too clear
And love it and be lost like me.
One the long nights through must lie
Spent in star-defeated sighs,
But why should you as well as I
Perish! Gaze not in my eyes.

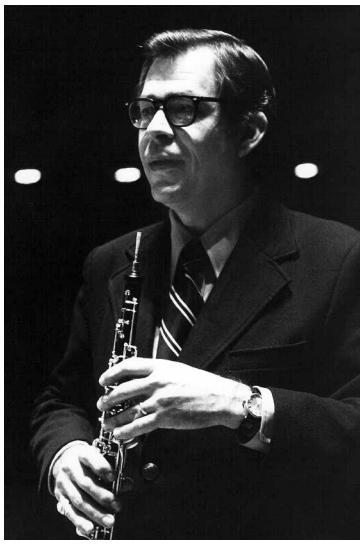
A Grecian lad, as I hear tell,
One that many loved in vain,
Looked into a forest well
And never looked away again.
There, when the turf in springtime flowers,
With downward eye and gazes sad,
Stands amid the glancing showers
A jonquil, not a Grecian lad.
(Housman, A Shropshire Lad, XV)

Whilst Britten's *Narcissus* can be interpreted as an aural description of a visual reflection (and what lovely watery effects one can get on the oboe), the story of *Echo* should be considered as a double analogy of reflection in sound and sight. The tale looks at the fall of innocent beauty and the agonies of growing up. Unrequited love is mirrored by remorse. Koen van Slogteren (1990) cites Sigmund Freud's '*Zur Emfuhrung des Narzissmus*' to argue a psychological significance for this story based on self knowledge and the self's relationship with the world. This relates to a similar view on *Niobe*, already described. Britten's music is lyrical and utterly beautiful. The opening phrase is entirely suitable for such a beautiful deity and the reflections leading to metamorphosis are brilliantly handled. The moment of metamorphosis is surely very obvious in the increasing agitation towards a cathartic trill. The final section where the mirror image gently combines towards the long *niente* c, gives the performer a perfect opportunity for a moment of complete stillness.

Tempi vary in performances from a rather fast quaver = 84 by Francis to 68 for Craxton and 56 for Bourgue. Some versions are freer than others and Francis effectively makes use of silence with a long pause at the end of the first section. The opening receives many beautiful interpretations with differing tone colours and dynamic levels. Nicholas Daniel (1994) is an example of a performance where a very quiet opening is highly effective in portraying a narcissistic quality. Britten (1957) asks that 'Narcissus should not be too slow, but it must be peaceful'.

Practically all performances make a good account of the reflection in the middle section emphasising the nature of a visual reflection through the exact connection between object and image. **Helen Jahren** (2004) makes an interesting analogy with a genuine echo effect by timing her reflections with a small delay. The relation of Echo in the Ovid story is made in this performance which generally contains many unusual interpretations throughout the work. Most interpretations make the point that metamorphosis has taken place before the last section, leaving this at a single dynamic, as marked, as though Narcissus and his reflection have become the same thing. Bourgue takes a

different view, maintaining the reflection dynamically to the end, all exquisitely played. His version lasting nearly 90 seconds longer than Boughton's again gives an original reading. John Mack (1990) offers a remarkably muted quality to a reflective reading of this piece whilst Gordon Hunt makes an interesting point by grading the difference between ***mf*** in bar 10 at the start of the mirror section and ***f*** six bars later. Here he creates an atmosphere with more menace in it, which somehow empowers the metamorphic moment of the trill in bar 23. **Robin Williams** (1988) has the idea of leaning on the first b♮ in bar 22 to emphasise the power of the music at this point. Being reforged into



John Mack

a flower is no light matter. A number of versions miss the difference between demisemiquavers and the final semiquaver group in bar 23.

The story of Arethusa provides Britten with just the right ending because here the lovers end up together for eternity. Arethusa makes her first appearance in Book V as the nymph in Calliope's song who tells Ceres that her daughter is indeed in the underworld. Her story relates how she came upon a beautiful clear mountain stream on a very hot day. The cool water enticed her to remove her clothes and swim naked. This roused the river god, Alpheus, which in turn put Arethusa to flight. She invoked the help of Diana as Alpheus bore down on her and a cloud enveloped her whilst Alpheus cast around to find her. Sweat poured from Arethusa until she turned into water. The final twist in the tale is magnificent: Alpheus realises what has happened and changes himself back into water to be united with Arethusa. Diana 'magics' them both to Syracuse harbour where they remain to this day in watery union. It could be argued that Britten ends his cycle in Sicily where his inspiration began on a holiday in September 1950 (Caird 2006).

This piece seems to provide Britten with a happy ending to match the triumphant cascades of notes to the work's D major conclusion. It also provides a final movement of requited love to match the unrequited one of Pan and Syrinx at the beginning. I say 'requited' because of the permanent union at the end of the story, though one cannot be sure of Arethusa's true feelings on the outcome! The three sections seem to correspond well to the story, the first giving a feeling of increasing movement, flight and rising panic, the second with its trills depicting the wateriness of Arethusa presumably whilst she hides from Alpheus and the third more mystically demonstrating the final metamorphosis into a cascade of water. Again this 'surface reading' is underpinned by music of beautiful delicacy for the nymph herself, with graceful motion, with sadness in the falling trills and with a majestic motion to the final conclusion. However Britten (1957) confounds this reading in his advice to Friedrich Krebs: 'Arethusa is pictured here entirely as become a fountain, although there are pools of stillness (the trills)'.

Performances vary considerably in speed perhaps as a result of the *largamente* direction and Britten's eventual choice of a metronome mark. Boughton is very slow and pairs the notes of the opening *Largamente* markedly whilst Francis plays the opening very fast and with freedom. Heinz Holliger (1991) structures the piece with an interesting pause before the fourth phrase in bar 22, a decision also taken by some other performers including Douglas Boyd. Nicholas Daniel (1994) gives an interesting dynamic shading in bars 14/15 and 16/17 in a performance which puts racy effect into the chase. Janet Craxton is quick and provides (like Daniel) the most distant and muted quality for the burbling trills of the middle section where her performance also goes furthest, with **Richard Simpson** (2002/3) in differentiating between the trills with lines on them and those without. **Robin Canter** speeds up and 'throws away' the phrases after the trills in an interesting interpretation of this section. Jeremy Polmear's trills are brilliantly continuous in the final phrase providing a consequential change to flowing water of an impelling kind. Schellenberger gives a rather restless feeling in these trills with convincing results, whilst Bourgue takes time in producing very quiet, burbling trills in a performance which is perhaps the most expansive. **Gernot Schmalfuss** (1999) brings his final section of *Arethusa* to a resounding close by

accentuating the top notes of the phrases as a motif perhaps harking back to the main motif of *Pan.*

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Britten's use of classical mythology represents a major theme throughout the composer's life. This is no more true than in the early 1950's when Britten seems to have used mythology as a means to explore and explain his own specific relationship with art and the world. *Billy Budd* is a great work illustrative of this process but at the same time Britten was able to create a miniature masterpiece in the *Metamorphoses* which captures many aspects in the kaleidoscope of human loving relationships.

The two stories of heterosexual love in Pan and Arethusa provide a beginning and an end to a cycle which includes great examples of the infinite range of human experience which Ovid gives us. Curiously the poet Shelley (1820, 551-3)wrote three 'Ovid poems' juxtaposing one, *Arethusa* ('Like spirits they lie, In the azure sky, When they love but live no more') with *Apollo* and *Pan,* both celebrating the competition won by Apollo and lost by Pan. Britten's choices are subtle and brilliantly chosen to create a six-movement work of a unique kind. As a work for solo oboe, it is a tour-de-force involving considerable technical, dynamic, and tonal demands. Any oboist would say that it takes a very special reed (Syrinx herself?) to deal with the demands of Phaeton, Niobe, Bacchus and Narcissus in quick succession. Nevertheless it is so suitably written for the oboe with the composer's seemingly innate ability to write 'playably' for any instrument.

This is a cycle which reveals greater depths than might initially be expected from pieces written for a madrigal concert on the Meare. We have seen how instrumental music can be influenced by literary and other artistic sources and how this composer explored moral and ethical issues through music. The power of Ovid, so influential to artists through the centuries from Shakespeare to Ted Hughes (1997), is mirrored with equal power by the composer. One truly gets the impression that Britten had 'read books and studied and pondered and tried to fathom eternal truths'. ◆

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, C., 2002. 'Ovid and art' in P.Hardie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ardito, L., 1999. 'The Aulos: Symbol of Musico-Medicinal Magic'. *The Double Reed,* Vol 22 No 2.

Auden, W.H. and **Garrett, J.**, 1935. *The Poet's Tongue.* G.Bell and Son, London.

Auden, W.H., 1940. 'Musée des Beaux Arts' in C.Ricks ed., *The Oxford Book of English Verse.* Oxford University Press.

Auden, W.H., 1935. In G. Elliott, *Benjamin Britten, The Spiritual Dimension.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Battistini, M., 2005. *Symbols and Allegories in Art.* J. Paul Getty Museum

Beaver, H., 1967. *Note* in H. Melville, *Billy Budd, sailor and other stories*. Penguin.

Britten B., 1957. 26 July Letter to Friedrich Krebs (copy), Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh.

_____, 1959 *The Land of Lost Content,* programme note, 22 June 1959. Aldeburgh Festival:Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh.

Britten, B., Forster, E.M., Crozier, E., 1951. *Billy Budd.* Hawkes and Son.

Britten B. and **Pears P.**, 1950. Postcard from Messina in D. Mitchell, P. Reed & M.

Caird, G., 2006. *Benjamin Britten and his Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*. The Double Reed Vol. 29, No. 3 and Double Reed News No 76 and 77.

Cook, N., 1987. 'Pan' in N. Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis.* Oxford.

Dalby, A., 2003. *The Story of Bacchus.* The British Museum Press.

_____, 2003 'The Vengeance of Bacchus' in A. Dalby, *The Story Of Bacchus.* The British Museum Press.

Duncan, R., 1981. *Working with Britten.* Rebel Press.

Elliott, G., 2006. *Benjamin Britten, The Spiritual Dimension.* OUP.

Fantham, E., 2004. 'Human Artistry and Divine Jealousy' in E. Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses.* Oxford University Press.

_____ 2004. 'After Ovid' in E. Fantham, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ford, B., 1994. 'Introduction' in B. Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets.* Carcanet.

Forster, E.M., 1949. 'Captain Vere's Prologue' in B. Britten, *Billy Budd.* Hawkes and Son.

Golding, A. (trans.), 1565 and 1943. *Ovid's Metamorphoses.* J.M. Dent.

Headington, C., 1992. *Peter Pears, A biography.* faber and faber.

Hindley, C., 1999. 'Eros in life and death' in M. Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hiramoto, S., 1999. 'An analysis of Benjamin Britten's Six Metamorphoses' in *The Double Reed.* Vol 22 No 2.
Housman, A.E., 1887. *A Shropshire Lad.* Jonathan Cape XV, 23.
Hughes, T., 1997. *Tales from Ovid.* faber and faber.
Impelluso, L., 2003. *Gods and Heroes in Art.* J. Paul Getty Museum.
Innes, M. (trans.), 1955. *Ovid: Metamorphoses.* Penguin Classics.
Keats, J., 1819. 'Hyperion' in *Keats' Poetical Works.* Oxford University Press, 1908
Kerenyi, K., 1974. *The Gods of the Greeks.* Thames and Hudson.
Kildea, P., 1999. 'Britten, Auden and 'otherness'' in M. Cooke, *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
McLaughlin, P., (no date). *An Exercise on Musicality.* Essay on Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Ann Arbor, Mi.
Melville, H., 1891. *Billy Budd, sailor and other stories.* Penguin.
Mitchell, D., 1993. 'A *Billy Budd* notebook (1979-91)' in M. Cooke and P. Reed, eds., *Billy Budd.* Cambridge Opera Handbooks, Cambridge University Press.
Mitchell, D., 1984. 'The Church Parables (1): Ritual and Restraint' in *The Britten Companion* ed. Christopher Palmer. faber and faber.
Mitchell, D., **Reed, P.**, and **Cooke, M.**, 2004. *Letters from a Life. Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten,* vol. 3. London: faber and faber.
Palmer, C. (ed.), 1984. *The Britten Companion.* London.
Rieu, E.V. (trans.),1950. *Homer: The Iliad.* Penguin Classics.
Shelley, P.B., 1820. 'Arethusa', 'Apollo', 'Pan' in *Shelley's Poetical Works.* Macmillan, 1896
Raeburn, D. (trans.), 2004. *Ovid Metamorphoses.* Penguin Classics.
van Slogteren, K., 1990. *Benjamin Britten: 'Six Metamorphoses after Ovid', für Oboe solo.* TIBIA, 4/1990, 268
_____, 1990. *Brittens 'Metamorphosen' für Oboe: Narcissus. TIBIA 4/90, 291*
_____, 1992. *Brittens 'Metamorphosen' für Oboe: Bacchus.* TIBIA, 1/92
_____, 1992. *Brittens 'Matamorphosen' für Oboe: Phaeton.* TIBIA 2/1992
_____, 1992. *Brittens 'Metamorphosen' für Oboe: Niobe.* TIBIA 4/1992
Warner, R., 1958. Introduction in *Plutarch*, *Fall of the Roman Empire.* Penguin Classics.
Whittall, A., 1999. 'The chamber operas' in M. Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Benjamin Britten*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DISCOGRAPHY

Bergeron, T., 1996. *Saxophone alone* Mark MCD-2204.
Boughton, J., 1952. First broadcast performance. *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid.* BBC Radio 3, 3 October, 11.00pm. National Sound Archive.
Bourgue, M., no date. *Les Métamorphoses d'Ovide.* Harmonia Mundi HM 902.
Boyd, D., 1994. BBC Radio 3 recital, Wigmore Hall. London, National Sound Archive.
Canter, R., 1982. *Benjamin Britten: Complete Works for Oboe.* Phoenix, DGS 1022.
Canter, R., 1998. Carlton Classics. National Sound Archive.
Carter, R., 1995/6. *British Composers: Britten, Walton.* EMI Classics 5 73989 2.
Craxton, J., 1976. *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid.* Decca.
Daniel, N., 1994 BBC Radio 3 recital. National Sound Archive.
_____, 1997 BBC Promenade Concert. National Sound Archive.
Dent, S., 1998. *Fantasies.* Bayerischer Rundfunk/Sonomeister.
Francis, S., 1964. *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid.* Argo.
_____ 1995 *Britten: Music for oboe, Music for piano.* Hyperion/Helios CDH 55154.
Holliger, H., no date. BBC broadcast recital. National Sound Archive.
_____. 1991 *Heinz Holliger and friends.* Phillips 434 076-2.
_____ 1997 *Sounding the century,* Barbican Hall, London. National Sound Archive.

Hunt, G., 1997. *Soliloquy.* Bis CD 769.
Indermuhle, T., 1990. *Britten, Haas, Hindemith.* Camerata 30CM-449.
Jahren, H., 2004. *Britten, Krenek, Dorati.* Bis CD 737.
Kelly, J., 1996. BBC Radio 3 recital, Studio 1, Pebble Mill, Birmingham. National Sound Archive.
King, N.A., 1999. *Evocations.* Boston Records BR 1030 CD.
Leleux, F., 1995. *Poulenc Britten.* Harmonia Mundi.
Lenscés, L., 1978. *Monodie.* Cadenza 800915.
Mack, J., 1990. *John Mack, oboe.* Chrystal records CD323.
Oostenrijk, P., Channel Classics.
Polmear, J., 1991. *Sweet Melancholy.* PA Recordings.
Schellenberger, H., 1998. *Campanella Musica.* Teldec.
Schmalfuss, G., 1999. *Benjamin Britten: Complete Works for Oboe.* Dabringhaus and Grimm, 1080930.
Simpson, R., 2002/3. *Celtic Magic.* Campion Cameo.
Spaneas, D., 2003. *when wind comes to sparse bamboo.* Capitone CPS 8717.
Vogel, A., 1997/2000.*Oboe Obsession.* Delos International.
Weigall, R., 1998. Private recording. All Saints Church, Elland, Yorkshire.
Williams, R., 1988. *Robin Williams 236.* Factory Communications, Manchester. National Sound Archive.

PICTURE REFERENCES

Bernini, G., 1622-5. *Apollo and Daphne.* Borghese Gallery, Rome.
Bloemaert, A., 1591. *The Death of Niobe's Children.* Statens Museum, Copenhagen.
Botticelli, S., 1482. *Pallas and the Centaur.* Uffizi, Florence.
Caracci, A., c. 1597-1604. *Pan and Diana.* Palazzo Farnese, Rome.
_____. *The Triumph of Bacchus.* Palazzo Farnese, Rome.
Caravaggio, M.M. da, 1596-7. *Bacchus.* Uffizi, Florence.
_____. *Narcissus.* Palazzo Corsini, Rome.
Davies, A.B., 1901. *Arethusa.* Butler Institute of American Art, Youngtown, OH.
Panthaios, c520 BC. Pottery, black-figured hydria from Attica, discovered in Naples: *Dionysos with satyrs and maenads; on the shoulder, chariots and animals.* The British Museum.
Pollaiuolo, 1470-80. *Apollo and Daphne.* National Gallery, London.
Poussin, N., 1625-7. *Echo and Narcissus.* Musee du Louvre, Paris.
_____, c.1628. *The Nurture of Bacchus.* National Gallery, London.
_____, 1636. *The Triumph of Pan.* National Gallery, London.
Ricci, S., 1703-4. *The Fall of Phaeton.* Museo Civico, Belluno.
Rubens, P.P., copy of Breughel, J., *Pan and Syrinx.* Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.
Titian, 1562. *The Death of Actaeon.* National Gallery, London.
Watts, G. F., 1885. *The Minotaur.* Tate Gallery, London.

N.B. Most of the above images are viewable on the Internet.

Thanks to Boosey and Hawkes Publications Ltd. for permission to publish extracts from the printed edition of *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid, Op. 49,* to the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh for permission to publish extracts from the *Composition Sketch* and Britten's 1951 pocket diary and to the Paul Sacher Foundation for permission to publish extracts from the *Fair Copy.*
Thanks to Robert Allan, Nancy Ambrose King, Charles Arnold, Matthew Bailey, Neil Black, Ian Boughton, Nick Clark, Jane Craxton, Michael Craxton, Mervyn Cooke, Andrea Cox, Edward Craig, Clive Fairbairn, Sarah Francis, Chris Grogan, Steve Halfyard, Angela Heap, Norma Hooks, Gordon Hunt, Peter Johnson, Janice Knight, Lesley Knowles, Friedrich Krebs, Colin Matthews, Felix Meyer, Donald Mitchell, Robin Moore-Ede, Stephen Powell, Philip Reed, Thomas Rietschel, Edwin Roxburgh, Axel Russo, Jane Salmon, Christian Schneider, Dan Stolper and Richard Weigall for support and advice.