

The University of Chicago Presents | Mandel Hall

November 8, 2013

6:30 PM pre-concert performance

Roger Chase, viola
Michiko Otaki, piano

BRITTEN Elegy for Solo Viola
BRITTEN Lachrymae (Reflections on a Song of Dowland), Op. 48

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BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

Britten achieved international renown at age 32 with his opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), and—following the success of his chamber operas *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* over the next two years—he turned his energies almost exclusively to stage works. After his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (also 1945), Britten virtually abandoned instrumental music until he met the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and began to write for him in 1961. There were two small exceptions: while composing his opera *Billy Budd*, Britten wrote *Lachrymae* for viola and piano in 1950 and *Six Studies after Ovid* for solo oboe in 1951.

Britten composed *Lachrymae* for the violist William Primrose, who – along with the composer – gave the first performance at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 20, 1950. Throughout his life, Britten was strongly attracted to the music of early English composers, and for this work he turned to the song *If my complaints could passions move* by John Dowland (1563-1626). It was a convention of Elizabethan love-songs that they should express love's sorrows as readily as its joys, and many of Dowland's love-songs have a dark cast, as a survey of their titles makes clear: *Flow my tears, In darkness let me dwell, I saw my lady weep, Go crystal tears*. Britten borrows from that convention by naming his work *Lachrymae* (Latin for “tears”).

The subtitle *Reflections on a Song of Dowland* is important because it makes clear that this is not a set of variations. Instead, Britten takes the opening phrase of Dowland's song and uses that as the basis for what might be called (to borrow Hindemith's term) “metamorphoses”: the shape and harmonic structure of that opening phrase will evolve through different permutations across the fifteen-minute span of *Lachrymae*. Dowland's song is a somber one (it is more about the nature of love than an expression of love directed to a specific person), and Britten's “reflections” on it preserve that character. This is generally dark and subdued music, and Britten brings it to a lovely close on the music Dowland uses to set his final lines:

Die shall my hopes, but not my faith
That you that of my fall may hearers be
May here despair, which truly saith,
I was more true to love than love to me.

Elegy for Solo Viola

Benjamin Britten was a pianist, and a very good one—he performed frequently with tenor Peter Pears and was regarded as one of the most capable and sensitive accompanists before the public. It

is less well known that Britten also played the viola. He began taking lessons at age ten, and while he did not play the viola professionally, he was a capable violist and played chamber music with friends. His enthusiasm for the husky, mid-range sound of the instrument remained strong, and he wrote imaginatively for the viola throughout his life.

The earliest of Britten's works for viola is the present *Elegy*, which he wrote at age sixteen but which was not performed publically until years after his death. Britten had begun to study with the English composer Frank Bridge (himself a violist) in the fall of 1927, when the boy was only fourteen, and Bridge would be—both musically and morally—one of the formative figures in Britten's life. In the fall of 1928 Britten was sent away to Gresham's School in Norfolk, though he continued to study privately with Bridge during these years. He remained at Gresham's until 1930, when he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. Public school was a difficult experience for Britten, but he made friends at Gresham's, and he left with mixed feelings.

On August 1, 1930, the day after he returned from his final year at Gresham's, the sixteen-year-old Britten sketched a brief piece for solo viola. Britten then did nothing with those sketches. He simply set them aside, and he may have forgotten about them entirely—his official Opus 1, the *Sinfonietta*, was published two years later. The sketches were not discovered until after the composer's death in 1976, and at that time they were edited into a performing edition and given the title *Elegy*, a title Britten himself never imagined for this music. Violist Nabuko Imai gave the first performance of the *Elegy* at the Aldeburgh Festival on June 22, 1984.

Some have heard the *Elegy* as a record of Britten's feelings on leaving Gresham's, but that is conjectural at best. Far better to take this music as an indication of where Britten was as a composer at age sixteen, and he was clearly an adventurous young composer. The *Elegy* is brief (only about six minutes long) and in ternary form: the slow opening section (marked *Poco lento*), gives way to an agitated central episode that rises high in the viola's register, then returns to the opening material and ends quietly. The mood is subdued and somber throughout, and—even on a linear instrument like the viola—the music makes it way with unusual harmonic freedom (the score is littered with accidentals).

Why did Britten never return to this music? Perhaps he did not see possibilities in these sketches. Perhaps this music represented a direction he did not choose to follow. Perhaps he simply forgot about it. But the *Elegy*, rescued from obscurity, offers some sense of the originality and promise of Britten even in the years before he began to find a distinctive voice of his own.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

November 8, 2013 | Mandel Hall

7:30 pm Concert Program

FRETWORK

Richard Boothby

Liam Byrne

Reiko Ichise

Asako Morikawa

Richard Tunnicliffe

with Elizabeth Kenny, lute

Dowland:

The King of Denmark's Galiard
The Earle of Essex's Galiard
M John Langton's Pavan

Sir John Souch his Galiard
Captaine Piper his Galiard
Piper's Pavan for lute solo

M Henry Noell his Galiard
M Giles Hoby his Galiard
Sir Henry Umpton's Funerall

Mrs Nichols Almand
Nicho. Gryffith his Galiard
Fantasia in G for lute solo

M. George Whitehead his Almand
M. Bucton his Galiard
Semper Dowland semper Dolens

Intermission

Adrian Williams:

Teares to Dreams (2004)

Dowland:

Lachrimæ Antiquæ
Lachrimæ Antiquæ Novæ
Lachrimæ Gementes
Lachrimæ Tristes
Lachrimæ Coactæ
Lachrimæ Amantis
Lachrimæ Veræ

To the most gracious and Sacred Princesse, Anna Queene of England, [S]cotland, France and Ireland.

Since I had accesse to your Highnesse at Winchester, (most gracious Queene) I have beene twice under sayle for Denmarke, hastening my returne to my most royall King and Master, your dear and worthiest Brother; but by contrary windes and frost, I was forst backe againe and of necessitie compeld to winter here in your most happie Kingdome. In which time I have endvoured by my poore labour and study to manifest my humblenesse and dutie to your highnesse, being my selfe one of your most affectionate Subiects, and also servant to your most Princely Brother, the onely Patron and Sun-shine of my else unhappie Fortunes. For which respects I have presumed to Dedicate this worke of Musicke to your sacred hands, that was begun where you were borne, and ended where you raigne. And though the title doth promise teares, unfit guests in these ioyfull times, yet no doubt pleasant are the teares which Musicke weepes, neither are teares shed alwayes in sorrow, but sometime in ioy and gladnesse. Vouchsafe then (worthy Goddess) your Gracious protection to these showers of Harmonie, least if you frowne on them, they bee Metamorphosed into true teares.

To the Reader

Having in forren parts met divers Lute-Lessons of my composition, publisht by strangers without my name or approbation; I thought it much more convenient, that my labours should passe forth under mine owne allowance, receiving from me their last foile and polishment; for which consideration I have undergone this long and troublesome worke, wherein I have mixed new songs with olde, grave with light, that every eare may receive his severall content. And as I had in these an earnest desire to satisfie all, I do likewise hope that the peruser will as gratefully entertaine my endeavours, as they were friendly meant.

Dowland's 1604 publication, *Lachrimæ or seaven teares figured in seaven passionate pavans, with divers other pavans, galiards and allemandes, set forth for the lute, viols, or violons, in five parts* is in many ways a most unusual publication. It is the only work explicitly calling for the combination of lute and viols, though such a combination may seem rather obvious and is something that very probably happened in any case, without specific instructions from the composer. Also, the seven pavans constitute the only thematically-linked sequence of movements using the same dance form - many composers had linked a single pavan to a single galliard using the same material, but Dowland takes his most famous song 'Flow my Teares', and then creates six further pavans as transformative variations upon it.

It is printed in what is called 'table format'; that is, with each of the individual parts facing a side of the book, with the lute on one end, the bass viol on the other, then cantus & altus on one side, and quintus & tenor opposite facing them. Thus the five viols and lute can sit around a table with a single opening of the book - though in truth, this is quite a stretch and it needs good eyesight to work - each piece having a separate opening. It rather brilliantly solves the problem of combining normal staff notation for the viols, and tabulature for the lute. Incidentally, we learn that Dowland was living in Fetter Lane at the time, where copies of the work were available for purchase.

The dedication and address to the reader are revealing of Dowland's character and his thoughts: we learn that he thought of himself as a traveller, struggling against the elements - *but by contrary windes and frost, I was forst backe againe*. In the First Book of Songs he details his travels to France, then Germany, and finally to Italy: Venice, Padua, Genoa, Ferrara and Florence. The Second Book is '*sent from the Court of a forreine Prince*' '*From Helsingnoure in Denmarke the first of June 1600*'. Dowland longed for an appointment at court in London, yet it was not until the end of his life that he achieved this. His fame as a lutenist on the continent was huge, yet he was frequently passed-over in his native land. He clearly felt these slights bitterly.

We also learn that this work was '*long and troublesome*' - the elaborate plan of the *Lachrimæ* pavans, a new concept, must have required extensive planning. He also aims to please all with songs old and new, grave and light. Clearly, he was worried that the public might be put off by the overtly gloomy-sounding title, and wanted to reassure that there would be happy pieces as well. I think also that we might consider Dowland's literary talents in the light of some of his most memorable turns of phrase: '*showers of Harmonie*', *the 'teares which Musicke weepes*' '*that was begun where you were borne, and ended where you raigne*'. Such a talent might be capable of composing the memorable lyrics to some of his songs.

The remarkable sequence of pavans seems to have been constructed with some kind of narrative to it - both musical and extra-musical. If that is true, then Dowland is the only composer of his time to have conceived such a work. Commentators have speculated on what the story might be: some have

seen a hermetic, philosophical narrative based on the ideas of Hermes Trismegista and others a religious one. All we have are the titles to the seven pavans, and, to speak for myself, I think the musical journey, the musical narrative doesn't need to be translated into an overt literary, philosophical or religious one; it is sufficient, and indeed better to feel and hear it in purely musical terms.

But the whole publication of 1604 is more than the seven pavans; as Dowland says in his introduction to the reader:

I have mixed new songs with olde, grave with light, that every eare may receive his severall content.

The old 'songs' are instrumental arrangements of some of his most famous songs from his First Booke of songs from 1597: 'My thoughts are wingd with hopes' becomes 'Sir John Souch, his Galiard'; 'If my complaints', Captaine Digory Piper's Galiard; 'Can she excuse my wrongs', The Earl of Essex, his Galiard. And, of course, 'Flow my teares' (from the 2nd Book of 1600) is the Lachrimae Pavan. The new 'songs' - meaning 'pieces of music' - are all the other galiards, pavans and almains. The variety of mood is huge.

The dedications are unusual: apart from the odd star, such as the Earl of Essex (long dead), the King of Denmark (Dowland's current employer) or Sir Henry Umpton (also dead), we have relative non-entities about which next to nothing is known. It may be that Dowland was just happy to receive some pecuniary recompense in return for a mention. It also reinforces the feeling that he, at times, was his own worst enemy. His friend, Henry Peacham, remarked that he '*slipt many opportunities in advancing his fortunes*', and it feels as if here he missed the chance to have done himself some good by dedicating pieces to the 'great & good' in Jacobean society who could have advanced his fortunes.

Yet, however lively and intricate are the galiards, and however touching and beautiful are the other pavans in the set, it is on the seven Lachrimae pavans that the reputation of the publication rests. He takes his song, 'Flow my teares' and subjects it to intense scrutiny with the object of transforming both the musical material and the affect, or mood of the song.

The full text of the song is:

*Flow my teares, fall from your springs,
Exilde for ever: Let me morne
where nights black bird hir sad infamy sings,
there let mee live forlorne.*

*Downe vaine lights shine you no more,
No nights are dark enough for those
that in dispaire their last fortuns deplore,
light doth but shame disclose.*

*Never may my woes be relieved,
since pitie is fled,
and teares, and sighes, and grones,
my wearie dayes of all ioyes have deprived.*

*Harke you shadowes that in darknesse dwell,
learne to contemne light,
Happie they that in hell,*

feel not the worlds despite.

Lachrimæ Antiquæ is more or less exactly as the song was published in the 2nd Book of Songs in 1600 as a four-part air, but with the addition of a 5th voice. The motive, or emblem of a single tear is expressed in the opening four-note theme: the first note swells to breaking point, then tumbles down a 4th. We will hear this at the beginning of each pavan in one form or another. The harmonic plan is conventional and straightforward:

1st strain: tonic to tonic (a minor)
2nd strain: relative major (C major) to dominant (E major)
3rd strain: dominant (E major) to tonic (a minor)

Next comes *Lachrimæ Antiquæ Novæ* or old tears renewed, and already we hear a new note of urgency. While this new pavan sticks to the broad harmonic plan of the first, there's a forward drive about it absent in *Antiquæ*; the second strain introduces a beautiful, consoling tune in the alto, and we note that the top part - the vocal line in *Antiquæ* - doesn't have all the most important lyrical material anymore: contrapuntal & imitative lines are emerging in the lower parts, animating and aerating the texture.

Lachrimæ Gementes, groaning or sighing tears, sees an extraordinary compression of texture, almost from the outset: all five parts are squeezed into the interval of a sixth at the beginning of the 2nd bar. Yet, in the second strain, the texture opens up into a breathtaking sequence, very reminiscent of Josquin at his best, with gently rocking thirds in the outer parts, contrasted with an elegant falling figure in the inner parts. The effect is ecstatic. We are still with the original harmonic plan here, slightly varied, and the third strain starts with a series of trumpet calls across the ensemble, on each beat of the bar. After a call & response, the group comes back together to explore the falling fourth motive of the original third strain, but instead of an ironic 'happy' ('they that in hell'), this seems a genuinely positive theme.

Lachrimæ Tristes, or sad tears is at the heart of the sequence; the mid-point on our journey. And here, at the opening, the top two parts seem to hug each other tight in a plangent reiteration of the falling tear motive. It's the first time the emblem of the tear has been expressed in two parts at once, and it's a telling moment. After this tender strain, a shock: instead of the sweet C major we have become used to, a challenging B major that throws our harmonic map out of the window; only for the music to be lurched back flatwards a few bars later, the musical equivalent of turning on a sixpence. After all this turbulence, we arrive in C major after all, and Dowland then quotes another of his most famous songs, *I Saw My Lady Weep*, apposite and beautiful. The final strain is filled with falling tear-emblem motives, but also, more significantly its opposite: a walking crotchet, rising fifth idea. This will become more significant later on.

Lachrimæ Coactæ could be translated as 'forced' or even 'crocodile' tears. This pavan seems the most urgent and driven of the whole set - biting dissonances push the first strain on to its conclusion; and the second starts again in B major, staying there and cadencing in the key before the bass slides turbulently off in chromatic crotchets. The third strain sees unsettled syncopations sink down into a calmer mood before dramatically rising up to conclude as strongly as it had begun.

Lachrimæ Amantis, or lovers tears, sees the old tear emblem combined with the new rising fifth motive in the bass, and harmonically, we find the gloom of a minor brightened by a cadence for the first time in A major. And also the lute, which has up until now played almost exactly the same as the viols, (apart from the decorated cadential bars) starts to emerge with independent material. That A major now leads gracefully on to the B major, which was so unsettling before, here seems sweet

and positive. In this strain, we start to have a reduction in the activity of the parts, a new calm that has been earned and achieved. This sense of being above the fray is continued into the final strain, where the rising figure begins to dominate.

The final part of our journey is reached with *Lachrimæ Veræ* or true tears. Here pairs of parts open with the falling tear emblem locked together, and the first strain is peppered with both the falling emblem and the rising motive - rivers are flowing uphill, it seems. The original harmonic plan has at last returned - but how different it feels! C major is restored to begin the second strain and the rising fifth motive weaves in and out with the tear theme. Augmented, stretched harmonies add colour to the increasingly static texture. At last we reach the final strain; all movement has been reduced to a minimum; the falling-tear emblem has been inverted; limpid textures and elegant, inevitable counterpoint propel the music through to a serene conclusion, where almost the only movement comes from the newly-liberated lute. One last sting of dissonance and the music fades, transfigured into silence.

Richard Boothby
December 2012

Rather than make a conscious attempt to base my piece on a specific aspect of Dowland's pieces, I preferred to immerse myself in the *Lachrimæ*s for a few months before quietly moving from it into my own piece. What has emerged is a drifting elegiac piece which on the whole retains Dowland's melancholia, ultimately slipping slowly away into a dream.

Adrian Williams