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An Analytical Study of The Holy Sonnets of John Donne by Benjamin Britten

Richard Arthur Ruth Jr.
Central Washington University

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AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF
THE HOLY SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE
BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN

A Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Richard Arthur Ruth, Jr.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It seems logical that one would hear more of the many styles and forms available in contemporary vocal literature. Many singers today seem to be frightened by the more demanding techniques required in performing today's compositions. They hide themselves in the more familiar melodies and harmonies of the past. More singers should step out to explore and experiment with both vocal technique and vocal expression demanded in many contemporary vocal solo works.

I. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to show some of the techniques used in the melody, rhythm and harmony Benjamin Britten used in setting The Holy Sonnets of John Donne. This study also shows the ways in which these techniques serve to bring out the full meaning of the text.

II. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study covers, briefly, the lives of both John Donne and Benjamin Britten. There is a brief interpretation of each of the sonnets used by Britten. The study of the music is limited to techniques used in the melodic,

rhythmic and harmonic settings of the text. Only those aspects most prominent will be discussed.

CHAPTER II

JOHN DONNE (1571-1631)

Dean Donne, Jack Donne and John Donne were all the same man. Dean was a man of the world, attempting and experimenting with all the worldly wants and lusts available. Here was a man who had walked the streets of the world. "If there were sins, he had shaken many of them by the hand. Ambition, adulation, adultery, and so on to the end of the alphabet" (3:56).

Jack Donne was the sower of wild oats who wrote a vast amount of poetry and essays describing his adventures and his thoughts of love. The love poetry is perhaps the best known of Donne's secular writings.

John Donne was the reformed, redeemed man of God, preaching and writing with the power and conviction of a man who knows there is a better way. Through the experiences of Donne's previous years, he was able to identify and communicate with those living in the depths of sin. If Donne had emigrated to the new world, as he once contemplated, America would have known a preacher unequalled in English civilization (3:56).

John Donne was born into a Roman Catholic family which was very strong in its doctrinal beliefs. Being from a very proud family, Donne was given the opportunities for

study at Oxford and Cambridge. He was unable to receive a degree because of his Catholic background. After leaving the schools, Donne struck out into the world. During his worldly wanderings, he found time to read the writings of the Church Fathers, but these writings led Donne further away from the Church. Through reading the writings of William Walton, a friend and writer, Donne became converted to the Anglican faith.

Because of a deep indoctrination by Jesuit friends, who were persecuted by Queen Elizabeth, Donne later contemplated suicide. This thought was prevalent particularly after his wife's death. The Jesuits believed in personal persecution to gain greater prestige after death. However, Donne did criticize the Jesuits' hostile civil power which they claimed was necessary for their thirst for martyrdom (8:6).

During 1596-1597, Donne was in the wars with the Earl of Sussex. While with the Earl and while on many naval trips, Donne found time to write poems

. . . utterly unlike the Petrarchan things proper for the gallant of the time; full of strange prolixity, a haunting feverishness for scientific accuracy in the observation of emotion, the thorns of the analytical, aloes, and a fire that makes Spenser's lyrics seem like cold cameos of ivory; holiness in the midst of the fleshly, rapture in the midst of the cynical (3:56).

Donne became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton and later married Egerton's daughter. Egerton, not approving of

the marriage, attempted to have Donne thrown into jail. Failing to do that, he used his influence to put a damper on Donne's future plans for political or business success (8:71). After remaining inactive for some time, Donne worked as assistant to the future Bishop of Durham. He refused to take Orders while in this position. Eventually, the King made it plain that advancement would be possible only in the church. Accordingly, Donne became Reader in Divinity in 1616. By 1621, he had risen to the position of Dean of St. Paul's, under King Charles I (8:7-8).

The writings of Donne are remembered today because of the ". . . fire and smoke to the last. . ." "More than Milton, more than Browne, more even than the very present and everlasting Burton, this man lives on" (3:57). After one reads of how Donne faced death with a calmness which is uncommon, it is easier to gain insight into the discussion of death in his Holy Sonnets.

I. INTERPRETATION OF THE HOLY SONNETS

The Holy Sonnets of John Donne, set to music by Benjamin Britten, does not include the entire selection of sonnets in the Divine Meditations. The poetry used is from the Divine Meditations of 1633. These are in three sets. The first set includes twelve sonnets of which Britten uses five: Nos. 2, 4, 6, 9, and 10. The second is a set of four

sonnets of which only the first and third are used. The third group of three also contributes only the first and third.

The above grouping is the order in which Helen Gardner, writer of many books and articles on Donne, thinks the sonnets should be read for clear meaning. Donne numbered the sonnets I-XIX in a much different order. Britten, in setting these to music, changes the order again.

The writing of the Holy Sonnets was inspired by the death of Donne's wife. He had a desire to see death and throughout the sonnets Donne is continually beseeching and conversing with death as well as with God.

The order in which the sonnets are interpreted is according to the order found in Britten's song cycle. Following each title is the set and number according to Helen Gardner followed by Donne's numbering.

1. "Oh my blacke Soule!", I, No. 2; IV

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned
 By sickness, death's herald, and champion;
 Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
 Treason, and durst not turne to whence he is fled,
 Or like a thiefe, which till deaths doome be read,
 Wisheth himselfe delivered from prison;
 But damn'd and hal'd to execution,
 Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned;
 Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;
 But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
 Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
 And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
 Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
 That being red, it dyes red soules to white (6:7).

Donne is ". . . struggling to bridge the chasm lying dark and immeasurable between his soul and God" (7:179). Extreme sickness is portrayed in the first two lines. Donne is constantly haunted by remorse causing him to be continually ". . . repenting, begging for forgiveness, lending himself anew to thoughts, perhaps actions, which he condemns as sinful, and repenting afresh in excruciating bouts of contrition" (7:179).

Donne considers the soul as a pilgrim who has turned from his country and refuses to turn back. The soul is also portrayed as a thief who continues to believe he will be released even up to the point of the verdict of death.

The last six lines give the way to grace. First Donne asks the question, "who shall give that grace?" Then he answers the question and notes the complete humility one must come to in being washed in Christ's blood.

2. "Batter my heart," I, No. 10; XIV

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
 As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
 That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend
 Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
 I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
 Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
 Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
 But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,
 Yet dearly'I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
 But am betroth'd unto your enemye,
 Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
 Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee (6:11).

Donne is beseeching God ". . . as he might an Inquisitorial gaoler" (7:179). In this sonnet are found the symbols with which Donne identifies his life's problems. Such symbols are the besieged town, imprisonment, legal restraint and physical violence. The personal pronouns are used here as in many of the sonnets to give a more personal expression.

The aspect of the love of man toward God is expressed. Helen Gardner believes that this sonnet should be read only after No. 5 in which the creator's love is expressed. Her reason is that the love theme is based on the idea that ". . . we love Him because He first loved us" (6:xli).

The first four lines deal with the power and force of God needed to bring man to His will. The rest of the sonnet parallels Donne's life problems with a soul being tempted away and drawn back to God. The "enemie" of which Donne speaks is sin or death.

3. "O might those sighes and teares," II, No. 3; III

O might those sighes and teares retorne againe
 Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
 That I might in this holy discontent
 Mourne with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vaine;
 In my idolatry what showres of raine
 Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
 That sufferance was my sinne, now I repent;
 Because I did suffer I must suffer paine.
 Th'hydroptique drunkard, and night-scouting thiefe,
 The itchy Lecher, and selfe tickling proud

Have the remembrance of past joyes, for reliefe
 Of coming illis. To (poore) me is allow'd
 No ease; for, long, yet vehement griefs hath beene
 Th'effect and cause, the punishment and sinne (6:13-14).

This sonnet is one of repentance and sorrow for past sins--lost time and tears which were wasted in worldly pleasures. Donne says in line eight that for the suffering in sin he experienced, he deserves to suffer more. In lines nine through twelve, Donne gives the realization that the only relief for coming judgment the sinner will have is the "remembrance of past joys." The last two lines explain that the continual uneasiness which Donne experiences is caused by the continual sin and grief in his life.

4. "Oh, to vex me", III, No. 3; XIX

Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one:
 Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
 A constant habit; that when I would not
 I change in vowes, and in devotione.
 As humorous is my contritione
 As my prophane love, and as soone forgott:
 As ridlingly distempered, cold and hott,
 As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
 I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today
 In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
 Tomorrow I quake with true feare of his rod.
 So my devout fitts come and go away
 Like a fantastique Ague: save that here
 Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare
 (6:15-16).

This sonnet is ". . . purely personal, but is analytic and not devotional" (6:xlili). The self-evaluation found here points out the hypocritical life lived. A constant change of mind and slipping into sin is followed by

returning to God with flowery words and promises. However, after trying to fool God, Donne realizes that God is not fooled and becomes fearful of His wrath. The term "ague" means fever; his fits change like a fever.

5. "What if this present," I, No. 9; XIII

What if this present were the worlds last night?
 Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,
 The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
 Whether that countenance can thee affright,
 Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,
 Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell,
 And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
 Which pray'd forgivenessse for his foes fierce spight?
 No, no; but as in my idolatrie
 I said to all by profane mistresses,
 Beauty, of pittty, foulnesse onely is
 A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,
 This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde (6:10).

The love of God in sending Christ to die for man is portrayed in this sonnet. The first line puts the question to man of what would happen if this were the last day of the world, or, if he were to die right now, what would happen?

The last six lines show a battle in Donne's mind. He is trying to show cause for the sins of the past saying that evil or foulness is a sign of stubbornness.

6. "Since she whom I loved," III, No. 1; XVII

Since she whome I lovd, hath payed her last debt
 To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,

And her soule early into heaven ravished,
 Wholy in heavenly things my mind is sett.
 Here the admyring her my mind did whett
 To seeke thee God; so streames do shew the head,
 But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst has fed,
 A holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yett.
 But why should I begg more love, when as thou
 Dost wooe my soule, for hers offering all thine:
 And dost not only feare lease I allow
 My love to saints and Angels, things divine,
 But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
 Least the World, fleshe, yea Devill putt thee out (6:14-15).

With the death of his wife, John Donne became more closely tied to inevitable death. The sixth sonnet of the cycle is a highly personal love poem dealing with Donne's love for his wife. In the first two lines, Donne refers to Ann as his "good." Evidently, he felt that she was one of the few good things that had happened to him. Since Ann's death, Donne had thought only of heavenly things; of God and possibly of seeing Ann at the end of time. The last part of the sonnet reveals Donne's realization that his time should not be spent on earthly loves for they take his mind away from heavenly things.

7. "At the round earth's imagined corners," I, No. 4; VII

At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
 Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
 From death, you numberlesse infinities
 Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe,
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
 All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
 Despaire, law, chance, hath slaine, and you whose eyes,
 Shall behold God, and never tast deaths woe.
 But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space,
 For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,
 'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace,

When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,
 Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good
 As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood (6:8).

The general judgment at the last day is depicted in this sonnet. The trumpets of the angels and the redeemed souls rising to meet their new bodies are both found here. Donne says that if at the time of judgment men find their sins are holding them away from God, it will be too late. So Donne beseeches God to show him the way to repentance that he may be ready. The last lines show the love of God once again in the shed blood of Christ sealing man's redemption.

8. "Thou hast made me," II, No. 1; I

Thou hast made me, And shall thy works decay?
 Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
 I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
 And all my pleasures are like yesterday,
 I dare not move my dimme eyes any way,
 Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
 Such terrour, and my feebled flesh doth waste
 By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doth weigh;
 Onely thou art above, and when towards thee
 By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe;
 But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
 That not one houre I can my selfe sustaine;
 Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art
 And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart (6:12-13).

Donne questions God as to whether He will allow him to perish. The constant trials and griefs which have confronted Donne seem to be all he can see. He asks God to save him ("Repaire me now"). If he moves his eyes off the straight road ahead, death, "despaire", and terror are seen

on all sides. Lines nine and ten show that God is the only one who can help. Death is constantly tempting Donne and without the strength of God, he cannot manage even one hour.

9. "Death be not proud," I, No. 6; X

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
 Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe,
 For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
 Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee;
 From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
 Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
 And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
 Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
 Thou art slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men.
 And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
 And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
 And better than thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?
 One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
 And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die (6:9).

John Donne wrote this sonnet as No. 10 of nineteen. Benjamin Britten uses it to sum up the song cycle. In the context of the rest of the sonnets used, the idea of Death dying and being no more is an excellent climax to the cycle. Donne is talking to Death in this sonnet. Death is informed that all of those whom he thinks he has won are not dead, but only asleep. More important, Donne states that death cannot kill him. Death depends upon the uncertain things of the world and dwells with the ugly things. Even drugs or spells can put man in the same state as death. Death is asked why he seems so proud when after a short sleep, the soul of redeemed man wakes for eternity never more to see Death.

CHAPTER III

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913 -)

Benjamin Britten is Britain's foremost composer today. Although noted particularly for his many operas, Britten wrote instrumental chamber works, choral works, and solo songs. Characteristic of all of his music is the individual treatment of each medium. No matter whether vocal or instrumental, each work has a sound all its own. Britten is very interested in the English poetry of the seventeenth century and has set many examples of this to music. In this way, he brought the language used during that time back to its full use in the vocal field.

Britten was born in Lowestoft, in Suffolk, the youngest of four children. His mother, a pianist and over-all musician, gave Britten great encouragement and musical opportunities. Through the Lowestoft Choral Society, of which Mrs. Britten was secretary, young Britten met many traveling artists. His musical talents were apparent even at the age of two when he would ask to play the piano.

Britten began composing at the age of five, using common household events as texts. Abstract forms appeared in his writings at an early age. Frank Bridge, Britten's first and foremost teacher and friend, introduced music of many styles to Britten but never tried to dissuade him from

the abstract forms so apparent even at the age of twelve. Through Bridge, Britten developed a thorough knowledge of the musical art.

The Royal College of Music in London awarded Britten a scholarship. Entering the college at sixteen, he studied with John Ireland in composition, and Arthur Benjamin on the piano. Two compositions, Sinfonietta, the first to be performed publicly, and A Boy Was Born, were written while Britten was attending college (9:2).

Britten became very interested in contemporary music, but found it hard to obtain at the college. Through a college award, Britten had the opportunity to spend six months in Vienna studying with Alban Berg. Unfortunately, college administrative influences on his family made the trip impossible. The trip would have been an important step in his compositional development. Britten stated: "It might have taught me how to unlock gates I did in fact have to climb over" (9:3).

After college, Britten became a teacher and accompanist in documentary films. Through this medium, he met W. H. Auden who became a great influence. Britten worked on films with Auden from 1935 to 1939. During these years, he supplied incidental music and radio features. Auden supplied the text for a number of Britten's compositions.

Britten, who was opposed to war and violence, moved to the United States when the war in Europe began and lived here for three years. Here, he once again wrote for Auden, who also had moved. While in the United States, Britten wrote his first opera, Paul Bunyan.

Britten decided to return to England, but before he left, Koussevitzky approached Britten about writing another opera. Paul Bunyan had not been too successful, but Koussevitzky saw a great talent in the young artist. Finances held Britten back from large productions such as opera. However, Koussevitzky made arrangements through the Koussevitzky Foundation to provide financial backing for Britten's next opera. Britten returned to England and there wrote his first great opera, Peter Grimes. Since then, he has become known as the greatest English composer of opera since Purcell. The years following have seen an opera per year.

The Rape of Lucretia, written in 1946, opened the field of performance for Britten. He traveled with the opera company all over Europe, directing the production (9:5).

Britten is a very professional musician and one of his greatest critics. He is deeply versed in all areas of music and is perturbed by musicians who think they are knowledgeable in an area and who attempt to talk their way around it.

Britten now lives in Aldeburgh, in Suffolk, where he does all of his writing. The morning is set aside for composing and the afternoon for relaxing and contemplating the writings for the next day.

I. TECHNIQUES USED IN SETTING THE HOLY SONNETS

The music to The Holy Sonnets of John Donne was written in one week in 1945. They were Britten's first setting of sonnets after five years of composing in other media. Britten enjoys the restricted form of the sonnet. "It is the kind of self-discipline which always fascinates him, to work in conditions which exact the quickest response in skill and concentration . . ." (9:69). Because of a reaction to an inoculation, Britten wrote the sonnets in bed while fighting a high fever. This probably had some influence on his writing as did his previous visit to a German concentration camp. Both of these incidents probably put Britten closer to the frame of mind in which Donne wrote the text.

Melody. Disjunct and conjunct movement are both used effectively in the melodic setting. However, most of the melodies are disjunct, moving from low notes to high notes and back within just a few beats. An example of this are the first few measures of No. 1.

Example 1. "Oh my blacke Soule," measures 3-8.

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art
 Sum-mon-ed By sick-nesse, death's he-
 -raid, and cham-pi - on;

Movement down on "blacke Soule" musically portrays the emotion involved. Immediately, the line rises on "summoned" followed by the melody beginning low again to build back up on "champion." The rise and fall of the melodic line combined with this text automatically brings out the desired emotion. Later in the same song, Britten's melody rises and falls building up emotion for "imprisoned."

Example 2. Ibid., measures 21-23.

wish-eth that still he might be im-prisoned.

Immediately following, the melody smooths out to suggest the change of mood at the word "grace."

Example 3. Ibid., measures 24-25.

espress e sost.

f *p*

Yet grace, if thou re - pent, thou canst not lacke;

Another use of wide skips is in No. 5. The first two measures include the interval of a diminished eleventh within one measure, building for the important question asked at this point.

Example 4. "What if this present," measures 3-4.

f

What if this pre - sent were the world's last night?

More skips are used on "Teares," "Blood," and "forgiveness." Each time the word is being emphasized.

Example 5. Ibid., measures 12-13, 15, 19-20.

Teares in his eyes Blood fills his frowne

- judge thee into hell, Which pray'd for-givenessse for his foes

In No. 8, Britten moves the melody very fast and builds the intensity again by skipping back and forth, interspersing smooth movement.

Example 6. "Thou hast made me," measures 36-39.

pp *cresc.*

Des-paire be-hind, and death be-fore doth cast Such terror

Within this same song, the phrases "onely thou art above" and "I rise againe" are both given a rising melody within two measures.

Example 7. Ibid., measures 45-47, 51-53.

ff 40

One - ly thou art a - bove,

40

I rise a - gain;

Another technique which Britten frequently uses is the declamation of one tone. This gives a feeling of recitative in emphasizing certain ideas (Example 5).

A technique contrasting to the skips is the smooth, lyric line. This technique is found mostly in two numbers: the beginning of No. 3 and No. 6.

Example 8. "O might those sighes and teares," measures 3-4.

pp *lento*

O might those sighes and teares

Example 9. "Since she whom I loved," measures 1-5.

Handwritten musical notation for Example 9, measures 1-5. The score is in G-flat major (two flats) and 3/4 time. It features a melodic line with a piano (pp) dynamic marking. The lyrics are: "Since she whom I Lov'd hath payd her last debt".

Example 10. Ibid., measures 17-19.

Handwritten musical notation for Example 10, measures 17-19. The score is in G-flat major (two flats) and 3/4 time. It features a melodic line with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The lyrics are: "Here thee ad-myrr-ing her my mind did whett To".

Britten also uses the broken chord a number of times. No. 1 has chord outlines in the melody on almost every phrase for the first two pages (Example 1).

Rhythm. The rhythms which Britten employs follow the inflection and accent of the word. In No. 1, the important words such as "Oh," "Soule," and "death's" are given longer notes so the words will be emphasized more. Also the accented syllables such as the first syllables of "summoned" and "champion" are given longer notes (Example 1).

Britten uses the triplet figure to combine words in a smooth unaccented manner where the performer might otherwise put incorrect accents. Following are three examples of the triplet used in this way.

Example 11. "Oh my blacke Soule," measure 12.

And durst not turne to whence hee is fled,

Example 12. Ibid., measures 26-29.

BUT who shall give thee that grace to be-ginne?

Example 13. "O might those sighes and teares," measures 7-8.

I might in this ho-ly dis-content

In the final phrase of No. 5, the triplet is used as an embellishment on the word "shake."

Example 14. "Oh, to vex me," measures 64-67.

Britten uses irregular groupings of notes on one beat. Smoothness and recitative qualities are added to No. 7 by grouping five sixteenth notes on one beat. This figure appears in almost every measure on the important words. Britten also adds emphasis marks over the notes so they will be lengthened as in rubato. By using this technique throughout the song, it becomes a unifying motive.

Example 15. "At the round earth's imagined corners."

On the last page of No. 7, Britten wants the words "how to repent" brought out more than the previous words with the five note motive. He slows the passage down by using triplets.

Syncopation is used throughout the sonnets to add intensity and movement as in No. 3.

Example 16. "O might those sighes and teares," measures 4-6.

returne a - gaine in - to my breast and eyes,

Previous to the above passage, Britten uses the rest and syncopation to give the feeling of a sigh (Example 8).

The heightening of intensity is accomplished very well in No. 9 with the use of syncopation on the last quarter of the beat. This figure then launches into a dotted-note pattern on the words "poyson, warre, and sickness."

Example 17. "Death, be not proud," measures 41-44.

And dost with poy-son, warre, And
sick-ness dwell,

Britten uses the rhythmic combinations and motives to enhance the text with an amazing fluency.

Harmony. The harmony of the cycle may be characterized as dissonant for the most part. Britten combines a disjunct melody with a consonant harmony or a conjunct melody with a dissonant harmony giving an overall dissonance.

In No. 1, the accompaniment has repeated F-sharps in octaves while the melody is moving in wide skips. The melody falls a number of times on long notes which are dissonant to the F-sharp (Example 1). Further in the same phrase, the melody moves down to F, again on a lengthened tone.

The introduction to No. 3 gives an example of the dissonant harmony with the conjunct melody. Here the

accompaniment begins softly, alternating dissonance and consonance. The melody then begins lyrically but is dissonant against the harmony for partial beats, resolving to a unison each time.

Example 18. "O might those sighes and teares," measures 1-4.

Andante con moto ($\text{♩} = 48$)

PP *espress*

PP *lamentoso*

O might those sighes and teares

PP

Chromatic movement is quite common. In No. 1, the accompaniment moves chromatically when the melody line begins to move through different keys.

Example 19. "Oh my blacke Soule," measures 10-11.

The musical score for Example 19 consists of three systems. The first system is the vocal line in G major (one sharp) and 2/2 time, with lyrics: "pil - grim, which a - broad hath done trea - son,". The second system shows the piano accompaniment in the right hand, and the third system shows the piano accompaniment in the left hand. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/2. The music features chromatic movement in the accompaniment as the melody line moves through different keys.

Britten also uses harmonic repetition as a unifying factor. In No. 2, the accompaniment has a pattern of three partial chords, which is repeated in octaves for four measures and then moves down a minor third, suggesting a key change from G minor to E minor. This same pattern continues through the entire song with slight variations.

Example 20. "Batter my heart," measure 1.

Presto agitato ($\text{♩} = 152$) *f*

4/8

4/8 (12/16)

4/8 (12/16)

In many places where the melody has a chord outline, the harmonic background is either in octaves or a repeated pitch as in No. 1, or the accompaniment doubles the melodic chordal outline as in No. 8. At this point, the accompaniment doubles the voices one beat behind, again adding to the dissonance (Example 7).

Harmonic consonance is found in No. 6, the most lyric of the cycle. Here, a continual broken chord pattern supports the flowing melody.

Example 21. "Since she whom I loved," measures 1-4.

Handwritten musical score for Example 21, measures 1-4. The score is in G-flat major (two flats) and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Since she whom I lov'd hath payd her last debt To".

The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 1 and 2, and the second system contains measures 3 and 4. The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand part with a steady eighth-note accompaniment and a left-hand part with chords and eighth-note patterns. The vocal line is marked *pp* (pianissimo) and features a melodic line with a long slur over the first two measures and a shorter slur over the last two measures.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

The sonnets of John Donne, because of their vitality and deep emotional impact, are some of the best poems which could be set to music. This author feels that he was able to gain an even closer affinity to the music by having experienced the spiritual truths which are so well stated in these sonnets.

Through the combination of disjunct and conjunct melodies, the wide variety of rhythmic treatment, and the frequently dissonant harmony, Benjamin Britten has brought out the meaning of these sonnets in an extraordinary manner.

Contemporary music may seem most difficult when first viewed, but the rich vocal experience, and in this cycle the deep spiritual experience, will over-shadow the long hours needed to master such compositions.

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APPENDIX

Index of Vocal Solo Works by Benjamin Britten

The Birds.

On This Island.

1. "Let the Florid music praise!"
2. "Now the leaves are falling fast."
3. "Seascape."
4. "Nocturne."
5. "As it is, plenty."

Fish in the unruffled lakes.

Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo.

1. "Si come nella penna (XVI)."
2. "Ah chi più dell' io mai (XXXI)."
3. "Veggio co' bei vostri occhi (XXX)."
4. "Tu sai ch' io so (LV)."
5. "Rendete agl' occhi miei (XXXVIII)."
6. "S'un castro amor (XXXII)."
7. "Spirito ben nato (XXIV)."

Folksong Arrangements, Vol. I: British Isles.

1. Salley Gardens.
2. Little Sir William.
3. Bonny Earl O'Moray.
4. O can ye sew cushions?
5. The trees they grow so high.
6. The Ash Grove.
7. Oliver Cromwell.

The Holy Sonnets of John Donne.

1. "Oh my blacke Soule!"
2. "Batter my heart."
3. "O might those sighes and teares."
4. "Oh, to vex me."
5. "What if this present."
6. "Since she whom I loved."
7. "At the round earth's imagined corners."
8. "Thou hast made me."
9. "Death, be not proud."

Folksong Arrangements, Vol. II: France.

1. La Noël passée.
2. Voici le printemps.
3. Fileuse.
4. Le roi s'en va-t-en chasse.
5. La belle est au jardin d'amour.
6. Il est quelqu' un sur terre.
7. Eho! Eho!
8. Quand j' 'etais chez mon père.

Canticle in Memory of Dick Sheppard.

Folksong Arrangements, Vol. III: British Isles.

1. The Plough Boy.
2. There's none to soothe.
3. Sweet Polly Oliver.
4. The Miller of Dee.
5. The foggy, foggy dew.
6. O waly, waly.
7. Come you not from Newcastle?

A Charm of Lullabies.

1. "Cradle Song."
2. "The Highland Balou."
3. "Sephestin's Lullaby."
4. "A Charm."
5. "The Nurse's Song."

Canticle II, Abraham and Issac.Winter Words.

1. "At Day-Close in November."
2. "Midnight on the Great Western."
3. "Wagtail and Baby."
4. "The Little Old Table."
5. "The Choirmaster's Burial."
6. "Proud Songsters."
7. "At the Railway Station, Upway."
8. "Before Life and After."