

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Benjamin Britten

SUPPORT NOTES

THE BACKGROUND TO SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

The details surrounding the writing and first performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are sketchy. It is thought to have been written about 1595 at the beginning of what is usually nominated as his 'second period'. More than likely it was written for a festive celebration, probably a wedding, perhaps that of Elizabeth Cary, goddaughter to Queen Elizabeth. If this was so, then the Queen herself might have been present as the guest of honour.

THE BACKGROUND TO BRITTEN'S OPERA

The first performance of the opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was given at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1960. It had been 15 years since Britten first made his mark on the operatic world with his masterpiece *Peter Grimes* and during that period, he had followed up that success with no fewer than 5 other operatic masterpieces (*The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd*, *Gloriana* and *The Turn of the Screw*) all of which are viewed as standard repertory today, with increasing performances worldwide.

Britten and his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, had established the Aldeburgh Festival in the little Suffolk fishing village where they lived, in 1948. For the Festival of 1960, it was suggested that he write an opera. As this was a comparatively sudden decision, there was no time to get a libretto written, so they had to take one that was ready to hand.

Peter Pears suggested the idea of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There would have to be some serious editing of course, as to set the complete play would have led to an opera of Wagnerian dimensions. In a skilful bit of editing, Pears cut the original play by approximately half, still managing to maintain the integrity of the story and the characters. Britten completed the opera (full score and all) in a record seven months.

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SYNOPSIS

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is different from his other plays, in that there is no main plot but rather three different stories and sets of characters which are quite separate, yet linked by the most delicate of threads. Like all Shakespeare's works, the twists and turns of the story line can be quite complex. However, I shall try to make this synopsis as concise and as illuminating as possible.

ACT 1

The scene is the wood outside Athens, at night. Fairies appear. They are Tytania's servants and as they go about their assigned tasks, they are interrupted by Puck, the mischievous attendant to Oberon. He harasses the fairies until the arrival of their King and Queen, who are at odds with one another over the possession of an Indian page boy. Tytania angrily departs, vowing never to release the boy to him and Oberon plots to avenge the injury. He sends Puck on an errand to fetch a herb whose juice "... will make man or woman madly dote upon the next living creature that it sees." Oberon disappears and the wood becomes silent.

The silence is interrupted by two mortals. Lysander and Hermia are fleeing Athens to avoid the forced marriage of Hermia to Demetrius. As they depart, Demetrius enters in pursuit. He himself is pursued by Helena who is desperately in love with him but whose loved is spurned in return. Oberon overhears their argument and when Puck returns with the herb, he instructs him to repair the relationship by applying to Demetrius' eyes the juice of the flower. "Ye shall know the man by the Athenian garments he hath on",

says Oberon to Puck. Of

course, unknown to Oberon, there are two such men in the wood. The seed of confusion and misrepresentation is planted.

We now meet our third group of characters, the six Rustics. They have come to the wood to rehearse their play, which they are to perform for the Duke at his wedding celebrations. Quince attempts to assign each man his part but is frequently thwarted by Bottom, a self appointed authority on most things and it seems, capable of playing all the parts by himself. However things are finally sorted out and they arrange a forward rehearsal, and with their final whispered '*adieu*', once more the wood is left empty.

Hermia and Lysander are lost and exhausted and they lie down to sleep. Puck enters and with Oberon's description of Demetrius also suiting Lysander, he squeezes the juice of the magic flower into his sleeping eyes. The comedy of errors begins. Helena, still in pursuit of Demetrius, comes across the sleeping Lysander and wakes him. Under the spell of the herb, Lysander ardently declares his love for Helena who understandably is perplexed. She runs out followed by Lysander. Hermia wakes with a start and follows where Lysander led.

Tytania enters with her retinue of fairies whom she bids sing her to sleep. Oberon appears and administers the juice into her eyes, bidding her "*wake when some vile thing is near.*"

ACT 2

Tytania is asleep in her bower. The Rustics enter to rehearse their play. Having sorted out some 'production problems', they commence the rehearsal observed by Puck. He follows Bottom at one of his exits and transforms the mortal into an ass. His companions, terrified run off. Alone and somewhat apprehensive, Bottom sings a crude song to raise his spirits. His bellowing awakens Tytania, who under Oberon's spell falls in love with him. She assigns her attendants to cater for his every whim and after much indulgence, music and dancing, Bottom falls asleep in the arms of Tytania.

Oberon expresses his delight at Tytania's predicament. However, Puck has been mistaken over the lovers and Demetrius and Hermia are clearly at cross purposes. Puck is dispatched to find Helena, and Oberon squeezes more juice into Demetrius' eyes before Puck returns with Lysander and Helena. Helena upbraids Lysander for his faithlessness to Hermia. Demetrius awakes, sees Helena and now she has two adoring swains.

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Hermia's entry adds a further complication and Helena decides she is the victim of a plot. There ensues a bitter quarrel which becomes very personal on the part of the ladies. They all depart, the ladies at odds, the men to fight a duel. Oberon who has observed this, becomes furious and vents his rage on Puck. His anger spent, he instructs Puck to seek out the lovers and right the wrong. This time Puck gets it right and the correctly paired lovers are lulled to sleep by the fairies. All that is left is for Puck to administer the juice into Lysander's eyes.

ACT 3

Dawn reveals Tytania and Bottom and the four lovers still asleep. Oberon undoes the spell on Tytania and they are reconciled.

The lovers slowly wake and they too are reconciled. They leave and Bottom, left alone on stage begins to wake. He sings of the wondrous 'dream' that he has had. As he departs, the other rustics come in, still at a loss to explain Bottom's disappearance. Without him it will be impossible to perform the play for the Duke. Their despair is turned to joy at the reappearance of Bottom. In a flurry of jubilation, they make their preparations and depart for the palace.

Scene ii: Theseus's Palace

Theseus and Hippolyta enter and in a few phrases voice their impatience that the wedding events of the day have not yet given way to the consummation of the night. The four lovers enter and beg successfully for the Duke's pardon and blessing. It is then time for the evening's entertainment as the Rustics present their play (a delightful parody of opera seria - more on that later).

Midnight tolls and all the mortals retire. It is now left to the fairies to give their benediction to the house and the recently married couples, and for Puck to bid farewell to the audience.

THERE ARE FAIRIES AT THE BOTTOM OF MY GARDEN

Belief in the fairy world stretches far back into the history of human folklore. Every community seems to have its own superstitions concerning these beings that are neither human nor divine. One theory of their origins holds that the first inhabitants of the European continent were smallish dark people who lived more or less underground and fled to the swamps, woods and hills when the taller white invaders occupied their land. They were thought to have magical powers and although they could be mischievous, were generally thought to be benevolent toward humans. From these beginnings sprang the mythology of elves, goblins and fairies that has enriched the cultures of almost every nation on the globe.

The fairy stories that have come down to us today are really just reworkings of the ancient myths of the Greeks and the Romans, who believed that all sorts of objects and places had their own special spirits. There were fauns, spirits of the countryside, and naiads or water nymphs and spirits of the woods and hills. The incorporation of these characters into the spoken and written traditions of the various cultures, contributed attributes that were unique to the particular locality, while maintaining some common characteristics. So the pixies in the West of England in reality, are cousins to the trolls in Scandinavia, the leprechauns of Ireland and the kobolds of Germany. The relatively recent stories of Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and J.M. Barrie (*Peter Pan*) illustrate these local characteristics, but probably the most interesting, as far as lineage with the original idea, are the stories of J.R.R. Tolkien. His hobbits seem much closer to the smallish dark people that were said to be the original European inhabitants than the delicate-winged 'tinkerbells' of today's children's stories.

It is not surprising that Shakespeare knew a lot about supernatural beings and their activities. He was brought up in a small market town, and fairy stories were more common in the country than in the cities. Also, he read widely and by doing so he gathered information on many traditions. The fairy characters in his *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, certainly have their origins in more than one tradition. In the next 'newsletter', I will examine these characters and their origins in a little more detail.

I like the idea of nature being possessed by spirits or fairies and it is an idea we will pursue in our production next year. The fairies *are* the wood, the wind, the dewdrops and by their existence they bless us as nature blesses us. They can also be quite mischievous as can nature, but ultimately we exist with them and under their spell. As we try to find our way out of the metaphorical woods (as the mortal characters in the play try to do), Shakespeare and Britten hold a mirror to our own state and by thus looking at what is reflected there, we may find cause to whisper to ourselves with gentle amusement, Puck's sobering words:

"Lord what fools these mortals be"

BRITTEN'S TONAL SYSTEM IN 'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM'

When Britten finished his studies at the Royal College of Music in the summer of 1934, it was his wish to further his studies abroad. The master he wanted to work with was none other than Alban Berg, one of the 'big three' of the Expressionist School, whose opera *Wozzeck* he had recently heard for the first time. As it happened, such a wish never eventuated. The powers-that-be at the Royal College advised his parents that such a move would be unwise. Not only was there a distrust of the avant garde (Britten's application to the College library to obtain a score of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* was knocked back), but there was an implication that there was a sort of 'moral' decadence associated with the expressionist school and with serialism in particular. Such a stance says as much about the conservatism of English music at the time, which was dominated by the dense pastoral textures of the Nationalist school, as about Britten's own upbringing.¹ It is an interesting exercise to speculate as to what course Britten's style would have taken if indeed such a collaboration eventuated. He took the advice of his family and mentors and stayed in England and commenced work as a professional composer, mainly writing music for stage and films in those early days.

The dodecaphonic or twelve-tone system, as formulated by Schoenberg, may have held some fascination for Britten when considering working with Berg, but if so it was short lived and it was never developed in his compositions. At the heart of Schoenberg's system was the principle of tonal equality. In opposition to this, Britten's expressive medium was via a system of tonal hierarchies. In fact, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is a scene in the Rustic's play, where Britten parodies the technique. Let's hope that it was with tongue-in-cheek that after Snout's monologue as Wall (wherein he sings in Schoenbergian sprechstimme, using all 12 tones with appropriate inversions and in correct retrograde motion), Britten places Hippolyta's comment:

"This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard"

So, how do we reconcile Britten's rejection of serialism with his obvious fascination with pan-tonalism. There were rumors of defection to the dodecaphonic cause when in 1954, he composed *The Turn of the Screw*, a chilling ghost story based on a novel by Henry James. The construction of the opera is masterly, and to achieve the taut structure which serves to 'turn the screw' ever tighter, the entire opera is a set of variations based on the 12 notes of the dodecaphonic scale. At the time, *The Turn of the Screw* was wrongly considered to be a step towards his acceptance of Schoenbergian principles. But it must be said that Britten, neither in 'Screw' or elsewhere, ever regarded his use of 'pan-tonalism' as a denial of tonal hierarchies. Britten used the system to embrace his idea of **totality** not equality. It was to symbolize the *all*. It is from such a perspective that we must view his use of the pan-tonal system in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for such a system dominates the texture of the work.

¹ The composer Gordon Jacob once wrote of his teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams that "*He was an instinctive poet in music and at that time had a horror of professional skill and technical ability.*"

From the very beginning of the opera, with the mysterious sliding string chords, we are drawn into his sound world. This is no mere backcloth to the action but an evocation of the living, breathing world. The totality of the world is symbolized by the use of sliding tonalities based on all twelve notes of the scale, although, typical of Britten's system of tonal hierarchies, one can perceive a definite reference point in G. Now, as you know, Shakespeare defines three distinct sets of characters in his play. Their co-existence certainly propels the story by various encounters and interactions, but as to the impact of one upon another, he leaves us to make of it what we may. There is no attempt to unify. Britten in his opera has chosen to employ a musical structure and tonality that has an interactive voice, permeating the work and embracing all characters, whether "torn by desperate passions or by ludicrous aspirations."

Perhaps the most interesting and expansive example that I can give occurs in Act II - which may well be called, the 'sleep' act. The four chords that are sounded at the beginning, set out all 12 notes (without repetitions, except for octave doublings), each chord having a distinct orchestral timbre.²

Muted strings. Muted brass. Woodwind. Harps and Percussion.

Throughout the ensuing Act, these chords form the basis or 'ground'³ for a set of variations which continue throughout the act, and all the characters share in the unifying music of prelude, interludes and postlude which again contrives an emphasis that is not explicit in Shakespeare. Whether for sophisticated lover or rough tradesman, it symbolizes sleep and dreams as the familiar gateway to a blessed realm of fantasy that is otherwise accessible only through enchantment. "Thus humans and 'supernaturals' alike are shown to share an existence in which the absurdity may stand revealed as a clue to essential truth."

² The same chord sequence, albeit in a different sequence, occurs at the start of the final movement of his *Serenade* (Opus 31), evoking the totality of the world of sleep in a setting of the sonnet 'To Sleep' by Keats.

³ Britten's link with Purcell is well illustrated here. The baroque and distinctly Purcellian device of the 'ground bass', is linked with the Doctrine of the Affections (that process of rationalizing emotional states by use of rhetorical principles). This led to the 'ground' having associations with things of the earth or the 'ground'. Thus, Purcell's use of it is predictable when, for example Dido is 'laid in earth' or Oedipus conjures up from the nether regions, the ghost of his father Laius, in his great song, *Music for a while* or when, as a prelude to sleep (on the 'ground' of course), such is used as a basis of his *Evening Hymn*

MORE FAIRIES AT THE BOTTOM OF MY GARDEN

Above, I spoke in general terms regarding fairy traditions in England and Europe as a background to the sprites that Shakespeare casts in his play. Let me now take you through these individual characters in a little more detail - their origins and personal characteristics.

TYTANIA

Tytania is the fairy with the longest history. She has links with the pagan deities of Roman times and although not portrayed as a goddess in Shakespeare's story, she does share similar traits. For example, early in the play, she is described as having devoted women followers ("*His mother was a votress of my order*" 2, I, 123ff.).

The Roman poet Ovid, first mentions her name as an alternative name for Diana, the goddess of chastity (although this virtue cannot be attributed to Shakespeare's Queen, as she is married to Oberon.) The fact that the quarrel between Oberon and Tytania is the cause of havoc in the mortal sphere, not only in the lives of humans but also in the elemental realm (2, I, 82ff.), also links her character with the gods and goddesses of ancient times, whose personal lives, it was said, impacted upon the smooth running of the seasons as well as the personal lives of mortals.

Tytania was also known by other names. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, written around about the same time, Shakespeare refers to her as Queen Mab in Mercutio's famous monologue.

OBERON

Oberon's first literary appearance as king of the fairy realm can be traced back to the French medieval romance, *Huon de Bordeaux*. In this poem, Oberon (originally Alberon in the French, and Alberich in the German - yes, the same character from Wagner's *Ring*, who steals the gold from the Rhinemaidens- a much darker character than his predecessors) is a dwarf-king, who helps the hero achieve his goals by magical means. It was in the English translation by John Bouchier that the name Oberon was first used. This translation was published shortly before Shakespeare wrote his play.

PUCK

Like Oberon and Tytania, Puck was not a character solely of his imagination alone. People of Shakespeare's time would speak of *a* puck, or *the* puck in general reference to a *kind* of fairy. They were mischievous beings, able to change their shapes into human or animal forms and were especially likely to appear as flickering lights to mislead travelers in the night. However, the puck was a friendly spirit at heart and was often called Robin Goodfellow. He was sympathetic to lovers and was particularly ready to help the industrious housewife in her daily chores. His attributes are clearly stated early in Act 2. (2, I, 32-42). Shakespeare places him at the centre of the play as Oberon's agent. He alone is responsible for all the complications that arise.

PEASEBLOSSOM, COBWEB, MUSTARDSEED and MOTH.

Unlike the above characters, the four solo fairies are Shakespeare's own invention. Their names suggest creatures of exceeding smallness and fragility and something of a contrast to the almost human characteristics of the others. (Is this why Puck takes such

delight in harassing them?). They are the attendants to Tytania, and to emphasize their protective role, Britten in the opera, gives them music that is quite military in character.

TRIVIA

- #1. Some other operas using Shakespeare stories include: Verdi's *Otello*, *Macbeth* and *Falstaff*, Bellini *I Capuletti e Montecchi*, Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* and Reimann's *King Lear*. Can you think of any others?
- #2. Britten's opera was the first to cast the countertenor voice in a major operatic role since the age of the baroque. His choice was inspired by the singing of Alfred Deller, who created the role of Oberon.

Origin of the Rustic's names.

The six Rustics, or workmen, are given names that reflect their respective professions. However their derivation is not as obvious to us today as it would have been for the people of Elizabethan England. Here's are possible explanations.

- Quince**, the carpenter. His name is taken from the wedge-shaped pieces of wood used in building. These were called 'quions'.
- Snug**, the joiner. The importance of a joiner ensuring a 'snug' fit of his woodwork gives rise to this moniker.
- Snout**, the tinker. One of the tinker's most regular tasks was to repair the spouts or 'snouts' of kettles and teapots.
- Bottom**, the weaver. There is an old medical term in weaving called 'weaver's bottom' where the tail bones get sore from long stints at the loom. The name could also derive from the device onto which the thread is wound is called the 'bobbin'.
- Flute**, the bellows mender. The whistling noise made by the bellows when blowing air onto the coals give could give Flute his name.
- Starveling**, the tailor. There was a popular belief at the time that tailors were always very thin.

Joseph Ward, (a cherished teacher and colleague at the Queensland Conservatorium for many years) created the role of Starveling. He was dubbed by Britten and Pears, "Joe, the first excellent Moon (pp!)" because of the amusing manner he devised of singing this character in the play-within-a-play.

Writing for the voice - Britten and the English language

I would like to deal with two separate, yet linked topics in the following article.

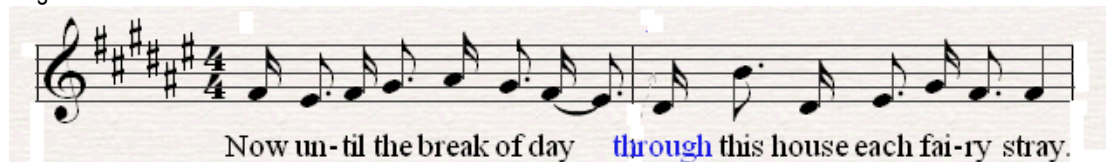
Firstly, I would like to examine Britten's deftness in the setting the English language- the environment in which he found himself and the legacy to which he responded Secondly, I will look at how he was inspired by the human voice and the musical and vocal qualities he most admired in his interpreters.

Britten and the English Language.

Following the death of Henry Purcell in 1695, English music was dominated by the Italian style and language. There were flashes of local greatness with such imported stars as Handel (although his setting of his adopted language is usually agreed to be somewhat idiosyncratic) and such homegrown talents as Arne and Hooke, both talented composers but whose gifts were always going to be in the shadow of the mighty Handel. When pointing to highlights over the next 150-200 years it usually centres around visits by such European luminaries as Haydn, CPE Bach, Mendelssohn etc rather than any homegrown talent. Even as late as the C19th, the Italian influence was such that all operas performed at Covent Garden were done so in Italian. Ludicrously, this included the first English performance of Stanford's *The Veiled Prophet of Korassan*. In such a manner, English music languished for some 150 years. Around the middle of the C19th, Stanford and Parry, following nationalist trends in European countries, began to restore to English music a character of its own. They and their more famous students led by Vaughan Williams, set the English language with restored pride by using techniques and 'rules' which were the basis for compositional processes in the European Schools. For example, the technique of word setting as laid down by Wolf and his contemporaries, that of one note per syllable, ensured the prosaic intactness of the poem and perhaps the speech-like delivery of the text, but perhaps straightjacketed vocal delivery in other ways. When Britten came on the scene, he found the prevailing techniques insufficient for his expressive needs. He looked for a model, not to his English or European contemporaries, but back 300 years to his predecessor, Henry Purcell. In an article written in 1945, Britten talks about this influence.

“One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell. In the past hundred years, English writing for the voice has been dominated by strict subservience to logical speech rhythms, despite the fact that accentuation according to sense often contradicts the accentuation demanded by emotional content. Good recitative should transform the natural intonations and rhythms of everyday speech into memorable musical phrases (as with Purcell), but in more stylized music, the composer should not deliberately avoid unnatural stresses if the prosody of the poem and the emotional situation demand them, nor be afraid of a high-handed treatment of words, which may need prolongation far beyond their common speech-length, or a speed of delivery that would be impossible in conversation.”

There are many examples of this method in “Dream”, but one particularly delightful section illustrates the technique he speaks of extremely well. When the fairies enter Theseus' palace to issue their blessing at the end of the opera, they sing.....



...on paper, the stresses seem unnatural and awkward, but when you listen to it, you will surely agree that nothing could be more apt and beautiful.

Britten also restored to the setting of the English language a virtuosity and dramatic character that also has its roots in the music of Purcell. Amidst the halcyon tones of English music in the first part of this century, Britten's settings fairly burst on to the scene. To those who liked it was arresting. However, among the conservative pastoral tones that dominated the English music scene at that time, his music seemed precocious and threatening. In reviewing one of the young Britten's compositions for a RCM scholarship, a panel of senior composers, which included Ralph Vaughan Williams and John Ireland were heard to exclaim, "What is an English public schoolboy doing writing music of this kind?" The young Britten's music was thus labeled 'clever', and his astounding technical skill was used as a rod with which to beat him. For example, after the premiere of *Our Hunting Fathers* at the Norwich festival in 1936, *The Times* reacted as though to an attack of childhood measles.

*"... if it is a stage to be got through, we wish [the composer]
safely and quickly through it"*

Such widespread attitudes from the establishment paid a large part in Britten's decision in May 1939, to leave for America. The self-imposed exile lasted 3 years.

Writing for the Voice

In discussing a casting problem with the late John Culshaw (former legendary record producer for Decca), Britten left us with no doubt as to what he looked for in a singer.

*"Frankly, I'm not very interested in beautiful voices as such.
I'm interested in the person behind the voice."*

In other words, a beautiful voice controlled by a mind was a blessing indeed, whereas a mindless, beautiful voice was of no interest to him. As Graham Johnson points out in his discussion of Britten's vocal music, self-conscious and artful vocal display, yield diminished returns when singing his music. This does not deny the technical demands that it makes on the artist, which can be formidable indeed, but in performing any great music, a humility and self-abnegation must lie in the heart of the artist.

Thus, it is not surprising then that Britten wrote most of his vocal works for specific singers in mind; singers whose imagination and intelligence he respected and who shared his vision, imagination and passion for poetry of the word. Of course the voice most associated with Britten's music is that of the tenor Peter Pears. Pears was an extremely cultivated and well-read musician, and his knowledge of literature had a strong influence upon the texts which Britten chose to set. Such appreciation and dedication to the poetic idea is evident in the manner of his vocal delivery. Diction is paramount, and his care for colour and textural inflection is unsurpassed. The unique colour of his voice is not to everyone's taste. However, it inspired Britten (and many other composers such as Walton, Tippett, Lutoslawski etc) to write some of his most wonderful music. Britten always claimed that without the inspiration of Pears' voice, he would be nothing. Graham Johnson, that supreme accompanist who worked closely with Britten and Pears, describes the tenor thus.

*"It is given to very few singers to forget themselves so entirely, to immerse
themselves in the music with such selflessness, that they make us believe
that they stand for an entire faith, that they mourn on behalf of a
whole generation. Yet this was Pears' achievement .."*

It was this quality of individuality and commitment that attracted Britten to particular singers and they remain the qualities that render his music best. Such great singers as Kathleen Ferrier, Dietrich Fischer-Diskau, Dame Janet Baker, Galina Vishnevskaya, John Shirley-Quirk are but a few among the many who along with Pears provided inspiration to the composer.

BRITTEN'S RECURRING THEMES

Night and Dreams

As you become more familiar with Britten's compositions, you will be aware of his fascination with certain ideas or themes which recur again and again in his works. For example, there is the theme of Reconciliation via the Christian notion of Salvation (as seen in *Billy Budd*, *Rape of Lucretia* etc), Age and Decay (*Gloriana*, *Death in Venice*), Night and Dreams (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Serenade*, *Nocturne* etc). On first glance, such themes seem diverse enough, but upon closer scrutiny, one is able to detect a point of origin from which they all spring. Nearly all seem to be derived from a parent theme which centres around the concept of innocence and the loss of that innocence.

In the following article, I would like to touch on the particular sub-theme of Night and Dreams (with its implications for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and its relationship to this concept of innocence. However we first need to look at the motivation for this parent theme in Britten's compositions. What was the background to this preoccupation?

To answer this we have to look to Britten's own childhood. He was from a well-to-do middle class family. His father had a successful dentistry practice in the Suffolk seaside town of Lowestoft and by all accounts, Britten's childhood was a happy one; some might say enchanted. Certainly being the youngest of four children and displaying prodigious talents (and not just in music), he was doted upon by his mother and elder sisters. This idyllic view of childhood remained with him all his life and like Ravel he identified strongly with children, writing many works specifically for and about them. However the 'innocence' of childhood inevitably gives way to the 'experience' of adulthood and such was a difficult transition for Britten, who never really came to terms with it. Like the symbolist poet Rimbaud, whose brilliant poems he set in his orchestral cycle *Les Illuminations*, Britten had experienced as a child, extraordinarily vivid sensations and impressions of the world, and in this innocent state would have registered them without any conscious or rational control. But innocence is vulnerable. As an adult he could no longer access in its pristine form, this unquestioning wonderment and amazement in Nature, which to him contained the seeds of essential truth. In this way he reflects the feelings of many other famous artists who have expressed the loss of these childlike qualities as if it were the loss of their very soul. There are some artists who have been able to retain the 'vision splendid', that unselfconscious expression of childlike wonder. Ravel was such a one and I think Mozart was too and some might say that filmmaker Steven Spielberg has retained it. Most others, however, realise the loss and are burdened by it. Blake mourns it in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where the innocent joys and happiness of the first part of the collection (..To see a World in a grain of sand...) are turned by 'experience', in the second to woe, misery and wrath. Wordsworth too, in his *Intimations of Immortality* mourns the 'refining' influence of civilization.

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore;-
 Turn whereso'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

Wordsworth knew that the essence of the artists vision and imagination is but a remnant of the child's insight and that the childhood vision and unique wisdom, once lost can never be recaptured in its pristine purity.

Britten seemed to feel this loss more than others. He was beleaguered by the burden of 'self-consciousness' and he gave memorable expression to it in so many of his compositions. If any one work sums up the theme, it is in the final song of his cycle *Winter Words*, settings to poems of Thomas Hardy. The song entitled *Before Life and After* is imbued with an extraordinary longing and sense of loss. I believe it to be one of the great songs of this century.⁴

*A time there was - as one may guess
 and as, indeed, earth's testimonies tell -
 Before the birth of consciousness,
 When all went well*

*But the disease of feeling germed,
 and primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;
 e're nescience shall be reaffirmed. How long?*

⁴ It is perhaps significant that one of his last works was an orchestral suite based upon English folksongs which bears the title (taken from this Hardy poem) *A time there was...* It is a brooding, nostalgic work, which while reflecting upon what might have been, typical of Britten's humanism, it also has within it a sense of calm resignation to what was now inevitable.

INNOCENCE AND THE WORLD OF DREAMS

"Night and Silence, these are two of the things I cherish most."

Britten's words are confirmed by the number of his compositions inspired by the nocturnal world. For him, night was a blessed time when one could experience the healing power of sleep and enter the magical world of dreams. It was a world close to that of the unselfconscious imagination of the child; a realm of enchantment viewed as it were through 'magic casements' (to quote Keat's).

Other great composer's have been similarly inspired by the night and the power of dreams. Witness Schubert's great song *Nacht und Traume*, or Faure's *Après un Reve*. But where these songs are essentially an escape from reality because the truth of day is too painful to face ('O night, give me back my dreams..' is the anguished cry of the singer on awaking in Faure's song), Britten's view of the world of dreams is a regenerative and healing one, despite the monsters that might infiltrate our reveries. The power of the Night is invoked with all its magic, childlike qualities not as a means of escape but as a means of restoring order and grace to the day.

So it is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Lovers are rejuvenated and restored by their experience in the enchanted wood. They have lived a lifetime in this single night and in the process have learned much. The fairies' blessing over them, shares a resonance with the Hardy poem quoted earlier. The fairies' world had never taken on the "tinct of wrong" or felt "the disease of feeling germed" and so the questioning longing implicit in Hardy's poem, is here given ingenuous answer by the fairies benediction.

Jack shall have Jill;

nought shall go ill;

The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well.

The Rustics too, especially Bottom, experience a wonderment which transforms and enchants their 'ordinary' lives.

I have had a dream .. says Bottom

..Past the wit of man to say what dream it was.

..... and he knows - perhaps because in his simplicity, he is closest to the innocence of the fairies who ministered to him in his 'translated' state - that his dream requires no interpretation.

Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream.

Nothing should be rationalized - as a knowing, 'experienced' adult might do - if he is to preserve the enchantment of his experience.

In the midst of all the hype and sophistication of today's society, such ideas will be dismissed as naive and fanciful. Yet this is exactly the attitude that Britten mourned. The 'real' world is so much more than that which we can rationalize and touch, and in it, the insight of the unsophisticate has much to offer us.

*To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in and hour.*

(From: *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake)

BRITTEN'S COMPOSITION PROCESS

The following is an edited version of an article by Britten from the *Observer*, 6th June 1960. In this article, Britten speaks first hand about his new opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, his compositional processes and what he looks for in his interpreters.

“Writing an opera is very different from writing individual songs: opera, of course, includes songs, but has many other musical forms and a whole dramatic shape as well. In my experience, the shape comes first. With *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as with other operas, I first had a general musical conception of the whole work in my mind. I conceived the work without any one note being defined. I could have described the music, but not played a note.

It was a particularly bad winter for me, writing it. Normally I work perfectly normal hours, in the morning and again between four and eight in the evening. Around Aldeburgh, the weather seems always to be better in the morning; it clouds over about midday and I don't work then. I cannot work at night. In Suffolk, the air is strong, and by nightfall I want to do nothing but sleep. This winter I became quite ill, but had to go on working. A lot of the third act was written when I was not at all well with flu. I didn't enjoy it. But I find that one's inclination, whether one wants to work or not, does not in the least affect the quality of the work done. Very often it is precisely after one has had what one feels to have been a wonderful morning, that one needs to watch out - perhaps one's critical faculties may have been asleep.

I haven't tried to give the opera an Elizabethan flavour. It is no more Elizabethan than Shakespeare's play is Athenian. Perhaps one or two points may seem strange. The fairies, for instance, are very different from the innocent nothings that often appear in productions of Shakespeare. I have always been struck by a kind of sharpness in Shakespeare's fairies; besides, they have some odd poetry to speak - the part about '*ye spotted snakes with double tongue*' for instance. The fairies are, after all, the guards to Tytania; so they have in places, martial music. Puck is quite a different character from anyone else in the play. He seems to me to be absolutely amoral yet innocent. he doesn't sing, but only speaks and tumbles about. I got the idea of doing Puck like this in Stockholm, where I saw some Swedish child acrobats with extraordinary agility and powers of mimicry, and suddenly realized we could do Puck that way.

Britten goes on to talk about the first production in the tiny Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh and then to the following passing thoughts on singers and acting.

(Because of the size of the hall)...“the singers do not have to sing with such uniform volume, so that the voice can be used throughout its full range of colours. Besides, on a small scale, we can choose singers who either can act or who are prepared to learn to do so. Some opera-goers seem to prefer singers who cannot act: There is a curious inverted snobbery current in this country which even prefers operatic acting to be as bad as possible. They do not want opera to be serious at all. They like singers who merely come down to the footlights and yell. For my part I want singers who can act. Mozart, Gluck and Verdi wanted the same thing how many singers know how to move? I think it's essential for every potential opera singer to have a course of movement in an opera school.”

BRITTEN AND PARODY. THE PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY.

The word parody comes from the Greek word ‘parodeia’ which literally means “a song sung alongside another” and of course is that well known literary device, which by imitating the style and manner of a particular writer or school, emphasizes the familiar conventions and (perhaps) weaknesses of that school. Being a form of satire, parody has a fair degree of respectability associated with it and has been used by such famous writers as Dryden, Racine, Fielding, Lewis Carroll and of course Shakespeare. (As well as the ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, another famous example of Shakespeare’s use of parody can be found in his *Hamlet*, where in the player’s scene, he mimics the highly dramatic style of his contemporary, Christopher Marlowe.)

Parody in music probably doesn’t have the same proud history as that of literature which stretches back to the Greeks, but it shares it’s sophistication via some rather famous advocates. Mozart’s *Musical Joke* (K. 522) is an obvious example and there are many others like Berlioz in *L’Enfance du Christ*, Offenbach in any number of his operettas, Walton in *The Bear*, along with Mahler, Ravel, Ives, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and others. From very early on in his career, Britten took delight in parody as a structural and comic device. The work which first gained him international recognition at the age of 23, was his *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*. The titles of the variations such as Romance, Aria Italiana, Wiener Waltzer etc are, as their names suggest, miniature, yet sophisticated caricatures of their source. They are of course superbly crafted, such that their origins are obvious, yet at the same time are of a character and originality that could only have come from the pen of Britten. Other examples of his use of parody can be found in his *Cabaret Songs*, *Albert Herring* and of course *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Now it must be said that the idea of using parody in the Rustics presentation of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was not originally Britten’s. He was following Shakespeare’s lead. For their presentation at the Duke’s celebrations, Quince and his fellow amateur thespians had chosen a classical story to deliver. (See ‘**Pyramus and Thisbe**’, below.) Perhaps as a way of contributing to the amateur status of the actors and their rather out-dated style of delivery, Shakespeare departs from his normal unrhymed, ‘iambic pentameter’ verse and introduces rhythms and metres which parody a variety of antiquated poetic forms. To complement Shakespeare musically, Britten parodies various operatic forms with a particular lampooning of nineteenth-century Italian opera. This style must have seemed an appropriate one for Britten to choose as a way of portraying the rather grandiose acting style of the rustics, as this operatic form developed by Donizetti and Bellini (and, it should be said, a style never close to Britten’s heart) so often “steered it’s perilous way between the banal and the melodramatic”.⁵

Britten constructs the play-within-a-play as fourteen tightly woven scenes and even though exceedingly funny, are always of a quality and charm that matches the rustics serious intent and good will.

⁵ As a private joke with his performers, Britten at this point replaces English musical terms with rather grandiose Italian ones. *Lento lamentoso*, *Presto feroce* and *Allegro disperato* are for his singers delectation alone, as the audience are not privy to the score.

'Pyramus and Thisbe'

The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe was a well known story. Based in Babylonian mythology, it was first related by the Roman writer Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* and has received several reworkings at the hands of other writers (eg: *Piramo e Tisbe* by Johann Adolf Hasse 1770, ...)

The story is that of two young lovers whose feuding families forbid their union. They are thus forced to communicate through a chink in the wall which divides the family estates. Their attempt at a rendezvous results in a series of misunderstandings and calamitous miscalculations. The tragic story ends with the suicides of the young lovers.

This fate of course is the same as that of Shakespeare's "star-crossed lovers", Romeo and Juliet. As well as the ending, the basic outline of the story has many similarities. It is intriguing to speculate that Shakespeare, in reworking this parodied version of *Pyramus and Thisbe* for 'Dream', was inspired by it to pen that most famous and touching of all his tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*. Such a speculation is given greater credence when we realize that it was written only a year or two after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Furthermore, we find Thisbe's name mentioned in the play when Mercutio, teasing the love-sick Romeo about Rosalinda, invokes by comparison the beauty of Thisbe (2, IV, 45.)