

Dialogues with the Past: Musical Settings of John Donne's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

My thesis concerns artists who have addressed the topic of death by interacting with voices from the past. In my study I trace layers of thought that begin with the seventeenth-century poetry of John Donne. Donne's works are influenced by his struggles with faith and his paradoxical understanding of mortality. They display a combination of emotion and intellect characteristic of seventeenth-century Protestant religious devotion, and provide a starting point for artistic reaction from English composers of later eras, whose spiritual worldviews were more (or less) sympathetic to Donne's as a result of their changing cultural experience.

Pelham Humfrey, a member of Charles II's Chapel Royal, set Donne's "Hymne to God the Father" to music after the Restoration. In Charles II's secular and cosmopolitan court, Donne's poem was both a voice from the past, representing a more religiously conservative era, and a parallel with the present, as a representation of Anglican devotion under English monarchy. Humfrey's setting explores archaism and contemporaneity through the combination of English lute song idioms with Italian solo madrigal and gestures from the *seconda prattica*.

Benjamin Britten, British composer of the twentieth century, interacted both with Donne's Holy Sonnets and Humfrey's setting of Donne's "Hymne to God the Father." For Britten, Donne's voice represented a more religious English past, combined with a tortured expression of spiritual searching that paralleled Britten's religious experiences in an increasingly post-Christian era. Britten's *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, and his realization of Humfrey's setting of "Hymne to God the Father," apply Donne's work to the subjects of the Holocaust and personal mortality, respectively, creating narratives of mourning that utilizes archaic Baroque idioms in the context of the contemporary song cycle.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of two great men who shaped my worldview: my teacher, the pianist and musicologist Dr. Samuel Hsu (1947-2011), and my grandfather, the Rev. Arthur W. Kuschke (1913-2010), theologian and hymnal editor.

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
Where, with the Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come,
I tune the instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke here before.¹

¹ John Donne, “Hymne to God My God, in My Sickness,” Stanza 1, Charles M. Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poems and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 271.

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CHAPTER ONE

John Donne

Introduction

This paper concerns artists who have addressed the topic of death by interacting with voices from the past. In my thesis, I trace layers of thought that start with the work of John Donne, Jacobean poet, Dean of St. Paul's, an uneasy convert to Protestantism concerned about finding answers for his mental and spiritual melancholy. Donne sought answers through religious and philosophical study, and the perusal of books by authors of the past, a practice which he compared to living in a crypt, entombed with books.

My study then progresses to Pelham Humfrey, a young composer of the Restoration, whose short life included setting the words of the late John Donne in Humfrey's most enduring work, the continuo song "Wilt thou forgive that sin where I began." In this song, which portrays the anxiety of a soul approaching death, Humfrey's characteristically sensitive text-setting provides a new layer of complexity to Donne's poetry, making it speak to a new generation through music. Before his early death, Humfrey was able to pass on some of his text-setting technique to his young pupil Henry Purcell, who condensed the styles of Humfrey and others to become the preeminent composer of the English Baroque, and whose musical voice spoke to many later generations of English composers.

My work will then observe Benjamin Britten, a twentieth-century composer who chose to interact with the past voices of Donne, Humfrey and Purcell. Britten turned to Donne's "Holy Sonnets" in 1945 when he lacked words to respond to the terrors of his concert tour of former Nazi concentration camps. His song cycle for tenor and piano, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, opens a twentieth-century dialogue with Donne, as well as with the

Restoration, whose composers' style inhabits the music of Britten's setting. In 1975 and 1976, as Britten neared the end of his life, he approached a more direct interaction with Donne and Humfrey, publishing his own realization of Humfrey's "Hymne to God the Father." Though this arrangement seems to efface Britten's voice by exchanging the act of new composition for something that resembles homage, it expresses Britten's voice in a very personal way from the midst of others' thoughts. The theme of the work, the lifelong influence of the music's style to Britten, and the instrumentation, which reflects circumstances of Britten's life as a performance collaborator, are all elements by which Britten expresses himself through voices from the past.

A Context: Voices from the past

In the first chapter of his book *The Work of Mourning*, Jacques Derrida memorializes his friend Roland Barthes, and examines the seemingly impossible topic of interaction between the dead and the living.² He exemplifies this interaction through the content of the chapter, for in it he combines theories of mourning, and memories of Barthes, with quotations from Barthes's own study of mourning, *Camera Lucida*, and his (Derrida's) critical response to that work. Derrida seeks catharsis in the face of bereavement by interacting with his dead friend's book about the death of another.

As Derrida holds this posthumous confraternity, he explains that his interaction is not with Roland Barthes, but with his own internalization of Barthes's personality and works. Barthes's name, says Derrida, no longer refers to a living person:

Since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation, since this nomination cannot become a vocation, address, or apostrophe (supposing that this possibility revoked today could ever have been pure), it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in

² Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31-67.

you, in us that I pass through this name. What happens around him and is said about him remains between us. Mourning began at this point.³

Derrida pinpoints the origin of the grieving process: mourning begins when a person has been reduced to our memory of him and our internalization of his ideas. Whether mourning occurs in the mind of a bereaved individual, alone with memories, or in a gathering of mourners at a funeral, comforting each other with reminiscence, the process of grief begins with developing and relying on internalizations of the departed person.

Though in this chapter Derrida interacts with the work of a friend and colleague, he extends his concept of mourning to describe interaction with the works of those long dead, whom he has never met. This is the first of “three possibilities” he describes “in the *time* that relates us to texts, and to their presumed, nameable, and authorized signatories...” [the italics are Derrida’s]:

The ‘author’ can already be dead, in the usual sense of the term, at the moment we begin to read ‘him,’ or when this reading orders us to write, as we say, about him, whether it be his writings or himself... This asymbiosis does not exclude a certain modality of the contemporaneous (and vice versa), for it too implies a degree of interiorization, an a priori mourning rich in possibility...⁴

Derrida is arguing that because interacting with voices from the past presupposes the internalization of another’s thoughts, this interaction contains an intrinsic element of mourning.

The works I will study in this paper involve “*a priori* mourning” on the part of their composers. Like Derrida does in his essay, Britten, Humfrey and Purcell wrote of death by interacting with other works about death, written in the past by those then dead. They became deeply acquainted with the texts of those with whom they interacted, and interiorized their thought in new works that address the topic of mourning. This paper will

³ Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” 46.

⁴ Ibid., 49.

study the nonphysical, time-spanning bond forged between writer and composer, between composer and composer, and between the three.

“Consorted with these few books”: John Donne and Voices from the Past

John Donne explores the role of voices from the past in the first of his “Satyres.” “Satyre I” is the poetic monologue of a scholar addressing a person (or to a feeling within himself) that invited him to leave the sanctuary of his study and wander the streets of town. The scholar considers the pleasures of earthly society vapid and harmful, compared with the society of the authors he communes with in his study.

Away thou fondling motley humorist,
Leave me, and in this standing wooden chest
Consorted with these few bookes, let me lye
In prison, and here be coffin'd, when I dye;
Here are Gods conduits, grave Divines; and here
Nature's secretary, the Philosopher;
And jolly Statesmen, who teach how to tie
The sinews of a cities mistique bodie;
Here gathering Chroniclers, and by them stand
Giddy fantastique Poëts of each land.
Shall I leave all this constant company,
And follow headlong, wild uncertain thee?⁵

In his study, the speaker has the company of great thinkers in many disciplines, through the presence of their texts. Not only does this company consist of those who are absent and probably dead, but the room which houses both these ghosts and the scholar is a place of death. The speaker compares the study to a “wooden chest,” which is standing, like a coffin that waits to hold a corpse (line 4). Donne probably wrote this poem while he was a student, in the period of 1592-5. Around 1608 this vision of study-as-crypt had become a reality for Donne, as he wrote to a friend, Henry Goodyer: “I have occasion to sit late some nights in

⁵ John Donne, “Satyre I,” in Charles M. Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poems and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 90.

my study, (which your books make a pretty library) and now I finde that that room hath a wholesome emblematic use: for having it under a vault, I make that promise me, that I shall die reading, since my book and a grave are so near.”⁶

These excerpts show that Donne’s interaction with voices of the past was complex in mood: in “Satyre I,” he values the voices as nurturing friends, but the deathliness of communing with the past in a small study space reveals a melancholy strain in Donne’s thought. Douglas Trevor examines these texts in his article “John Donne and the Scholarly Melancholy,” where he explains that to Donne, as well as to many scholars of the seventeenth century, scholarship was an intrinsically introspective pursuit, and thus was considered to hold a special risk for the development of melancholy.⁷ Trevor also explains that in Donne, this tendency toward scholarly melancholy is bound up with the guilts and fears of religious introspection. Donne experienced a difficult process of conversion from his family’s Roman Catholic faith to Anglicanism before his ordination to the Anglican priesthood in 1615. Trevor emphasizes that the entwined strains of scholarly and religious melancholy are central to Donne’s expression, and that they derive from the same introspective tendencies that fuel his scholarship.

It is through his studies that Donne understands and conceptualizes his devotion. He comes to read himself as he does his books, with insight, persistence, and considerable anguish—anguish that he sees saturating the world around him, and on which he continually draws regardless of the genre in which he writes.⁸

Trevor argues that by searching within himself as he searches within his books, Donne created an introspective voice that combined the analysis of the scholar with the emotion of the believer. Thus much of Donne’s work embodies mourning both in its creative process,

⁶ Donne, letter to Henry Goodyer, in Coffin, 372.

⁷ Douglas Trevor, “John Donne and Scholarly Melancholy,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 83.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

and its content, which is often Donne's depiction of "the anguish that he sees saturating the world around him."⁹

Donne's practice of "reading himself" appears throughout his poetry, because unlike many seventeenth-century English poets, Donne usually writes about his own personal experiences. Though his genres often comment upon, update or criticize the stylistic characteristics of his contemporaries, Donne's subject matter almost always finds its source not in theoretical affects but in Donne's own life, as I will discuss next. Trevor suggests that this tendency is an outgrowth of Donne's interaction with voices of the past.

"Dying life and living death": Donne's Life and Religious Thought

In 1572 John Donne was born into a London in flux. In his Introduction to *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, Charles Coffin suggests that one of the best descriptors for the driving force of the Renaissance is "animated," an idea he takes from Matthew Arnold and which he understands literally as "the life in motion."¹⁰ Coffin refers not only to changes resulting from scientific insights, religious reformations, the discovery of New Worlds, and the shift from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean era, but also the motion caused by the necessary response of the individual: "the reciprocal motion inward, increasing the sense of personal involvement in the world, and giving somehow a sense of responsibility for it, which placed man more nearly in the center of his own attentions and at the focus of all the animating forces."¹¹ Donne's poetry is often a personal grapple with these changes or "animating forces," particularly, in the poetry I will consider, with the theology of the Reformation.

⁹ Trevor, "John Donne and Scholarly Melancholy," 83.

¹⁰ Coffin, Introduction to *The Complete Poems and Selected Prose of John Donne*, xxii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

Donne lived through the end of Elizabeth I's reign, and through those of the first two Stuart kings. During Elizabeth's reign the Church of England had achieved a shaky stability by compromising some Roman Catholic structures and practices with Reformation theology. During the Jacobean period, the tension between Protestant and Catholic ideology remained sharp, leading eventually to the establishment of the Puritan Commonwealth soon after Donne's death. The tension invaded Donne's personal life. Born into a Catholic family, his earliest education was conducted by Catholic clergy. Donne did not obtain degrees at either Cambridge or Oxford, though he attended both universities, because he could not subscribe to the Queen's headship of the Anglican Church, in the oath taken at graduation. Additionally, during this youthful period, Donne was busily squandering his inheritance on women and books. In later life he was dogged by guilt for his behavior in this part of his life, differentiating between the "Jack Donne" he was and the "Dr. Donne" he became.¹² He revisited the time frequently in guilt-ridden poetry.

Part of this transformation began with his secret marriage to Ann More in 1601. Donne had been in the employ of Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, when he met Ann, who was Sir Thomas's seventeen-year-old niece, and above Donne in social station. Their marriage cost Donne his job and his position in society, leading to a period of poverty which lasted some ten years, in which he had to support a growing family through the help of generous friends.

Donne's religious perspective was in flux at this point. He was examining both his Roman Catholic heritage and the new Anglican faith which held preeminence in the social circles he wished to reenter. Donne's spiritual search was not motivated only by social demands, though. During this time he penned a potentially heretical work called *Biathanatos*, a

¹² Trevor, "John Donne and the Scholarly Melancholy," 93.

defense of suicide which could have angered either camp. Later Donne wanted to impress upon people that his spiritual search was motivated by a desire to find truth through study. In his book *Pseudo-Martyr*, written in 1610, he retraces his religious journey up to that point.

I used no inordinate hast, nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any local Religion. I had longer work to do than most men, because I had first to blot out, certaine impressions of the Romane religion, and to wrestle both against the examples and against the reasons, by which some hold was taken; and some anticipations early layde upon my conscience.¹³

Donne goes on to say that though his religious indeterminacy threatened to affect his reputation negatively, he prolonged the search for his conscience's sake: "these respects did not transport me to any violent and sudden determination, till I had, to the measure of my poor wit and judgment, surveyed and digested the whole body of Divinity, controverted betweene ours and the Romane Church."¹⁴

This quotation shows the author of "Satyre I" applying his love of study and interaction with books to the formation of his religious views, in a long struggle that he revisits frequently in his poetry. Donne believed that the painstaking study of theology through books was a method directed by and derived from God. Donne says of his religious conversion through reading: "God, which awakened me then, and hath never forsaken me in that industry, as he is the Authour of that purpose..."¹⁵ Donne suggests that studying these texts, part of his influence of voices from the past, is not only a way to interact personally with the theological controversy of the Reformation, but even to interact with God, who "awakened" Donne through his study.

Later in *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne defends his right to publish on theological subjects though he is not an ordained minister. This lack of clerical legitimacy was a problem for

¹³ Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, in Coffin, 313.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Donne, as he became more interested in writing about theology. Ordination also promised a professional security that Donne had lacked. He became an Anglican priest in 1615, and his success in preaching was such that he became Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1621.

In 1617, Donne suffered the loss of his wife Ann. Izaak Walton, Donne's acquaintance and early biographer, writes that the remainder of Donne's life exhibited tendencies toward isolation and settled melancholy. "Burying with his tears, all his earthly joys in his most dear and deserving wife's grave; and betook himself to a retired and solitary life. In this retiredness, which was often from the sight of his dearest friends, he became *crucified to the world* and all those vanities, those imaginary pleasures that are daily enacted on that restless stage; and they were as perfectly crucified to him."¹⁶ Walton's description draws from the imagery of the New Testament's epistle to the Galatians, which describes a sanctified disassociation with the world as a death: a crucifixion. Donne says something similar in his Holy Sonnet XVII, which he composed in response to Ann's death.

Since she whom I lov'd hath payd her last debt
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
And her Soule early into heaven ravished,
Wholly on heavenly things my mind is sett.¹⁷

On February 25, 1630, he preached a sermon before King Charles I entitled, "Death's Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the Dying Life, and Living Death of the Body."

After Donne's death in 1631, the sermon came to be interpreted as a swan song: the title page of the posthumous first edition calls this piece "The Doctors Owne Funerall

¹⁶ Izaak Walton, "The Life of Dr. John Donne," 1640, reprinted in *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert & Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 51. Capitalizations and italics in Walton's text are original to Walton. English literature of this period utilized these tools to emphasize specific words or ideas.

¹⁷ Donne, "Holy Sonnet XVII," lines 1-4, in Coffin, 253.

Sermon.”¹⁸ The title expresses Donne’s love of paradox, a trait that composers would find fascinating in the future. Donne uses his contradictory title as a springboard to unravel the problem of facing death, through an exposition of Psalm 68:20, “And unto God the Lord belong issues of death.” By “issues of death,” Donne understands the text to indicate “deliverances from death.”¹⁹

In the sermon Donne responds to the plural of the word “issues” (i.e. “deliverances”) in his text, arguing that life is composed of a series of deaths. “In all our deaths, and deadly calamities of life, wee may justly *hope* of a good *issue* from him. And all our *periods* and *transitions* in life, are so many passages *from death to death*; our very *birth* and entrance into this life, is *exitus à morte*, an *issue from death*...”²⁰ This idea resembles Derrida’s exploration of the plurality of death in “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” but it adds a spiritual dimension. In Donne’s sermon, these transitions from one period of life to the next represent not only the death of one age, but the new life of the next; at the death of infancy, childhood begins; at the death of youth, age begins; and at the death of the body, heavenly life begins. In the case of Donne’s life experience, one might add marriage, conversion, and the loss of a loved one to the list of “living deaths.” Donne sees all of these painful transitions as deliverances accomplished by God for the benefit of the believer.

Donne further argues that the plural of “issues” or “deliverances” includes God’s deliverance “through death”: that is, through the atoning death of Christ.

*As the God of mercy, the glorious Sonne rescued us, by taking upon himself this issue of death...The holy Ghost rescues us from all discomfort by his blessed impressions before hand, that what manner of death soever be ordeined for us, yet this exitus mortis shall be introitis in vitam, our issue in death shall be an entrance into everlasting life.*²¹

¹⁸ Richard Redmer, preface to “Death’s Duell” (London, 1632), reprinted in Coffin, 576.

¹⁹ Donne, “Death’s Duell,” in Coffin, 577.

²⁰ Ibid., 578. The italics are Donne’s.

²¹ Ibid.

In “Death’s Duell,” Donne seeks to reconcile his listeners with the experience of death, through the use of a paradox which he extracts from his understanding of the Bible, the most influential of the voices of the past with which Donne interacted.

Individual Repentance and Collective Music: “A Hymne to God the Father”

One of Donne’s last poems was his “Hymne to God the Father,” written around 1623. This work became more popular with seventeenth-century composers than many of Donne’s works, perhaps because it appears to have been written with music in mind. It is one of only a few poems that Donne gave the appellation “hymn,” and Izaak Walton records that it was set to music at Donne’s request. “He caus’d it to be set to a most grave and solemn Tune, and to be often sung to the *Organ* by the *Choristers* of St. *Pauls* Church, in his own hearing; especially at the Evening Service.”²² Walton does not mention the composer of this “Tune,” nor provide a technical description of the music. I will examine a possible candidate for this musical setting in the opening of my second chapter.

In Walton’s account, he ascribes a statement to Donne describing the added power of this poem when set to music. The statement may contain more of Walton’s point of view than Donne’s, but it is interesting as an early seventeenth-century Anglican impression of the power of sacred music. Walton writes that when Donne heard this work performed, he

...did occasionally say to a friend, “The words of this *Hymn* had restored to me the same thoughts of joy which possess my soul in my sickness when I composed it. And, O the power of Church-musick! that Harmony added to this Hymn had raised the Affections of my heart, and quickned my graces of zeal and gratitude...I always return from paying this publick duty of *Prayer* and *Praise* to God, with an unexpressible tranquility of mind, and a *willingness* to leave the world.”²³

²² Walton, “The Life of Dr. John Donne,” 62. The italics are Walton’s.

²³ Donne, quoted in Walton, “The Life of Dr. John Donne,” 62.

Walton's description suggests that the musical setting of Donne's "Hymn to God the Father" enhanced the poem's devotional effect for its listeners. Through these thoughts attributed to Donne, Walton also suggests that the musical setting of the poem was especially effective in bringing about reconciliation and peace with the prospect of death: a purpose similar to that of Donne's sermon, "Death's Duell." This may help explain why Donne chose to have this individualistic, first-person-singular poem shared with his congregation as a choral anthem. In "Donne's Temporal and Extemporal Song," Diane Kelsey McColley observes that a freely composed text had no natural place in the Anglican liturgy of the time.²⁴ Most English Protestant religious song at this time was derived from scriptural texts, such as the psalms, and hymns did not gain popularity until they were defended by Isaac Watts almost a century later; even then, their popularity was first in Nonconformist churches. In Donne's England, the only place for a hymn in Anglican services was an addition before or after the liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer.

Not only did Donne's "Hymne" lack a natural place in the Anglican liturgy, it also seems an odd choice for communal expression because of its personal nature. One of its most striking devices is a recurrent pun on Donne's name, to express his own struggle with sin and confession. Despite this personal element, Donne considered the poem effective as a communal statement in the worship of his church. McColley suggests that in so doing, Donne perhaps "offers the congregation he addresses as 'dearly beloved' in his sermons the fruits of his private meditations as he does in his sonnets and *Devotions*."²⁵ In so doing, Donne was beginning a spiritual dialogue through music that was to be taken up by future generations of composers.

²⁴ Diane Kelsey McColley, "Donne's Temporal and Extemporal Song," *Poetry and Music in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 131-133.

²⁵ McColley, "Donne's Temporal and Extemporal Song," 132.

Because Donne's "Hymne to God the Father" seems to have been the most musically conceived of his poems, and because it led to a number of settings which I will examine in later parts of my thesis, I will provide its full text here. I will also offer some analytical observations relevant to the use of this poem as an expression of individual repentance transformed into music with collective applicability, both to a large congregation in Donne's day and to composers of various centuries in the future.

A Hymne to God the Father²⁶

I

Wilt thou forgive that sinne where I begunne,
Which is my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive those sinnes, through which I runne,
And do run still: though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.

II

Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I have wonne
Others to sinne? and, made my sinne their doore?
Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I did shunne
A yeare, or two: but wallowed in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

III

I have a sinne of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, Thou haste done,
I fear no more.

²⁶ Donne, "A Hymne to God the Father," in Coffin, 270-271. I have chosen to utilize this version of the text, which retains archaic spellings, because the archaism is retained in the works of the composers I examine in this paper.

Speaking of this poem, Izaak Walton reports “on his former sick-bed [Donne] wrote this heavenly *Hymn*, expressing the great joy that then possesseth his soul in the Assurance of Gods favour to him when he Composed it.”²⁷ At its end, the poem does express a much stronger “assurance of God’s favor” than many of his religious poems do (notably the Holy Sonnets). But that assurance is reached with difficulty, through a painful and suspenseful process of confession. As a former Roman Catholic, John Donne would have been familiar with the practice of bringing his confession to a priest. But in this poem, the anxious speaker brings his sins directly before God, in accordance with Reformation teachings that God ought to be approached by each believer without the intervention of a human priest. However, the speaker is troubled by doubt. He becomes discouraged as each sin reminds him of others that he has yet to confess, combining to make a seemingly limitless number. The act of confession seems futile from the start.

As in most of his poems, Donne creates an intimately personal context, strikingly in this case by punning on his own name. With this gesture he equates forgiveness with belonging to God, in the refrain of the stanzas’ closing couplets: “When thou hast done, thou hast not done...” Because the speaker feels that his forgiveness is incomplete, he feels that he is slipping out of God’s grasp; that his salvation is insecure. He also uses this gesture to equate his past sins with himself, seeing his identity hopelessly defined by original sin: “Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I begunne, / Which is my sin, though it were done before?” (line 2). By juxtaposing the concepts of sin and forgiveness in one word, “done,” Donne expresses the fear and insecurity of a person struggling with guilt.²⁸

²⁷ Walton, “The Life of Dr. John Donne,” 61.

²⁸ Some commentators also view the repeated word “more” in this poem as a reference to Donne’s wife Ann More, and the stresses that resulted from their marriage. Donne’s verbal alertness was surely aware of this homonym, but I leave Ann out of the discussion here, because a more generalistic approach to the poem better reflects later composers’ approaches to the work. See McColley, “Donne’s Temporal and Extemporal Song,” 131.

This kind of paradoxical verbal idea is related to a poetic gesture called a “conceit;” Coffin defines this term as a “metaphor compounded of disparate elements.”²⁹ This technique is characteristic of Donne (often the metaphors are much odder), and may also be seen in some of the poets who followed him in period and style, such as George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, and it earned them the label “metaphysical,” from eighteenth-century writers who thought that Donne’s scintillating eloquence, or what they called “wit,” distracted from his expressive capabilities. Referring to Donne’s early poems, Coffin explains that by expressing emotional truths with verbal virtuosity, Donne is reflecting the complexity of personal experience. “He is realizing in language situations which may be referred to as authentic human experiences, wherein ideas are in motion, that is, where both the mind and the feelings are vigorously engaged.”³⁰ Donne’s “Hymne to God the Father” is perhaps more immediately accessible than the Holy Sonnets and other poems, because Donne avoids more intricate metaphors, but the element of paradox expressed in the “conceit” is still central to this simpler poem, which Donne chose to share with his congregation through music.

In this poem, though he repeatedly asks God if He will forgive, the speaker seems not to be arguing for forgiveness, but presenting reasons why he ought *not* to be forgiven. The speaker is in a state where he sees nothing but sin in his identity (stanza I) and in his propensity and influence (stanza II). He is overwhelmed with guilt even though he never mentions individual wrongdoings, but only categories of sin. In this psychology of guilt, the believer’s confession creates a self-image where he can see the justice of being rejected by God much more clearly than he can see the hope of forgiveness.

²⁹ Coffin, Introduction to *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, xxviii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

The perspective changes drastically in the third stanza, however. As it begins, Donne alters the pattern of the two earlier stanzas, and mentions for the first time a specific sin, not a category of wrong: the “sinne of fear” (line 13). This is hardly the sort of heinous sin that we would expect to culminate a confession. The heinousness of fear consists in doubting the love and power of Christ. The source of the fear is anxiety about death: “that when I have spun / My last thread, I shall perish on the shore” (lines 13-14). Enjambment (running a sentence or phrase over a break in a line) creates tension at this spot, sending the first line breathlessly into the second, unlike the predictable coordination of punctuation and line in most of the preceding material.

Donne ties together two metaphors in line 14, to communicate different ideas about the end of life. In metaphor of spinning one’s last thread, Donne reworks the image of the Fates spinning the threads of one’s life: he places the responsibility for his fate in his own hands, while maintaining the idea of life’s fragility from the original myth. The second metaphor, that of death as the restful end of a stormy voyage, is one that had been common in Renaissance culture, including works like Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Thomas Campion’s lute song, “Never Weatherbeaten Sail.” It continued to appear in sacred music during the Baroque, notably in Bach’s Cantata BWV 56, *Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen*. Donne’s take on this gentle metaphor is horrifying, suggesting that one might survive the dangerous voyage of life only to shipwreck on the very shore one hoped to safely reach. This is the poem’s tense high point.

Then Donne introduces another twist on the central homonym trope. “But swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne / Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore” (lines 15-16). Abandoning metaphors, this line addresses death, the source of fear, by its real name. The pun on “sonne” connects Christ with the entrance of brightness and hope for

the speaker's perspective. It also unifies Donne and Christ, both through rhyming and because they are both the subjects of double meanings in the structure of the poem. This unification creates another layer of paradox, in which Donne seeks to express the Christian doctrine of the believer's rescue from death through Christ's death. The next line, with its "thou hast done," echoes Christ's words on the cross, "it is finished," and expresses both the accomplishment of the speaker's redemption and God's now-secure possession of Donne. Confessing the sin of fear did what the preceding confessions could not do: it destroyed both the fear and the sin.

Deathless Music: Donne's Voice from the Past

Near the end of his life, John Donne left two memorials that show how he wished to be remembered: how he wished to speak to humanity after his death, as a voice from the past. Shortly before his death a request was made for Donne to pose for a monument to be placed at his grave. Donne had recently prepared his will and knew that he was going to die. When the artist arrived at Donne's residence, Donne insisted on posing not in the clothes of the living, but wrapped in a shroud. According to Walton,

Several Charcole-fires being first made in his large Study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and, having put off all his cloaths, had this sheet put on him, and so tyed the knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed, as dead bodies are usually fitted to be shrowded and put into their Coffin, or grave. Upon this *Urn* he thus stood with his eyes shut, and with so much of the sheet turned aside as might shew his lean, pale, death-like face, which was purposely turned toward the East, from whence he expected the second coming of his and our Savior Jesus.³¹

This image, carved in marble, was placed at Donne's grave in St. Paul's Cathedral, where it remains to this day. As he lived entombed among past voices from his books, Donne left a

³¹ Walton, "The Life of Dr. Donne," 78.

monument that asserts mortality in its image and reasserts immortality in its permanence (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Marble Effigy of John Donne by Nicholas Stone, at St. Paul's Cathedral, London

But Donne did not wish to be viewed after his death only as a cold figure in a shroud. In true paradoxical Donne fashion, he also left a late poem, written either during an illness in 1623 or during his final illness in 1631,³² which describes his living future in heaven. There, he expects to spend eternity not as a preacher, scholar, or poet, but as a musician.

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
Where, with the Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come,
I tune the instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke here before.³³

Donne's poems left us with a record of "thinking here," before approaching eternity. These meditations came to speak to composers in the future, and Donne was "made their music"—but the music he deeply wished to become was of a different kind, as part of a "Quire of Saints" whose voices had ceased to be past, and had become eternal.

³² Donald R. Dickson, ed., *John Donne's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2007), 155 n. 5.

³³ Donne, "Hymne to God My God, in My Sicknesse," Stanza 1, in *Coffin*, 271.

CHAPTER TWO

Pelham Humfrey

Seventeenth-Century Musical Settings of Donne's "Hymne to God the Father"

It would be appropriate to begin the study of musical settings of Donne with the setting that was sung at St. Paul's Cathedral at Donne's commission. Unfortunately, no record identifies the composer of this setting. Izaak Walton's account of the music simply mentions "a grave and solemn Tune."³⁴ Only one setting of Donne's "Hymne to God the Father" survives from the early seventeenth century, a continuo song by John Hilton. Hilton served as organist at St. Margaret's Church at Westminster Abbey, starting in 1628.³⁵ He could well have been known to Donne before Donne's death in 1631 as a reputable church musician at one of the city's most important churches.

However, despite Hilton's occupation, he did not come to be known for sacred compositions. Rather, he developed a small reputation from a selection of published *Ayres, or Fa-la's for Three Voices* (1627) and for editing a published collection of popular rounds or catches, entitled *Catch as Catch Can* (1652).³⁶ His surviving publications seem to make him an odd candidate to set Donne's poetry, but his unpublished manuscripts show a more literary scope. Hilton's setting of Donne's "Hymne to God the Father," entitled "Wilt thou forgive the sin where I begun?" survives in the Egerton manuscript no. 2013, kept in the British Museum.³⁷ This manuscript contains a number of unpublished settings of texts with considerable literary merit, including poems by Robert Herrick and Henry Wootton. These

³⁴ Izaak Walton, "The Life of Dr. John Donne," 1640, reprinted in *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert & Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 62.

³⁵ Peter Le Huray and Ian Spink, "Hilton, John (ii)," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13048> (accessed February 23, 2012).

³⁶ Ian Spink, Introduction to *English Songs 1625-1660*, transcribed and edited by Ian Spink, vol. 33 of *Musica Britannica: A National Collection of Music* (London: Stainer and Bell, 1971), xvi.

³⁷ Ian Spink, *English Song, Dowland to Purcell* (London: Batsford, 1974), 68.

literary text selections show Hilton to have been a discerning reader, despite the more lighthearted side he showed in his publications.

The text of Hilton's setting suggests that it was written before 1633, when the poem first appeared in print. Donne's manuscript differs in several points from the version that was published after his death. If Hilton did compose his setting at Donne's request, he extracted his text from a manuscript version provided by Donne. If Hilton composed the setting without a commission, after Donne's death, he probably would have used the text as it was printed in 1633. The text in Hilton's setting resembles Donne's manuscript version of the "Hymne to God the Father" more closely than it does the 1633 published version, including several textual variants unique to Donne's manuscript.³⁸

In Hilton's manuscript, "Wilt thou forgive the sin where I begun?" is set as an ayre for solo voice with continuo or lute. As such, it seems better suited to amateur home use than inclusion in a church service. Walton's description of the setting performed or Donne at St. Paul's describes the performers with a plural, "choristers."³⁹ If Hilton's setting is the one sung at St. Paul's, either it existed in a choral arrangement, or perhaps Walton meant that it was sung by different choristers upon different occasions. A solo continuo song in an Anglican worship service of the period would be highly unusual, but then so is Donne's use of a newly-composed devotional text.

Whether or not John Hilton's setting is the one commissioned by Donne, it does display typical features of early seventeenth-century song which are pertinent to discuss here.

³⁸ Spink, *English Songs 1625-1660*, 100, and *John Donne's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, edited by Donald R. Dickson (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 156 n. 5, and 157. The only place where Hilton's text resembles the 1633 published edition rather than the manuscript is in line 5, where it reads, "When thou hast done, thou hast not done," as opposed to the manuscript, which reads, "When thou hast done, I have not done." This variant could easily be an attempt to create continuity with the other two stanzas, which create the expectation of this refrain.

³⁹ "He caus'd it to be set to a most grave and solemn Tune, and to be often sung to the *Organ* by the *Choristers* of *St. Pauls* Church, in his own hearing; especially at the Evening Service." Walton, "The Life of Dr. John Donne," in *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert & Robert Sanderson*, 62.

The second setting I will examine comes from a later cultural period, the Restoration, and embodies a style that both draws upon and contrasts with early seventeenth-century English song. Hilton's piece exemplifies a declamatory style of text setting that originates from sixteenth-century Elizabethan lute song. This primarily syllabic style is very English in its neglect of the melismatic expressive devices and rhythmic flexibility one might find in, for example, Italian recitative of the period. In her essay, "Seventeenth-Century Settings of Herbert," Louise Schleiner explains that an interchange of inspiration existed between the old lute-song composition style and seventeenth-century lyric poetry. Some poems were designed as "simulated or virtual song,"⁴⁰ with rhythm and meter reminiscent of syllabic lute song rather than natural English speech. Another variety of poetry was designed as "simulated speech," which "distributes accents and pauses" to imitate conversation rather than emphasizing a superimposed meter.⁴¹ Though Donne's poetry generally utilizes the latter style, his "Hymne to God the Father," with its musical title and metric regularity, reflects "simulated song" to a greater extent than most of his work. Thus Hilton's rather anachronistic setting, reminiscent of sixteenth-century lute-song, is appropriate for Donne's poem.

Hilton's setting also resembles lute song in that it is strictly strophic. This seems less appropriate for Donne's poem, since there is such a marked progression in its dramatic narrative, especially the third stanza. Hilton's setting also includes some awkwardness in the text's underlay and accents in the second and third stanza; clearly he wrote the tune with the

⁴⁰ Louise Schleiner, "Seventeenth-Century Settings of Herbert: Purcell's 'Longing,'" in *Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne: Essays on George Herbert*, edited by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), 195.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

first stanza in mind.⁴² But this kind of inconsistency is so common in Elizabethan lute song that anyone who knew the genre would probably not have found it disconcerting. It is music that stands back quietly and allows the text to speak, rather than trying to add musical layers of meaning.

That being the case, in the last measures of the setting, Hilton provides a hint of the more rhetorical direction that musical settings of Donne would take in following years. Measures 13-16 set the final refrain of the stanzas, which reads, “When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more.”⁴³ “When thou hast done” begins on the downbeat of m. 13, leading the listener to expect the downward-sequenced next phrase to begin on the downbeat of m. 14. The general predictability of the phrases throughout the song also creates this expectation. However, Hilton inserts an eighth-rest on the downbeat of m. 14, before “thou hast not done.” This is a subtle and eloquent mark of natural anxiety, a drawing in of breath before the speaker confesses that God has not really completed his forgiveness. This gesture also serves the last stanza well, where it creates more drama before the triumphant awaited pronouncement, “thou hast done” (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Spink, transcr. and ed., *English Songs 1625-1660*, 100.

⁴² For example, in the second stanza, mm. 3-4, the rhythm that effectively expressed the first stanza’s text does not coordinate with the second stanza’s enjambment, creating a gap between “won” and “others,” and placing an accent on the second syllable of the latter word, not the first.

⁴³ Throughout this paper, when referring to Donne’s text as set by a composer, I reproduce the text as it appears in the published edition of the music, in this case Spink, *English Songs 1625-1660*, 100.

Another Age: Pelham Humfrey and the Chapel Royal in the Restoration

The next notable setting of the “Hymne to God the Father” was written in a very different England from the one that John Donne and John Hilton knew. In 1647, after a civil war in which the English and Scottish houses of Parliament fought against their own king, Charles I was beheaded. This took place seventeen years after Donne preached “Death’s Duell” in Charles I’s presence. A new government was established, in which the monarchy was replaced by a Commonwealth, led by Oliver Cromwell as “Lord Protector.” The government sought to reorganize worship practices after Reformed models, discouraging the use of choirs and musical texts not taken from the Psalms.

Charles I’s heir fled to join his mother Henrietta Maria in the safety of Louis XIV’s court at Versailles. There the future Charles II became accustomed to a religious and musical culture completely different from what the Puritan political leaders sought to establish in England. After the death of Cromwell, Parliament asked Charles II to return to England, and he was officially reinstated in May of 1660, in the beginning of what is known as the Restoration of the English monarchy.

Charles II went about to reestablish many of the religious and liturgical practices that had had existed during his father’s reign. Perhaps most significant musically was the reorganization of the Chapel Royal, a choir of men’s and boys’ voices dedicated to singing services in the presence of the king.⁴⁴ During the reign of Charles II, the choir was located in Whitehall, then the royal residence. The Chapel Royal maintained regular daily worship services, even on days when the king was not in attendance. The boy choristers who sang and were educated in this ensemble went on to become the most prominent composers in a flowering of English music during the Restoration, including John Blow, William Turner,

⁴⁴ Ian Spink, *Restoration Cathedral Music 1660-1714* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 101.

and Pelham Humfrey, who later taught Henry Purcell in the second generation of the Restoration Chapel Royal.

The Chapel Royal was first reorganized in 1660 by Captain Henry Cooke, who had sung as a boy chorister in the old Chapel Royal during Charles I's reign, and had gone on to become a Captain in the Royalist forces during the Civil War. Cooke explored the country for talented boys, searching in country church choirs as well as in London, and displayed a knack for picking out boys of great talent, including the young Pelham Humfrey. Humfrey was born in 1647, which means that he was about thirteen when he was recruited, and he continued as a boy chorister in the Chapel Royal until Christmas of 1664, when his voice broke. He may have grown up in London, since he was reputedly the nephew of Colonel John Humfrey, a resident of London and a well-known supporter of Cromwell.⁴⁵ But this circumstance does not seem to have interfered with Pelham Humfrey's career as a musician to the king, for his entire short musical career was spent in a state of privilege and royal support.

As "Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal," Captain Cooke was not only required to prepare the children to sing in daily services in Whitehall, but also to oversee their food and lodging, general education, and performance training on instruments such as the lute. He also seems to have taught the more talented ones to compose. Cooke himself composed occasionally, though not with the success he enjoyed in his teaching career, which almost single-handedly supplied England with its next generation of composers. He did however innovate the use of a string ensemble in church anthems, a choice which was apparently influenced by Charles II's taste for all things French. After his return to England, Charles II had set up an ensemble called the "Twenty-Four Violins," in imitation of Louis

⁴⁵ Peter Dennison, *Pelham Humfrey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

XIV's *Vingte-Quatre Violons du Roi*, which had become famous under Lully's direction.

Initially the Twenty-Four Violins performed in Charles II's coronation in 1661. Around 1662 they were integrated in the Chapel Royal worship services.⁴⁶

Anglican worship services had previously relied on a cappella compositions or the accompaniment of the pipe organ. With the addition of Charles II's Twenty-Four Violins, many of those who attended the Chapel Royal services were dismayed at what they saw as the intrusion of secular music into the sacred realm. Among the critics of this novel practice was Thomas Tudway, "Professor of Musick" at Cambridge, who began his musical career in the Chapel Royal as a boy chorister in 1661 with Pelham Humfrey. He described his disapproval in the Preface to the second volume of his anthology of church anthems, published in 1716.

His Majesty who was a brisk, & Airy Prince, coming to the Crown in the Flow'r, & vigour of his Age, was soon, if I may so say, tyr'd with the Grave & Solemn way, And Order'd the Composers of his Chappell, to add Symphonys &c with Instruments to their Anthems; and thereupon established a select number of his private music, to play the Symphonys, and Retornellos which he had appointed.⁴⁷

Tudway adds that the older generation of musicians were taken aback by this request: "Dr Child, Dr Gibbons, Mr Low, &c Organists to his Majesty, hardly knew how, to comport themselves, with these new fangl'd ways..."⁴⁸ Tudway then laments the vestiges of this secular influence on the church music of his own day.

Thus this Secular way was first introduc'd, into the Service of the Chappell, And has been too much imitated ever since, by our Modern Composers; After the death of King Charles, Symphonys, indeed, with the Instruments in the Chappell were laid aside; But they continu'd to make their Anthems with all the Flourish, of interludes, & Retornellos, which are now performed, by the Organ."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Dennison, *Pelham Humfrey*, 2, 4.

⁴⁷ Thomas Tudway, Preface to *Services and Anthems*, Vol. 2 (1716), reprinted in Spink, *Restoration Cathedral Music 1660-1714*, 437.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 437.

The young choristers soon began to imitate Cooke's example, composing anthems with a continental flavor to please the King. Pelham Humfrey was one of the most prominent in this respect; five of his works were included in a record of Chapel Royal music called *Divine Services and Anthems*, published in 1664.⁵⁰ Tudway describes how the Children of the Chapel Royal became involved in writing music according to the "new fangl'd ways" from France. After the inception of the Chapel Royal in 1661, writes Tudway,

In about 4 or 5 years time, some of the forwardest, & brightest Children of the Chappell, as Mr Humfreys,⁵¹ Mr Blow, &c began to be Masters of a faculty of Composing; This, his Majesty greatly encourag'd, by indulging youthful fancys, so that ev'ry Month at least, & afterwards oft'ner, they produced something New, of this Kind; In a few years more, several others, Educated in the Chappell, produc'd their Compositions in this style, for otherwise, it was in vain to hope to please his Majesty.⁵²

Generally, after a boy's voice broke, he was provided with a sum to support himself and continue his education. When he left the choir, Humfrey received £40 rather than the usual £30, followed by £200 from Secret Service funds, in order to pay for travels in France and Italy. Peter Dennison observes influences of Carissimi and Lully in music Humfrey wrote after returning from his tour, which suggests where Humfrey went and what he did there; for Humfrey left no account of the trip.⁵³ His experience apparently reinforced the European influences inculcated early in his career due to the taste of Charles II, through the French court of Louis XIV and his Italian composer Lully. Humfrey became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (an adult tenor chorister) in 1667, and composed a number of anthems for their performance. Most of these works contain "symphonys" for string ensemble.

⁵⁰ Dennison, *Pelham Humfrey*, 6.

⁵¹ There seems to be no accepted spelling of Humfrey's name in contemporary documents, in which spellings range from Humphrey to Humfreys to Humphryes (in Playford's *Harmonia Sacra*). "Humfrey" is the most commonly accepted modern spelling.

⁵² Tudway, Preface to *Services and Anthems*, Vol. 2 (1716), reprinted in Spink, 437.

⁵³ Dennison, *Pelham Humfrey*, 6.

Unlike John Donne, whose life, personality and worldview are well documented in his letters and contemporary accounts, little information exists about Pelham Humfrey apart from professional details. His small stature and confident attitude did not make a good impression on London diarist Samuel Pepys, who wrote on November 15, 1667, of a visit with “little Pellam Humphrys, lately returned from France and is an absolute Monsieur, as full of form and confidence and vanity, and disparages everything and everybody’s skill but his own.”⁵⁴ Pepys says that Humfrey criticized the technique of the King’s musicians, including the French Master of Music Louis Grabu, and that Humfrey planned to replace Grabu himself. They played some consort music after dinner, and Pepys gives final vent to his annoyance in this conflicted reflection on Humfrey’s performance: “Nor do I see that this Frenchman doth so much wonders on the Theorbo, but without question he is a good musician; but his vanity doth offend me.”⁵⁵

Pepys presents an ambitious, annoying young musician, confident in his abilities. After reading Pepys’s impression of Humfrey, it seems surprising that most of his anthems are settings of somber, penitential texts. Ian Spink observes that Humfrey’s anthems “even when festive are often in minor keys...most surprisingly, perhaps, there are no final Hallelujahs....”⁵⁶ His work displays a serious and text-conscious attitude toward poetry; in fact, there is no extant purely instrumental work by Pelham Humfrey. His secular music consists mostly of music for the theatre, including songs for a restaging of Shakespeare’s *Tempest* in 1674. We lack sufficient historical documentation to create a fuller portrait of this complex man, who was young and talented, bombastic and ambitious, a literary chorister, a

⁵⁴ Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Vol. 8, edited by Robert Latham, William Matthews, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 529.

⁵⁵ Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Vol. 8, 530.

⁵⁶ Spink, *Restoration Cathedral Music 1660-1714*, 118.

church musician who wrote for the theatre; a child of Charles II's "secular" church music who was drawn to sorrowful texts from the Psalms.

In July 1672, Captain Henry Cooke died, and Humfrey immediately succeeded him as Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal. During this time he taught Henry Purcell for a year, until 1673. His teaching career did not last long, however: on April 23, 1674, he made a will, probably because of declining health, and he died on May 18 of that year, aged only twenty-seven. His short lifespan helps to explain his relative obscurity despite the eloquence of his few surviving works.

Restoration Rhetoric and Jacobean Poetry: Humfrey's "Hymne to God the Father"

At some unknown point in his career, probably after rejoining the Chapel Royal as an adult in 1667, Pelham Humfrey set John Donne's "Hymne to God the Father." To a musician of the Restoration like Humfrey, Donne represented both a voice from the past and a parallel with the present. Like the Chapel Royal, Donne's poetry and sermons reflected Anglican devotion under the previous king, Charles I; in fact, Donne preached "Death's Duell" before Charles I in Whitehall, the same royal residence where Pelham Humfrey sang before Charles II with the reestablished Chapel Royal.⁵⁷

But since Donne's time, England's king had been executed, and an attempted republic had come and gone. The reinstated monarchy of the Restoration was influenced by Charles II's desire to imitate the court of Louis XIV, and created a more secular atmosphere than either the Puritan Commonwealth or the London of Donne that preceded it. Musical styles of the Continent had become important for musicians who wished to please the king, even to the extent that French secular styles had become accepted in the music of worship.

⁵⁷ Richard Redmer, preface to "Death's Duell" (London, 1632), reprinted in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles Coffin (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 576.

Additionally, the circumstances of the publication of Humfrey's "Wilt thou forgive that sin" made the work itself a voice from the past from the time of its introduction to the public. It was first published in 1688, fourteen years after Humfrey's death, in Henry Playford's *Harmonia Sacra* Book I. Henry Playford was the son of John Playford, the most prominent music publisher in London in the mid-to-late seventeenth century. John Playford was known for publishing lucrative anthologies designed for home use, containing popular works by many composers in the same genre.⁵⁸

John Playford retired in 1684, when his son Henry took over the business in collaboration with John Carr. *Harmonia Sacra* was one of Henry Playford's first publications. In it he sought to add a spiritual niche to the publisher's reputation for secular anthologies. Playford's Preface explains, "The Youthful and Gay have already been entertain'd with a variety of rare Compositions, where the lighter Sportings of Wit⁵⁹ have been Tun'd by the most artful Hands, and made at once to gratify a delicate Ear, and a wanton curiosity. I now therefore address to others, who are no less *Musical*, though they are more *Devout*."⁶⁰ This preface displays a reaction against "youthful" secularism and lack of seriousness, similar to that which Thomas Tudway expresses in the Preface to his *Services and Anthems* Vol. 2 (1715), discussed above. Tudway connects the taste for lighter things in music to the youth and superficiality of the court of Charles II. Both Tudway and Playford are writing under a new monarch; the first volume of *Harmonia Sacra* was published two years after the death of

⁵⁸ Rebecca Herrison, "Playford, Purcell, and the Functions of Music Publishing in Restoration England," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, No. 2 (Summer 2010): 250.

⁵⁹ By "wit," Playford means a high mental capacity (and the person who possesses it), together with an unusual ability to express complicated ideas with words. This term became a popular one among Donne's critics in following years. This is interesting considering Playford uses it not to describe the religious poetry in *Harmonia Sacra*, but secular poetry with less emotional content. As we will find in Chapter 3, Enlightenment-era critics often became distracted with the "wit" of Donne's poetry and failed to register the emotion it contained. See "wit, n.," OED Online, December 2011 (Oxford University Press, 12 March 2012), <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.ohiolink.edu:9099/view/Entry/229567?rskey=zCM9bM&result=1>>.

⁶⁰ Henry Playford, Preface to *Harmonia Sacra; Or, Divine Hymns and Dialogues*, Book I, edited by Henry Purcell and Henry Playford (London: Printed by E. Jones for H. Playford, 1688), i. Italics are Playford's.

Charles II. Apparently music publishers sensed the presence of an audience that desired sacred music whose seriousness harked back to a pre-Restoration attitude, one more in line with Donne's time.

Playford's preface indicates that the anthology is directed not only toward "devout" persons, but also toward persons of discriminating literary taste. Playford writes, "There are many Pious Persons, who are not only just Admirers, but excellent judges too, both of *Music* and *Wit*; to these a singular Regard is due, and their exquisite Relish of the former ought not to be pall'd by an unagreeable Composition of the later."⁶¹ The emphasis on text is reinforced in the score; many songs list their text source, often with a description of the author's qualifications, sometimes before the composer is named. In addition to the work of John Donne, the collection includes scriptural texts, texts by prominent clergy and theologians, as well as poets like George Herbert and Abraham Cowley. Such a project is a natural place for the work of Pelham Humfrey, a composer known for solemn church anthems, whose texts included the workss of Shakespeare and Donne.

Finally, Playford explains how the literary quality of the selections serves the anthology's first-mentioned devotional purpose. The texts are intended not only to inform the minds of the "readers," as examples of "wit," but also to move their affections in an edifying manner. "The *Words* were penn'd by such Persons, as are, and have been, very Eminent both for learning and Piety; and indeed, he that reads them as he ought, will soon find his Affections warm'd, as with a Coal from the Altar, and feel the Breathings of Divine Love from every Line."⁶² As an expressive combination of "learning" and "piety," and as a throwback to a more serious age, Donne's work is preeminently appropriate to the goals of this published collection.

⁶¹ Playford, Preface to *Harmonia Sacra* Book I, i.

⁶² *Ibid.*, ii.

Playford engaged Henry Purcell to edit the anthology. Rebecca Herrisone suggests that Purcell was involved in an attempt by Carr and Playford to “gain authority for their editions by using named composers as editors.”⁶³ Henry Playford’s “Preface to the Reader” also indicates that he and Purcell were conscious of their publication as an interaction with voices of the past, and that they were in a sense curators of the memory of those whose works they presented posthumously.

As for the Musical Part, it was Compos’d by the most Skilful Masters of this Age; and though some of them are now dead, yet their Composures have been review’d by Mr. *Henry Purcell*, whose tender Regard for the Reputation of those great Men made him careful that nothing should be published, which, through the negligence of Transcribers, might reflect upon their Memory.⁶⁴

The published score of Humfrey’s “Wilt thou forgive” shows that the editors wanted to acknowledge both the composer and the author on equal footings. Many of the songs in *Harmonia Sacra* list the author of the text before the score of the piece, and the composer after. Other pieces by more famous composers list the composer and may not mention the author. A few list both composer and author at the beginning of the piece, and so it is with the score of this song (Fig. 2). Even the layout of the published score emphasizes that Humfrey’s “Wilt thou forgive that sin” is a creative interaction between Humfrey and the late Donne, as well as a creative interaction between Purcell and his late teacher.

⁶³ Herrisone, “Playford, Purcell, and the Functions of Music Publishing in Restoration England,” 250.

⁶⁴ Playford, Preface to *Harmonia Sacra*, ii.

Figure 2

The Words by Dr. Dunn. *Set by Mr. Pelham Humphries.*

WILT thou forgive that Sin, where I began, which was my Sin, tho'

it were done before? Wilt thou for-give that Sin, through which I run, and

do run still, tho' still I do deplore? What thou hast done, thou hast not done, for — I have more.

O 2

Playford, *Harmonia Sacra* Book I, 51.

Figure 3: Transcription (E.M. Cowell)

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I began

John Donne (1573-1631)

Pelham Humfrey (1647-1674)
From *Harmonia Sacra*, pub. 1688
ed. Henry Playford and Henry Purcell

Wilt thou for-give that Sin, where I be-gan, which was my Sin, tho' it were done be-fore?

5

Wilt thou for-give that Sin, through which I run, and do run still, tho' still I do de-

9

plore? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

13

Wilt thou for-give that Sin, by which I've won o-thers to sin, and made my Sin their

16

dore? Wilt thou for-give that Sin, which I did shun a Year or two, yet wal-low'd in a

20

score? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

This system contains measures 20 through 23. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The melody starts on a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. A slur covers measures 21 and 22, ending with a quarter note G4. The bass line starts with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4. A slur covers measures 21 and 22, ending with a quarter note G3.

24

I have a Sin of Fear, that when I've spun my last Thread, I shall per-ish on the Shore; but

This system contains measures 24 through 27. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The melody starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. A slur covers measures 25 and 26, ending with a quarter note G4. The bass line starts with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4. A slur covers measures 25 and 26, ending with a quarter note G3.

28

swear by thy self that at my death, thy Sun shall shine, as he shines now and here - to-

This system contains measures 28 through 31. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The melody starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. A slur covers measures 29 and 30, ending with a quarter note G4. The bass line starts with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4. A slur covers measures 29 and 30, ending with a quarter note G3.

32

fore, and hav-ing done that thou hast done, I fear no more.

This system contains measures 32 through 35. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The melody starts with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. A slur covers measures 33 and 34, ending with a quarter note G4. The bass line starts with a half note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, B3, and C4. A slur covers measures 33 and 34, ending with a quarter note G3.

Musical Analysis

Humfrey's setting of Donne's "Hymne to God the Father" (Fig. 3) displays its complicated interaction with the past on many levels. Most of Humfrey's continuo songs display a dramatic use of melismatic gestures originating from Italian arioso; Purcell later perfected this style in his continuo songs. But in contrast to his other works in this genre, Humfrey's "Wilt thou forgive that sin where I began" resembles the older declamatory style of the early seventeenth century, using almost no operatic gestures. This understated aesthetic updates the strophic style of composers like John Hilton with a through-composed arioso setting that creates narrative drama through tonal areas, melodic contour, dissonant gestures and carefully-placed motivic repetitions.

Humfrey's setting reflects the form of Donne's poem by maintaining a distinction and a shift between each separate stanza, and creating corollaries between refrains in the text, within its through-composed musical structure. Though the setting of each stanza wanders harmonically, each begins and ends on the tonal center of G. Humfrey also uses similar rhythmic and melodic material to begin each stanza, and the stanza's ending phrases resemble each other as well. This demarcates each stanza of text, and illustrates their symmetrical verbal construction.

The primary structural motive is a falling diminished fourth in the vocal line, which appears at the beginning and end of each stanza. The falling diminished interval is a favorite rhetorical gesture of Humfrey's, one which Dennison identifies as tracing from Italian operatic influences developed from the *seconda prattica*.⁶⁵ In this song the motive is connected to the continual presence of sin, the central and inescapable problem that opens and closes each stanza of Donne's poem.

⁶⁵ Dennison, *Pelham Humfrey*, 34.

The falling diminished fourth first occurs between mm. 1-2, setting the text, “Wilt thou forgive *that sin* where I began.” The F-sharp drives the melody toward a cadence on “began” in m. 2, rooting the first stanza in G minor. The vocal line wanders from this tonal center only shortly in mm. 4-5, where it modulates to the brighter key of the mediant (B-flat Major) during Donne’s reference to original sin (line 2, “which was my sin, though it were done before”). However, in m. 7, a falling figure built around a madrigalism on the word “run” drives the tonality and the tessitura of the melody back down to G minor. The speaker has admitted participation in sin himself, and if he dreamed momentarily in B-flat Major that original sin was an excuse for his predicament, he realizes now that he was wrong. The low tessitura of the melody in mm. 8-9, on the word “deplore,” reflects a rhetorical drop in speaking pitch with which one might express shame or disgust.

The falling diminished fourth returns in m. 10, setting “When thou hast done, thou hast *not* done.” Humfrey illustrates the unexpectedness and despair of this phrase of text by returning to the motive that depicted sin in the stanza’s opening. He also evades the motive’s natural resolution to G minor; instead, the motive resolves deceptively to E-flat Major, the key’s submediant. Humfrey is illustrating the text: like the speaker’s forgiveness, the musical phrase is “not done,” and goes on to bewail sin’s extent in a melisma that reaches over mm. 10-11. This melisma is lengthy in the context of Humfrey’s primarily syllabic setting. It extends the end of the phrase to draw out the word “for,” a seemingly innocuous little word which contains all the miserable memory of the further sin that the speaker must yet confess.

This is an unsettling moment for the listener, who has been led to expect regular and accented downbeats, and is confronted suddenly with a gesture that seems to extend the end of the phrase beyond expectation and predictability; it is a musical corollary to the expressive

use of enjambment so typical of Donne's poetry. The effect is heightened by the quarter-rest that follows the melisma. Humfrey seems to have found all this rhetorical eloquence in the comma Donne placed after "for," which though not present in Playford's score, appears in the 1633 edition of Donne's *Poems*. It is an expressive and unexpected punctuation on Donne's part, and one that deserves a thoughtful response. This is one of many examples of Humfrey's detailed attention to the text.

At m. 12, the stanza finally reaches the tonic, not with God's forgiveness as requested, but with the speaker's assertion of further sinfulness: "I have *more*." The first stanza reached out to God only to return to itself and its insoluble problem.

The second stanza begins with the vocal line reiterating the opening pattern of mm. 1-2, again with the falling diminished fourth on the word "sin," but the tessitura has been raised a fifth (c minor). This heightened drama reflects both the disturbing discovery of the endlessness of sin in the melisma of mm. 10-11, and the increasing heinousness of the sins to be confessed in stanza 2. The harmony wanders further in this stanza, modulating abruptly to the key of the subtonic (F Major) in mm. 14-15. The text here describes how the speaker's sin "won others to sin," and the music illustrates the idea by allowing the vocal line to lead the continuo astray to an unexpected tonal center. The continuo returns to G minor as the text returns its focus to the speaker in m. 16.

Another short modulation occurs in m. 18. At the end of that measure, the music cadences on D minor for only a moment, as the text describes a futile past attempt at reform: "Wilt thou forgive that Sin, which I did shun / a Year or *two*." This cadence causes a momentary pause at the word "two," reflecting the comma that follows it; this pause is further emphasized by the note's extension across the measureline. But even before this note is over, the bass has returned to G on the downbeat of m. 19. Humfrey is emphasizing

the ineffectuality of the speaker's attempt to escape from his sin: he doesn't escape far, and he is immediately recaptured. Measure 19 returns to the rhetorical use of low tessitura to express disgust, but here the self-loathing has increased, to drag the vocal line to its lowest pitch in the piece, as the singer groans over the sins that he "wallow'd in a score" of years. The stanza closes in mm. 20-23 with a return of the musical refrain that closed stanza 1 (mm. 9-12), reasserting the hopelessness of the situation, as the falling diminished fourth again evades resolution (m. 21).

The third stanza opens with a sudden modal shift to G Major. As the voice enters after the continuo's downbeat, the speaker seems to be responding to a revelation of brightness. The new modal atmosphere looks ahead to lines 15-16 of Donne's poem: "but swear by thy self that at my Death, thy Sun / shall shine, as he shines now..." Humfrey begins the stanza by illustrating a burst of sunlight that illuminates the speaker's thoughts and provides hope for redemption. This is another example of Humphrey's sensitive reading of the text; the sunrise must occur in the music before the speaker reaches "as he shines now," in order for the narration to make dramatic sense.

Again, the stanza includes a falling diminished fourth (mm. 24-25), this time not on the word "sin," but on the word "fear," which both Donne and Humfrey place in the metrical moment allocated to "sin" in the previous two stanzas. Fear is the only specific sin mentioned in the poem, and though it seems rather un sinful, it is presented as the climactic and most heinous confession, showing that the speaker's real problem is not his sin, but his lack of faith in God's forgiveness.

The music modulates as the speaker confesses his fear, cadencing in B-Flat Major, the key of the mediant, at m. 27. Then an abrupt shift to C Major (the subdominant of G Major) occurs in m. 28. The text has shifted to a drastically different line of thought, starting

to request forgiveness not in the context of sin, but in the context of Christ's redemption. The speaker asks here that God "swear by Himself," a bold request that Humfrey renders hesitant and doubtful in tone through the tonal shift: to the speaker, this concept seems remote, far removed from the place where his thoughts naturally leave him. But as the phrase continues, the vocal line climbs to illustrate the rising Sun of Christ's presence (mm. 29-31), with a triumphant high point on F5, the highest vocal pitch in the piece. Though it started seemingly far away in C Major, this phrase progresses back to a cadence in B-Flat in m. 32. Redemption is not as impossible as the speaker thought.

With this emphasis of this highest pitch in the piece, Humfrey also re-emphasizes the structural significance of the diminished fourth. The lowest pitch in the piece was the F-sharp in m. 19, used in the despairing phrase about "that Sin, which I did shun / A Year or two, yet *wallow'd in a score.*" Together, these outlying pitches create a diminished fourth—but considering their places in the score, this is not another *falling* diminished fourth, but a *rising* one. As we shall see, this subtle reversal of the piece's portrayal of sin foreshadows the method Humfrey uses to resolve the question of the inescapable falling diminished fourth once and for all, in the last three measures of the piece.

In mm. 32-33, Humfrey uses for the first time in this piece a dissonant falling interval larger than the diminished fourth: a diminished seventh. This is the widest leap in the piece, and it occurs at the end of an unexpectedly angular measure. The diminished fourths in the previous stanzas occurred on the phrase, "not done;" this falling diminished seventh occurs as the speaker sings, "and having *done that.*" The interval expresses a greater effort than that exerted by the ineffective diminished fourths in the previous stanzas; perhaps it reflects a vast distance overreached by God to destroy man's sin, or the speaker's expanded vision of God's redemptive power.

This moment is followed by a striking reversal of the falling diminished fourth, in the text “and having done *that thou* hast done” (m. 33). The motive associated with sin has been turned upside down, now moving from F-sharp up to B-flat in a *rising* diminished fourth, showing that God has reversed the speaker’s sin by accomplishing forgiveness. The calmness expressed in this tiny syllabic setting reflects the speaker’s new state of freedom from fear, as he addresses the problem of sin for a final time in m. 34. Here at last the diminished fourth is resolved to a G tonality that ends the phrase, without recalling more sin to confess; and with a fermata on that resolution, Humfrey ends his setting.

Pelham Humfrey’s setting of Donne’s “Hymn to God the Father” shows the influence of earlier syllabic, declamatory English text setting, like that found in John Hilton’s “Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun.” It adds the expressive rhetorical potential of Italian recitative, while maintaining a solemn tone; a balance probably learned in the service of Charles II, who encouraged his musicians to incorporate “secular” continental elements into sacred music. Humfrey retains the historicity of the poem through a musical style that honors the past and incorporates the potential of the present.

It may be coincidence that in this time-spanning collaboration between the past and the present, both Donne and Humfrey were writing near the end of life. Donne was drawn to themes of death and repentance in the light of his own sickness, but Humfrey probably composed this with no inkling that his life would be cut short at the age of 27. It is hard to guess whether the song had the same personal significance for Humfrey as the poem did for Donne. But the setting does show that Humfrey interacted profoundly with Donne’s voice from the past, and that Donne was a source from which he sought to project a unique depiction of repentance and deliverance from death. Works like this preserve Humfrey’s voice to speak into later ages. We need not have known Humfrey to converse with him.

CHAPTER THREE (INTERLUDE)

How John Donne's Poetry Reached Twentieth-Century Composers

“Wit” Becomes “Unnatural”: Donne's Poetry during the Enlightenment

After Pelham Humfrey, there are almost no settings of John Donne's poetry to be found among compositions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For successful communication, voices from the past require a sympathetic ear in the present. Until the early twentieth century, Donne's voice rarely found a sympathetic ear, because stylistic changes in literature, theology and music were in the process of discounting the intellectual mode of communication in which his spiritual expressions were couched.

Even as Playford's *Harmonia Sacra* was enjoying wide dissemination (soon to be reprinted in 1703), Donne's poetry was falling out of favor with the literary taste of the times. In 1693, John Dryden criticized Donne's work in his *Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire*, in which he first applied to Donne the enduring (and somewhat patronizing) label “metaphysical.” Focusing on Donne's “Satyres” and love poetry, Dryden complains that Donne's penchant for verbal virtuosity and philosophical abstruseness negates the power of the emotions he tries to portray.

He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but also in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love...I may safely say it of this present age, that if we are not so great wits as Donne, yet certainly we are better poets.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ John Dryden, *A Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire* (1693), reprinted in *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. Donald Dickson (New York: Norton, 2007), 193.

Dryden effectively deflates the work of Donne by inferring that “wit,”⁶⁷ i.e., native intelligence and the ability to express thoughts in an eloquent manner, is not the same thing as “poetry.” Presumably, “poetry” would succeed where Donne’s “amorous verses” failed: as Dryden says, it would “engage the hearts” of its readers. This kind of thinking, an appeal to natural emotions as opposed to intellect and artifice, was to attract thinkers and writers of the Enlightenment, when poetry (as well as music) reacted against the exuberant complexity of the Baroque. In 1778, Samuel Johnson took up this line of criticism and expanded upon it in his Introduction to the “Life of Cowley,” which he wrote for an anthology of English literature. Johnson uses with Dryden’s term “metaphysical” to criticize Abraham Cowley and other poets that Johnson sees as representing a seventeenth-century school of thought epitomized by John Donne. For Johnson, these “metaphysical” poets were concerned only with abstruse concepts, and with expressing ideas in an eccentrically virtuosic fashion that leaves the emotions untouched.

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavor; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they wrote only verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.⁶⁸

Like Dryden, Johnson disqualifies these poets’ work from the category of “poetry,” calling their works “verses” instead. That is, their works utilize the technical form of poetry, but lack the lyricism he considers necessary for success in that genre; like a performance of music, successful poetry should not only be formally correct, but should stand the “trial of

⁶⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary contains a wonderful contemporary definition of the term “wit” from late seventeenth-century natural philosopher Robert Boyle: “That nimble and acceptable Faculty of the Mind, whereby some Men have a readiness, and subtilty, in conceiving things, and a quickness, and neatness, in expressing them, all which the custom of speaking comprehends under the name of *Wit*.” In *Reflections upon Several Subjects*, vol. III book 3 (London: W. Wilson for Henry Herringman, 1665, quoted in “wit, n.”, *OED Online*, December 2011 (Oxford University Press: 12 March 2012)

<<http://www.oed.com.proxy.ohiolink.edu:9099/view/Entry/229567?rskey=zCM9bM&result=1>>.

⁶⁸ Samuel Johnson, “Cowley,” in Prefaces to *The Works of the English Poets*, reprinted in *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson*, edited by Donald Greene (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 677.

the ear.” Additionally, according to Johnson, the “metaphysical” poets’ focus upon “learning” led them to apply themselves to the expression of “wit” rather than expression of emotion. Johnson reserves his most ardent criticism for the conceit, a literary device which he finds artificial.

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. From this account of their compositions it will be readily inferred that they were not successful in representing or moving the affections.⁶⁹

These reactions against the poetry of Donne reflect an Enlightenment aesthetic that had a corollary in music criticism of the time. In the late eighteenth century, the music of the High Baroque, with its “learned” aspects like counterpoint and fugue, and its frequent use of ornamentation for expressive purposes, was giving way to styles of music that were more logical and narrative-oriented, like developing sonata-allegro form. Musicians of the time often described their ideals in terms similar to those that Dryden and Johnson used in the literary realm.

For example, Italian violinist Francesco Geminiani rails against excessive and affected use of Baroque ornamentation in a 1751 treatise on violin performance. In the work’s preface, Geminiani describes the “intention of music,” and he places the expression of emotion on at least equal par with Baroque performance technique. Geminiani says that “The intention of music is not only to please the Ear, but to express Sentiments, strike the Imagination, affect the Mind, and command the Passions.”⁷⁰ The “Mind” is only one part of human nature that music is to touch, and it is not first in Geminiani’s list. He claims that

⁶⁹ Johnson, “Cowley,” in Greene, 677.

⁷⁰ Francesco Geminiani, Preface from *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (London: 1751), reprinted in *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents*, edited by Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomson/Schirmer, 2008), 221.

good music comes not from the learned use of complex musical ornaments but from “nature”—the same source which, according to Dryden, was to serve the poet for writing good love-poetry, rather than “wit.” Geminiani plays on the common musical reference to the art of ornamentation as an expression of the performer’s “taste,” claiming that really good taste has nothing to do with ornaments.

What is commonly call'd good Taste in singing and playing, has been thought for some Years past to destroy the true Melody, and the intention of their Composers. It is supposed by many that a real good Taste cannot possibly be acquired by any rules of Art; it being a peculiar gift of Nature, indulged only to those who have a naturally good Ear.⁷¹

A year later, Johann Joachim Quantz takes the matter further in his 1752 treatise on flute performance. Quantz criticizes the fading Baroque aesthetic of “learned” music, claiming that music which is out-of-touch with all but the most sophisticated listeners has failed as music. His criticism resembles Johnson’s take on the “metaphysical” poets’ abstruse paradoxes, in which “heterogeneous ideas” were “yoked by violence together.” In keeping with the Enlightenment aesthetic of his times, Quantz bases his criticism on “Reason.”

Reason teaches us that if in speaking we demand something from someone, we must make use of such expressions as the other understands. Now music is nothing but an artificial language through which we seek to acquaint the listener with our *musical* ideas. If we execute these ideas in an obscure and bizarre manner which is incomprehensible to the listener and arouses no feeling, of what use are our perpetual efforts to be thought learned?⁷²

Quantz contrasts the “teaching of reason” with the “bizarre” manners of expression perpetrated by musicians who wish “to be thought learned.” In so doing he not only criticizes the old aesthetic of the High Baroque in music, but also reflects a wider line of thought throughout culture in favor of “natural” expression as opposed to “learning” for learning’s sake. Just as the music of Johann Sebastian Bach was met with distaste during the

⁷¹ Geminiani, “On Ornaments,” from *The Art of Playing the Violin*, in Weiss and Taruskin, 221.

⁷² Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, trans. Edward R. Reilly (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), reprinted in *Music in the Western World*, 223.

Enlightenment, until Felix Mendelssohn and others in the nineteenth century helped listeners hear the emotion in its learned style, the poetry of Donne underwent a long period of unpopularity among literati and readers, including composers in search of texts to set. The poetry of Donne was waiting for another age for a sympathetic ear, another age when emotional struggle and intellectual complexity would naturally travel hand-in-hand.

Nineteenth-Century Contexts: Changing Theological Perspectives

The Enlightenment's advocacy of naturalness and reason involved a gradual rejection of the supernatural, which created an increasingly secular society through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This anti-supernatural rationalism eventually entered the religious realm as well. In the nineteenth century a school of thought called "Higher Criticism" developed in the theological seminaries of Germany.⁷³ These scholars sought to apply scientific methods of historical research to the texts of the Bible: particularly, they sought to date sections of scripture, and identify their authors, based on analysis of literary style. Many came to the conclusion that books of the Bible were compiled by various authors after the occasions described in them, and that they were therefore unreliable as historical records, especially historical records of supernatural events.

Higher criticism owed much to the biblical criticism of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who challenged the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). The movement grew through the work of German theologians and philosophers, like Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, who first applied the term "Higher Criticism" to biblical studies in his *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*

⁷³ Dyson Hague, "The History of the Higher Criticism," in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth*, Vol. 1, ed. R.A. Torrey, A.C. Dixon, et al. (New York, 1917; rpt. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1973), 9-42.

[Introduction to the Old Testament], which was published in Leipzig in 1780–1783. In his preface to the Second Edition of his *Einleitung* (1787), Eichhorn argues that a purely theological study of the Old Testament, ignoring the history of languages and culture that it contains, misled readers to treat its supernatural accounts as records of fact. He sees his studies as a way to “reconcile thinking men” (that is, rationalists influenced by the Enlightenment), to a new consideration of the Bible.

Nothing but an expounder of their contents was wanting to reconcile thinking men to these extremely important monuments of the human mind, and a champion of their importance who might show that the greater part of the miracles and supernatural events are not contained in the books at all, but were introduced into them from mere misapprehension and ignorance of the language and mode of representation which they possess in common with all the works of remote antiquity....⁷⁴

Eichhorn was followed by German, Dutch and English Higher Critics throughout the nineteenth century. The new theology spread rapidly since theologians of all nations customarily visited German schools of divinity to study with their world-renowned biblical language scholars. As these scholars began to question the literal truth of supernatural elements in the Bible, such as the virgin birth of Christ (consequently questioning Christ’s divinity), their thought drifted slowly down to average ministers in many nations. Uneasy churches throughout Europe and America began to deemphasize the teaching of theology as a set of unalterable truths, and to emphasize religious emotion instead.

Donne came from a period when rigorously intellectual theology fueled religious experience, and the two are inseparable in his poetry. In the nineteenth century, Donne’s cerebral religious emotion was becoming as foreign to churchgoers as it had already become to secular literary critics. The quality of paradox so characteristic of Donne and other “Metaphysical” poets results from a long tradition of Christian writing, in which theological

⁷⁴ Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Introduction to the Study of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. George Tilly Gollop (London: 1888), x.

and devotional writers sought to reconcile profoundly paradoxical problems of life: questions about the reasons for suffering, and how God can be good and yet allow sin. These paradoxes appear in writings of the New Testament, Augustine, Boethius, and throughout Christian history; one might say that answering such questions has been the central philosophical purpose of Christianity. When nineteenth-century theologians (and consequently nineteenth-century churches) moved away from accepting the supernatural, Christianity was distanced from its traditional tools for answering these questions, and Donne's exploration of Christian paradox consequently began to lose its context for Christian readers.

Donne's distance from churchgoers of the nineteenth century may be seen by comparing seventeenth-century religious poetry to nineteenth century hymnody, the typical religious poetic expression of its time. As was noted in Chapter 1, the tradition of English hymnody gained momentum near the beginning of the eighteenth century with the works of Isaac Watts. Before that the texts of most English Protestant church music were taken from the Psalms (with a few exceptions, like Donne's "Hymne to God the Father".) Seventeenth-century metrical psalm settings, such as those found in the widely distributed Scottish Psalter of 1650, share many qualities with Donne's poetry: they combine religious experience with theological doctrines, and they explore paradoxes involving suffering and the nature of God. Take for example the first three stanzas of Psalm 22 from the 1650 Scottish Psalter.

My God, my God, why hast thou me
forsaken? why so far
Art thou from helping me, and from
my words that roaring are?

All day, my God, to thee I cry,
yet am not heard by thee;
And in the season of the night
I cannot silent be.

But thou art holy, thou that dost
inhabit Isr'el's praise.
Our fathers hoped in thee, they hoped
and thou didst them release.⁷⁵

These stanzas begin the psalm's struggle to reconcile the fact of the speaker's suffering, and God's apparent apathy toward it, with the belief in a loving and good God who hears the prayers of believers. The experience of spiritual isolation, and the theological tenets of God's goodness and omnipotence as displayed in the Bible ("our fathers hoped in thee" is a reference to Biblical history) are held in equal importance. Donne explores a similar paradox in his Holy Sonnet no. XIV, where the Reformed doctrine of total depravity (sinners' inability to save themselves) leads to a picture of God's loving but violent takeover of the human soul:

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 me, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.⁷⁶

The hymnody of the nineteenth century tends to be both less theologically rigorous than either of these examples, and more exclusively focused on emotion. Perhaps as a result, it also tends to eschew violent depictions of despair or terror such as those displayed in the above examples, and includes less paradox. For example, this hymn written around 1855 by the Irish hymn writer Joseph Scriven deals with a troubled believer coming before God, as in the above examples, but it avoids challenging theological concepts and portrays prayer as a pleasant and easy experience.

What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry

⁷⁵ Francis Rous, et al., "Psalm 22," in *The Scottish Psalter: Being the Psalms in Metre, with the Paraphrases, and a Selection of Prose Psalms* (Edinburgh: Printed by Evan Tyler, 1650; Rpt. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1887), 22.

⁷⁶ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet XIV," in Charles Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 252.

Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Ev'rything to God in prayer.⁷⁷

This poem portrays interaction with God not as an experience that involves suffering, but as an experience that easily mitigates suffering. It does not address more complicated theological doctrines like original sin, or present the paradox that a believer might feel abandonment. Instead it focuses on prayer as an emotional experience, in which Jesus, as “a friend,” will remove “needless pain.” The poetry is also much more lyrical and singable than that of Donne’s works or the metrical psalms of the Scottish Psalter. In this hymn, the problems of suffering and the theological paradoxes that provide their traditional explanations are deemphasized, presenting a transcendent experience of emotional tranquility.

As a natural extension of the Enlightenment’s focus on reason and secularism, nineteenth-century Christianity deemphasized the supernatural, and the doctrines of a Bible whose authenticity many felt unable to justify. Churches reacted by refocusing their attention toward religious emotion. So, just as Donne’s poetry, with its emphasis on paradox, was too “learned” for many eighteenth-century literary critics, it was also too theological for many nineteenth-century churchgoers. Donne’s poetry was waiting for a time when emotion would again be expressed through literary virtuosity, and when religious expression would be willing to interact intellectually with culture. That time began to return in the twentieth century.

⁷⁷ Joseph Scriven, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” stanza 1, in *Trinity Hymnal*, ed. Robley J. Johnston, Arthur W. Kuschke, et al. (Suwanee, Georgia: Great Commission Publications, 1961, rpt. 1998), 533.

Donne's Poetry in the Early Twentieth Century

Though interest in Donne's work began to quietly resurface in the late nineteenth century, it was in an essay by T.S. Eliot that the "Metaphysical" poets received their first extensive justification. Eliot's work is a collection of three essays on seventeenth-century literature, the second of which, "The Metaphysical Poets," is taken from a review of Herbert J.C. Grierson's seminal anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, published in London in 1921. In Eliot's essay (also written in 1921), Eliot argues that the metaphysical poets are peculiarly relevant to his day. He engages directly with Johnson's preface to "Cowley," acknowledging and defending the tendency of Donne and others to use abstruse "conceits" to express ideas. Eliot argues that this tendency does not reflect an idle interest in displaying "wit," or a disconnection with emotion, but rather an aesthetic of the early seventeenth century that engaged with emotion, and all experiences of life, through an experiential intellect.

Eliot describes these early seventeenth-century poets as "intellectual poets" as opposed to the "reflective poets" who overtook English literature after the Restoration and the Enlightenment, for whom feelings were the primary matter of poetry.⁷⁸ We saw above how this "reflective" strain appeared in nineteenth-century hymnody as well. Eliot explains that the seventeenth-century style does not elevate intellect above human experience, but elevates intellect *to* human experience. "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for his work, it is constantly amalgamating different experience."⁷⁹ Eliot argues that the metaphysical conceit tendency, the drawing together of various ideas to make a cohesive whole, is a close corollary to

⁷⁸ T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Leonard and Virginia Wolff at the Hogarth Press, 1924), 219.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

everyday experience: “The ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary.” This ordinary man “falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and the two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.”⁸⁰ According to Eliot, the “metaphysical poets” were focused on understanding the chaos of life and bringing it into order: they were “engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling...”⁸¹

Eliot then draws our attention to the relevance of “metaphysical poetry,” with its interest in philosophy, to his own age, arguing that the challenges before modern poets were similar to the challenges that the “metaphysical” poets tried to meet.

It is not a permanent necessity that poets should be interested in philosophy, or in any other subject. We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.⁸²

The “variety and complexity” that Eliot saw in his society was also manifesting itself in music. The early twentieth century saw an explosion of new compositional styles, as composers moved away from the Romantic styles of the late nineteenth century. Some of these composers, like Satie and the other members of Les Six, did so by writing music that emphasized popular idioms and eccentric humor. Some, like Charles Ives, turned to archaic and folk styles as an alternative to the Romantic tradition and tonal harmony. Some, like Arnold Schoenberg, composed music that stretched the chromaticism of the late nineteenth century beyond recognition, creating a new kind of music that aggressively challenged

⁸⁰ Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” 219.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 221. Italics are Eliot’s.

tonality. Perhaps the only quality shared between these and other composers who sought new sound in the early twentieth century was their ability to confuse their baffled audiences, who lacked a musical context to make sense of this “modern music,” whether it was inherently simple or complex. Thus one might say that the most common quality shared between composers of the early twentieth century is the quality of *difficulty*.

The need for “difficulty” was felt by some in the religious realm as well. One of the main reasons that the time was ripe for the re-emergence of John Donne is that the vacuum created by the cultural fading of organized religion had left many without their culture’s historical sources for making sense of the “difficulty” and “complexity” of life. In the early twentieth century, some theologians were lamenting the effects of rationalist Higher Criticism, which had removed Christian experience from the intellectual realm. One such person was J. Gresham Machen, Presbyterian scholar and professor at Princeton Seminary. In his essay “Christianity and Culture,” delivered as a lecture at Princeton Seminary in 1912, he argues that religion has become irrelevant to the culture because the church has abandoned intellectual defense of its faith.

Modern culture is a mighty force. It is either subservient to the gospel or it is the deadliest enemy of the gospel. For making it subservient, religious emotion is not enough; intellectual labor is also necessary. And that labor is being neglected. The church has turned to easier tasks. And now she is reaping the fruits of her indolence. Now she must battle for her life.⁸³

He explains that the church’s avoidance of “intellectual labor” came from a generally negative image that the religious community has developed regarding the Christian scholar.

The scholar is represented either as a dangerous disseminator of doubt, or else as a man whose faith is a faith without works. A man who investigates human sin and the grace of God by the aid solely of dusty volumes, carefully secluded in a warm and

⁸³ J. Gresham Machen, “Christianity and Culture,” *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913): 1-15, rpt. in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. D.G. Hart (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004), 408.

comfortable study, without a thought of the men who are perishing in misery every day!⁸⁴

This image, with its out-of-touch scholar who relies on books to the exclusion of experience, was derived from churchgoers' perceptions of theologians like the Higher Critics, whose efforts seemed to undermine rather than assist the faith of the ordinary believer. This image could easily be mistaken for John Donne closeted in his study, writing abstruse poetry with the help of his books, as he describes himself in his "Satyre I" (see Chapter 1). The difference is that Donne's study is neither "warm" nor "comfortable"—his scholarship was an extension of challenging, emotional religious experience, not an escape from it. Machen, like Donne, believes that scholarship is necessary for understanding spiritual experience, and that the two ought to coexist and inform each other, as they do in Donne's poetry. Machen asserts the practicality of scholarship as he explains how he believes seminaries ought to re-integrate faith and learning.

Instead of making our theological seminaries merely centres of religious emotion, we shall make them battle-grounds of the faith, where, helped a little by the experience of Christian teachers, men are taught to fight their own battle, where they come to appreciate the real strength of the adversary and in the hard school of intellectual struggle learn to substitute for the unthinking faith of childhood the profound convictions of full-grown men.⁸⁵

Machen's essay presents a spiritual crisis in the beginning of the twentieth century, which he believed could only be solved by integrating both intellect and emotion into the Christian experience. Machen's defense of the intellect was something of a lone voice in organized religion; Princeton Seminary and his Presbyterian denomination both dismissed him in the thirties. However, many people in the secular realm felt a similar need for intellect in spirituality, and this need began to make Donne's poetry appealing, as a source for the intellectual spirituality that organized religion did not always provide. Donne's religious

⁸⁴ Machen, "Christianity and Culture," in Hart, 400.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 409.

poems result from the spiritual crisis of his own times: the Reformation overthrew the unquestioned authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and left many wondering where to turn for spiritual truth. For twentieth-century readers, Donne's religious poetry provided profound, uplifting, yet confused and tortured expressions of faith, relevant in a time when the relevance of the established church was waning for many.

In his Preface to *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (1994), Charles Coffin discusses the late eighteenth-century writings of Matthew Arnold, whose ideas suggested that poetry could be “enough, probably, to shore up the modern spiritual life sagging from the decay of Christian orthodoxy.”⁸⁶ Coffin writes of Donne, “In the twentieth century he has been the poet to whom English and American readers most often have turned...not for compensation for the lost religion, but for just such an enlargement of our view of man and sharpening of our insight into his complication as the poet can give.”⁸⁷

It turns out that Eliot's diagnosis was accurate, and in the “variety and complexity” of twentieth-century society, many began to turn back to the Metaphysical poets for insight, especially for religious insight. Many English composers began to set Metaphysical poetry around the turn of the century. Ralph Vaughn Williams composed his *Five Mystical Songs* in 1911. This song cycle for baritone, chorus and orchestra explores worship, redemption, and the love of God through five poems by George Herbert. In 1914 Edward Elgar composed his op. 19, choral settings of “The Fountain” and “The Shower,” two poems by Henry Vaughan: one about love, the other about faith. In 1916-1918, Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (composer of the iconic English hymn “Jerusalem”) composed a choral cycle entitled *Songs of Farewell*, which included settings of sacred poems by John Donne and George

⁸⁶ Charles Coffin, ed., Preface to *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, (New York: Modern Library, 1994), xix.

⁸⁷ Coffin, ed., Preface to *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, xix.

Herbert. In 1924 Gustav Holst composed a choral setting of Vaughan's spiritual dialogue "The Evening Watch."

These early settings found a musical niche for seventeenth-century spiritual poetry that eventually spread to include composers as diverse as Ned Rorem (*Flight for Heaven*, 1952), Virgil Thomson (*Praises and Prayers*, 1963), Randall Thompson (*Two Herbert Settings*, 1970-71), and John Rutter ("What Sweeter Music," 1988). Though this musical interest in seventeenth-century poetry began with more lyrical poets like Herbert, as the century progressed the thornier poetry of Donne began to appear more frequently, even being referenced in popular music in Van Morrison's "Rave on, John Donne" (from *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*, 1983). Interestingly, this work portrays Donne as a misunderstood prophet fruitlessly addressing the broken societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2005 Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," appeared as a moment of spiritual distress in John Adams's opera about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the testing of the first atomic bomb, *Doctor Atomic*. The first twentieth-century composer to produce major settings of John Donne was Benjamin Britten, whose work I will examine next.

After a long period of critical unpopularity, the poetry of John Donne emerged at the opening of the twentieth century as a distant yet relevant voice from the past. As Donne's Jacobean poetry was out-of-touch with the British Commonwealth, and did not interest readers or composers until the historically parallel era of the Restoration, so it underwent another time of comparative dormancy until the parallel period of the early twentieth century, when "fragmentary" experience and themes of spiritual searching gained renewed relevance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Childhood Faith and the Horrors of War: Benjamin Britten's Context for Donne

Benjamin Britten's Life and Faith

One reader who benefited from Grierson's publications of Donne was Benjamin Britten. A deeply literary man, Britten interacted with the work of many English poets of the past and present during his career, but John Donne was one whose influence spanned a good part of Britten's life. In 1943 Peter Pears wrote to his friend Elizabeth Meyer, "What have you been reading lately? Ben and I have been re-reading Donne lately — those wonderful holy sonnets, and especially the Hymn to God the Father."⁸⁸ Both the Holy Sonnets and the "Hymne to God the Father" were to find musical expression in the works of Britten: the Holy Sonnets within a couple years, and the "Hymn to God the Father" near the end of Britten's life, in a realization of the setting by Pelham Humfrey.

Benjamin Britten, born in Suffolk in 1913, grew up in a home that encouraged literature, music, and religion. His father used to read Dickens to Benjamin and his sisters; but though his father appears to have been a loving parent, Britten's mother was by all accounts the dominant force in his early life. Edith Britten was an amateur musician, a pianist and a soprano, who quickly recognized her son's talent and implemented rigorous discipline to develop it. Britten wrote once that he was enrolled in piano lessons "as soon as I could walk."⁸⁹ His mother reinforced his music lessons by having the boy play duets with her every Sunday afternoon. This practice, which generally centered around the playing of

⁸⁸ Peter Pears, letter to Elizabeth Meyer, in *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, Vol. 2 1938-1945, ed. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1278.

⁸⁹ Benjamin Britten, letter to Eric Walter White, 2 December 1953, in *Britten* by David Matthews (London: Haus Publishing, 2003), 5.

Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, is one that David Matthews considers to be a significant mark both of the intense emotional interdependence between Benjamin Britten and his mother, as well as an example of musical discipline.⁹⁰ Edith Britten encouraged Benjamin to compose from a young age as well, leading to the production of many youthful pieces. In the words of a friend, Basil Reeve, Edith Britten "was *determined* that he should be a great musician."⁹¹

Edith Britten's influence was not limited to her son's musical training; she also instructed her son in religion. Britten's father was not generally a churchgoer, but Edith was a member of St. John's Church in Lowestoft, an evangelical-leaning Low Church Anglican congregation. Britten was eventually confirmed in the Anglican church in 1928, a couple years before he entered the Royal College of Music. During his youth, one of the emotional and spiritual bonds between mother and son was the reading of a popular evangelical devotional called *Daily Light*, as Graham Elliott observes in his work *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*.⁹² Elliott notes that while at boarding school, Benjamin Britten often mentioned *Daily Light* readings in his letters to his mother. These references seem to indicate that for Benjamin, reading *Daily Light* was at least as much about his relationship with his mother as it was about personal religious devotion. In one letter the young Britten writes to his mother, "I still think of you, every second of my life, and especially when I read my *Daily Light*, and realize that you will be reading it too."⁹³ A scholar like Machen might have considered this childhood faith, with its dependence on Britten's relationship with his mother, as a faith focused on emotion.

⁹⁰ Matthews, *Britten*, 7.

⁹¹ Basil Reeve, in Mitchell and Reed, Vol. 1, 12. Italics original.

⁹² Graham Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10-11.

⁹³ Britten, letter to Edith Britten, in Mitchell and Reed, Vol. 1, 103. Britten's formatting, spelling and punctuation remained eccentric throughout his life. In my thesis, I have copied his text as he wrote it in order to preserve the sense of his personality displayed in these idiosyncrasies.

After his graduation from the Royal Academy of Music in 1933, Britten began to distance himself from his mother's faith. Part of the change came because Britten did not sympathize with his mother's leanings toward Christian Science, a faith she had incorporated into her belief during the 1930s. Britten ceased to be a regular churchgoer around this time, though this caused something of a rift between himself and his mother. Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Britten quotes a 1936 diary entry in which Britten writes on a Saturday night, "The periodical row about going to Communion (for to-morrow). It is difficult for Mum to realise that one's opinions change at all."⁹⁴

Probably the clearest mature statement of faith that Britten produced is contained in his "Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors," and his remarks in the ensuing hearing, which took place in 1942. Britten had been living in America in order to avoid participating in the British Armed Forces during the war, but he returned in 1942 when this tribunal granted him conscientious objector status. His statement begins, "Since I believe that there is in every man the spirit of God, I cannot destroy, and feel it is my duty to avoid helping to destroy as far as I am able, human life, however strongly I may disapprove of the individual's actions or thoughts."⁹⁵ In the Tribunal's Report, Britten is recorded as saying, "I was brought up in the Church of England. I have not attended for the last five years. I do not believe in the Divinity of Christ, but I believe that his teaching is sound and his example should be followed."⁹⁶

Though Britten's beliefs were different from the stance of the Anglican church, disbelief in the divinity of Christ was becoming more common as a result of nineteenth-century Higher Criticism. But though Britten was no longer in complete sympathy with the

⁹⁴ Britten, in Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (Faber and Faber: London, 1992), 83.

⁹⁵ Britten, "Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors," in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40.

⁹⁶ Britten, "Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors," in Kildea, 40.

religion of his childhood, he appears to have maintained a quiet practice of devotion. His letters contain periodical references to prayer.⁹⁷ There are also a vast number of religious compositions, ranging from the massive *War Requiem* to the *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, which I will examine in the next chapter. Clearly despite Britten's rejection of organized religion he still reserved a deep interest in aspects of Christianity. In an 1985 interview, Britten's collaborator and companion, Peter Pears, explains that Britten was "an agnostic with a great love for Jesus Christ...Agnostic means 'don't know' and he would certainly admit to ignorance of the entity of God, but he had a tremendous admiration for Jesus Christ, and insofar as he was God in Man he could accept that in a sort way of as a definition..."⁹⁸

Britten's desire to partially reject and partially maintain the religious faith of his mother could have led naturally to an interest in Donne's spiritually searching poetry. In particular, Donne's series of Holy Sonnets never reach the consolation of a complete and orthodox conclusion to their struggle with the problem of guilt in the face of death. This inconclusive element, which can make the Holy Sonnets appear to be the record of an unfinished spiritual journey, would appeal to a man whose faith was characterized by a quality of "don't know."

It was also in the thirties that Britten got to know the poetry of John Donne. In this decade he became friends with the poet W.H. Auden and his set of bohemian artistic friends, as he began to branch out further from under the wing of his mother. Britten attributed to Auden the stimulation of his interest in poetry, as well as the beginning of his interest in Donne.⁹⁹ "Auden got us to take Donne seriously. One didn't get much of him at

⁹⁷ For example: "Pray for me," Britten to Peter Pears, before his journey to Germany with Yehudi Menuhin in July 1944; Mitchell and Reed, 1269.

⁹⁸ Pears, in Elliott, 28.

⁹⁹ Britten, in Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), reprinted in Kildea, 224.

school, or at least we didn't appreciate him properly there."¹⁰⁰ Like T.S. Eliot, Auden was a twentieth-century poet who sympathized more with the poetry of Donne than the traditional literary and educational establishments did. Donne's poetry became a part of the creative life and worldview that Britten formed for himself as a young and searching artist.

Concerts at Belsen

Britten expressed interest in setting the Holy Sonnets to music in 1944,¹⁰¹ while he was still working on *Peter Grimes*, an opera which deals with similar matters of guilt and mortality in a more secular context. After the premiere of *Grimes* in summer 1945, Britten had hardly begun work on *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* when a life experience occurred to color the themes of death and guilt in an urgent and uniquely contemporary way. In July he learned that Yehudi Menuhin was planning to embark on a short concert tour of Germany, to play for the survivors of concentration camps. The tour was a humanitarian venture, organized by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association, and the Jewish Committee for European Relief. It was only months since the surrender of Nazi Germany, and many survivors of concentration camps had not yet been moved. Menuhin had played numerous concerts for Allied troops during the course of the war, and so this concert tour was a natural outgrowth of his musical humanitarian work. Britten's participation, however, was rather serendipitous. Menuhin explains in his autobiography, *Unfinished Journey*.

I asked the British authorities if I might visit the camps in their sector, the British gave me permission to go, and Gerald Moore agreed to come with me. Then, about a week before our departure, at a party given in London by the music publishers Boosey & Hawkes, I met Benjamin Britten. Returned to England after spending the war years largely in the United States, he too was casting about for some commitment to the human condition whose terrible depths had been so newly revealed, and was immediately enthusiastic about my initiative. He urged me to take

¹⁰⁰ Britten, in Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, in Kildea, 224.

¹⁰¹ Pears, letter to Elizabeth Mayer, in Mitchell and Reed, 1215.

him, and Gerald Moore very gracefully gave way.¹⁰²

In Britten's Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors, he stated that he believed he could be most helpful in the contemporary struggles not by taking up arms, or even by participating in non-combative corps, but through the medium of music. "I believe sincerely that I can help my fellow human beings best, by continuing the work I am most qualified to do by the nature of my gifts and training, i.e. the creation and propagation of music."¹⁰³ Yehudi Menuhin's concert tour was a perfect opportunity for Britten to fulfill the role of musical humanitarian he takes upon himself in this Statement. But Britten may have been unprepared for the extent of suffering he was to see. The true nature of the Holocaust had only just been discovered by the Allies, and when Britten arrived in Germany he witnessed a uniquely modern horror for which recent history could not have prepared him. Menuhin describes the tour in his autobiography.

We took with us more or less the whole standard violin literature—concerti, sonatas, little pieces—and I played it, without rehearsal, two or three times a day for ten days in the saddest ruins of the Third Reich. At Belsen we played twice in one afternoon. I shall never forget that afternoon as long as I live. The inmates of the camp had been liberated some weeks earlier, the prison huts burned down, and the ex-prisoners transferred to the adjoining SS barracks, which had, among other comforts, a theatre. Men and women alike, our audience was dressed in army blankets fashioned by clever tailors among them into skirts and suits. No doubt a few weeks since their rescue had put a little flesh on their bones, but to our unaccustomed eyes they seemed desperately haggard, and many were still in hospital.¹⁰⁴

Performing several times a day without rehearsal in such traumatic circumstances made for a grueling tour. When Britten returned to England he was laid up for several weeks with a fever. In letters from August 1945, Britten frequently mentions the frustration of his illness, but alludes only briefly to his trip to Germany. He hesitates to describe it, as though the pain of the experience is yet too recent to be relived. Despite the trauma, however, he also

¹⁰² Yehudi Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey* (London: Macdonald, 1977), 178-179.

¹⁰³ Britten, "Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors," in Kildea, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, 179.

expresses the importance of what he saw, and the need for others to see it.

Germany was a terrific and horrific experience; eminently worth while. I'm trying to get others to repeat the dose, because it is necessary.¹⁰⁵

There were millions of D.P.s [displaced persons] in, some of them, appalling states, who could scarcely sit & listen, & yet were thrilled to be played to. We stayed the night in Belsen, & saw over the hospital – I needn't describe that to you. On the whole, the Military Government seems to be doing a good job, & not so brutal or callous as one might fear – but o – what insoluble problems.¹⁰⁶

Britten says, “I needn't describe that to you,” and yet he does try to describe his experience, falling repeatedly into the same vague yet chilling terms: “terrific,” “appalling,” “horrific.”

He wants to communicate what he saw, because “it is necessary” for others to understand what happened, but words fail him. Britten's need to communicate his experience soon found expression in what he had called “the work I am most qualified to do by the nature of my gifts and training”¹⁰⁷—music.

During the period of illness after his return from Germany, Britten was also swiftly finishing the song cycle of Donne's Holy Sonnets that he had begun in June. He completed the set by August 19. In his analysis of the cycle, Peter Pears (the work's dedicatee and first interpreter) opines that the “horrors of Belsen” were an influence from the start.¹⁰⁸ Certainly after the tour, themes of guilt and human suffering were fresh in Britten's mind; or more generally, as Pears states, “the theme of the *Holy Sonnets* is death.”¹⁰⁹

In 1963, enough time had elapsed for Britten to describe the German tour experience in a little more detail. In an interview with Michael Schafer, Britten was asked

¹⁰⁵ Britten, letter to Jean Hamilton, in Mitchell and Reed Vol. 2, 1278.

¹⁰⁶ Britten, letter to Peter Pears, in Mitchell and Reed Vol. 2, 1272.

¹⁰⁷ Britten, “Statement to the Local Tribunal for the Registration of Conscientious Objectors,” in Kildea, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Pears, “The Vocal Music.” In *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists*, edited by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (London: Rockliff Publishing, 1952; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 70.

¹⁰⁹ Pears, “The Vocal Music,” in Mitchell and Kellner, 69.

about the connection between pain and music, and whether physical pain ever influenced a piece he composed. Britten responded,

I wrote my Donne Sonnets in a week while in bed with a high fever, a delayed reaction from an inoculation. The inoculation had been in order to go on a tour of concentration camps with Yehudi Menuhin in 1945. We gave two or three short recitals a day—they couldn't take more. It was in many ways a terrifying experience. The theme of the *Donne Sonnets* is death, as you know. I think the connexion between personal experience and my feelings about the poetry was a strong one. It certainly characterized the music.¹¹⁰

Almost twenty years later, Britten's ability to describe the camps has not progressed beyond the word "terrifying." However, in this interview he reinforces Pears's statement about the topic of the song cycle, and its intrinsic connection to the experience of the German tour. Britten also emphasizes that Donne's poetry and Britten's personal experience informed each other to create the cycle. It was through *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* that Britten was able to address this experience for himself, and communicate it to others in a way that his own words could not.

Voices from the Past: John Donne and Henry Purcell

The Holy Sonnets of Donne were curiously appropriate to express Britten's experience in the summer of 1945. Donne wrote most of the Holy Sonnets while suffering from illness, and while undergoing a time of professional and spiritual upheaval. Donne added later sonnets in response to experiences like the death of his wife. The Holy Sonnets are replete with images of death and guilt, coexisting with anxious, almost-hopeless longing for redemption. The introverted, isolated first-person voice of these texts provides an intimate arena for Britten to explore the grief of an individual, without tackling the overwhelming task of expressing collective loss (that came later, in the *War Requiem*.) It also

¹¹⁰ Britten, in Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, in Kildea, 231.

creates an immediacy that discourages listeners from maintaining the sanitized, detached attitude of those who have not seen the horrors of war.

In a letter to Pears written on August 6, 1944, Britten tells of his experience working with Donne's voice while composing the cycle. Despite his illness, Britten expresses a sense of refreshment after the German tour ordeal, and after his long project to complete *Peter Grimes*, whose contemporary librettist was Montagu Slater. Work on the cycle was "going slowly ahead — but I'm abit weary, & can't get down to much yet. But it's heaven to deal with Donne instead of Montagu!"¹¹¹ In this quotation, Britten treats Donne like a friend who visited him in his illness; a heavenly friend, in fact. Derrida would say that Britten is mourning for Donne.

The character and structure of Donne's poetry, with its intrinsic quality of paradox, allows Britten to reflect the "insoluble problems" he witnessed in Germany. Donne's poetry hesitates to express complete satisfaction in its search for redemption, constantly wavering between doubt born of guilt, and faith in forgiveness. This poetry provides a lament for the the human soul, longing to heal, but appalled and terrified at the sight of its unforgivable sin.

As Britten referred back to the literature of the seventeenth century for his song cycle, he also turned to that period for musical models as well. Though in literary circles Donne's career spanned the beginning of the Baroque in music, and the technical complexity combined with emotional intensity in his work parallels the aesthetic that came to characterize Baroque music. Already by 1945 Britten and Pears had established a habit of including English song of this era in their recitals, particularly settings by Henry Purcell. Britten's practice of writing original, modernized realizations for the sacred continuo songs

¹¹¹ Britten, letter to Peter Pears, in Mitchell and Reed Vol. 2, 1277.

of Purcell and others is a musical origin for his Holy Sonnets cycle, in which he draws on the rhetorical character of Baroque song to set the rather Baroque poetry of Donne.

The premiere of *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* took place in 1946 during a festival commemorating the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death. It appeared on a program next to Britten's Purcell song realizations. In the same year Britten produced several works in homage to Purcell, including his Second String Quartet, which includes a ground-bass movement, and *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, whose main theme is derived from the Purcell's incidental music to the play *Abdelazer* by Aphra Behn.

In a pamphlet published for the festival, Britten describes his esteem for Purcell, and how his creative process in creating realizations of Purcell's works requires an "intimate" acquaintance with Purcell's music—particularly with the archaic, culturally foreign, or odd-sounding elements; in short, a close acquaintance with Purcell's voice from the past.

The realiser must soak himself in the composer's idiom in order to provide natural Purcellian harmonies for the melodies. Nor must he be afraid of those very Purcellian qualities of clarity, strangeness, tenderness and attack. But what a rewarding task it is! One can learn endlessly by becoming intimate with such a gift as his.¹¹²

The art of text-setting was one of the most influential things Britten learned from Purcell. Britten said in 1959, "I had never realized before I first met with Purcell's music that words could be set with such ingenuity, with such colour."¹¹³ By imitating Purcell's style of text setting, Britten wished not only to improve his music's eloquence, but to reconnect listeners with a vibrant English musical past. In the context of composing *Peter Grimes*, which Britten completed early in 1945, he said that he wished to "restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that had been curiously rare since the

¹¹² Britten, "250th Anniversary of the Death of Henry Purcell (Nov. 21st, 1695-Nov. 21st, 1945), Homage by Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett," reprinted in Kildea, 52.

¹¹³ Britten, interview with John Amis for BBC series *Talking about Music* (pre-recorded November 3, 1959), reprinted in Kildea, 163.

death of Purcell.”¹¹⁴ In *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Britten references Purcell through similarities in text setting, like flexible weaving between syllabic and melismatic treatments, as well as rhythms that reflect the characteristic elocution of the English language, such as the “Scotch Snap” favored by Purcell for producing natural English word emphasis.

Britten’s choice of musical style coordinates with Donne’s poetry both because they came from the same century in England, and because the declamatory faithfulness Britten saw in Purcell’s style reflects Britten’s attitude toward these particular texts. Throughout the cycle, Britten scrupulously reproduces the punctuation, archaic spellings and capitalizations transmitted in the Grierson’s edition of Donne, Britten’s source for his texts. Britten also reflects Purcell through his selection of forms, most strikingly the chaconne that closes the cycle, a movement which displays a confidence in the face of death, creating a kind of antithesis to “Dido’s Lament.” More generally, Britten utilizes a Baroque aesthetic by forming each movement around a single motive and “affection,” as Peter Pears observes in his analysis of the cycle.¹¹⁵

In *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, anachronism leads to contemporaneity. Britten’s choice of text reflected a period when English literature sought to understand “insoluble problems” by combining the study of paradox with spiritual searching: by connecting what Eliot would call the “fragmentary” and “chaotic” experiences of life to form a cohesive whole. Britten’s choice of compositional model recalls a time when English song was scrupulously and flamboyantly text-centered, and when a single movement was often designed to study every aspect of one musical and affective idea. The past helps Britten force our attention to deal with his present, to seek for order in its chaos.

¹¹⁴ Britten, in Eric Crozier, ed., *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, Sadler’s Wells Opera Books No. 3 (London: John Lane/The Bodley Head, 1945), 8.

¹¹⁵ Pears, “The Vocal Music,” in Mitchell, 70.

CHAPTER FOUR

Benjamin Britten's *Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (1945)

Introduction: Britten's Narrative through Donne's Poetry

In this chapter, I will examine Britten's creative interaction with the past displayed in *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (1945).¹¹⁶ I will show how Britten utilizes neo-Baroque references to recall the musical and spiritual era of the poetry, and how these archaisms are often applied to concepts relevant to Britten's twentieth-century experiences in his horrific visit to Belsen. I will also show how Britten's music functions as literary analysis, illustrating the composer's reading of the poems through choices of textures, tonal centers, form and other techniques. Britten starts with Donne's Holy Sonnets as printed in Grierson's editions, carefully maintaining their accuracy through both text transcription and a musical rhythm that observes even small idiosyncrasies of punctuation. But Britten does not simply transcribe Donne's sonnets into heightened speech; he selects individual sonnets and reorders them to create his own tense and uneasy narrative of repentance and mourning. For Britten, Donne's poetry is a starting place for his own exploration of grief.

The cycle begins with the speaker's recognition of guilt and mortality in no. 1, Donne's Sonnet VI, "Oh my blacke Soule!" In this song the speaker discovers both the reality of his sin and his inability to rescue himself from it. In the next two songs, the speaker pursues forgiveness in contrasting moods and attitudes: raging demand (no. 2, "Batter my heart"), and gentle despair (no. 3, "Oh might those sighes and teares"). In no. 4,

¹¹⁶ This cycle has been a subject of numerous theses and dissertations, as well as a small number of articles. Some of these are referenced in this chapter; other pertinent works for further reference include: Barbara Docherty, "Syllogism and Symbol: Britten, Tippett, and English Text," *Contemporary Music Review* 5, no. 1 (1989): 37-63; Vicki Pearce Stroehrer, "Form and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's Sonnet Cycles" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Texas, 1994).

the speaker reflects frenetically on his inability to repent in any of his ever-changing states of mind (“Oh, to vex me). These four songs constitute the first stage in the protagonist’s grief.

A transition occurs gradually through nos. 5 and 6 of the cycle. No. 6, “What if this present,” begins with a culmination of the cycle’s increasing terror up to this point, depicting the last judgment and a terrifying, graphic vision of Christ’s crucifixion. Paradoxically, the terror of Christ’s crucifixion leads the protagonist to his quietest moments of peace thus far; significantly, his attention has been drawn away from the grief of his own situation, toward that of another. This altruistic transition continues in no. 6, “Since she whom I loved,” in which the speaker grieves gently for the death of a loved one. This new kind of grief creates a different result in the protagonist: it draws him toward spiritual comfort and love for God, while the percussive dissonances of earlier movements are swallowed into lyricism. This is the cycle’s turning point.

The last three movements display both a subtly more hopeful outlook and a change of purpose, as the protagonist’s thoughts move further from his guilt and toward the immanence of his death. No. 7, “At the round earth’s imagined corners,” presents a brighter response to the Last Judgment, a philosophical mirror image the dark apocalypse of no. 5. No. 8, “Thou hast made me,” is a last surge of fear as the protagonist recognizes the immediate end of his life. The final movement, “Death be not proud,” finishes the song cycle with an uneasy acceptance of death, which exudes peace and cautious confidence in eternal life, yet appears to leave some questions unanswered.

“Holy discontent”: The Protagonist Mourns for his Sins (Nos. 1-4)

The first movement is a setting of the fourth of Donne’s Holy Sonnets. Within Britten’s narrative, the song functions as a prologue to the cycle, outlining the protagonist’s

guilt and his fearful quest to escape it. This poem's primary image is one of colors: it begins with an image of the soul as black, made so by sin, and ends with a hope of the soul becoming white, or clean. It describes the method of becoming "white" as beginning with a realization and admission of the soul's darkness: "Oh make thyself with holy mourning black" (Holy Sonnet IV, line 10). Donne then describes repentance as the soul turning "red with blushing, as thou art with sin" (line 11). He then connects this concept with the image of the redness of Christ's blood, creating a paradox for the soul: in order to become "white," it must first become "red": "Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might / That being red, it dyes red soules to white" (lines 13-14).

In his setting of this poem, Britten expresses these images of color through his use of pitch centers. He uses F-sharp to reflect the "black" of sin, and G-natural to reflect the "white" of grace ("yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack," line 9). The movement focuses relentlessly on the pitch F-sharp, constantly trying and ultimately failing to resolve to G. It attains G only for a moment, when describing "grace." The movement finally establishes a key in the last measures, by the addition of B-natural to the persistent F-sharps, implying B minor, the key that the key signature projected from the beginning. But though the pitch associated with unforgiven sin becomes subsumed into a tonality, the open fifths of the final measure create a starkly empty effect. The ending expresses the paradoxical, transitional nature of a soul that is not black or white, but "red"—a color that Donne's poem associates with sin, blushing (i.e., repentance), and with the blood of Christ.

By beginning his cycle with this sonnet, Britten ruthlessly confronts the hearer with an immediate realization of guilt. The piece opens with three *forte* iterations of a dotted, funeral-march ostinato, in unison F-sharp octaves (Fig. 1). The pronouncement of the first line, "Oh my blacke Soule!" is uttered in a stark, exposed arpeggio that begins on a high F-

sharp and commences a syllabic descent to an excruciatingly dissonant E-sharp on the word “Soule”. This surprisingly brutal opening reflects shock, such as one might experience in the first glimpse of a deserted Nazi death camp.

Figure 1

Benjamin Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1946), 3.

Britten continues the stark, relentless expression of guilt throughout the movement by maintaining the funeral march ostinato rhythm in the piano. The pitch of this ostinato remains fixed on F-Sharp octaves until the text reaches the line, “Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done / Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled” (lines 3-4). Here Donne is describing the soul as a traitor to Heaven, its true home, locked in the brokenness of earth because of sin. At this point the piano begins an ascent, in which the rhythmic ostinato remains fixed, but the pitch rises gradually by half-steps as the speaker describes guilt in escalating metaphors. While the piano’s pitch ascends, the voice declaims the text in figures which continually reach upward to F or F-sharp, only to drop downward again. Both the piano and the voice seem to be reaching toward something “higher.”

At m. 24, the piano reaches the top of its ascent, beneath the text, “Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke” (line 9). The voice and the piano are in clean, unison G-

natural octaves, as the singer utters the word “grace” (Fig. 2). This G is the singer’s highest note in the movement, and it creates an unexpected bright moment. But before the word “grace” has ended, F-sharp returns in the piano part, muddying the high G octaves, and leading to the accompaniment’s slow descent to low F-sharp once more, in m. 31.

Figure 2

Figure 2 shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 21 to 23. The vocal line (treble clef) has the lyrics: "Wish-eth that still he might be im - pri-son-ed." The piano part (grand staff) features a complex accompaniment with various dynamics and articulations. The second system covers measures 24 to 26. The vocal line (treble clef) has the lyrics: "Yet grace, - if thou re - pent, thou canst not lacke; But". The piano part (grand staff) continues with a complex accompaniment, including dynamics like *f*, *espress. e sost.*, and *dim.*.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*. 5.

In the last portion of the piece, from m. 31 onward, the voice describes a hope of repentance. This section retains the ostinato, but because it grows quieter until the end, this rhythmic figure begins to resemble a heartbeat more than a funeral march. Britten is moving the funerary trope inward, from an image of collective mourning in a funeral, to personal mourning in a more intimate, physical reference. From this point, though the music never again achieves a clear G octave, it also never returns to stark F-sharp octaves, but iterates the softened ostinato with broad but gentle chords.

In the last phrase of text, which says of Christ's blood "That being red, it dyes red soules to white" (line 14), the rise-and-fall trajectory found through the vocal part is reversed to one of fall-and-rise (Fig. 3). The vocal phrase begins on F-natural, and ends on a high F-sharp (m. 41): not *forte* like the opening, but *pianissimo*, with an additional *diminuendo* on the voice's final note. The piano part fades away in open fifths, F-sharp and B-natural (m. 42, Fig. 3). Though B minor was implied from the start by the piece's key signature, this is the first moment where the key is articulated. By integrating F-sharp into a B tonality, Britten suggests that the troublesome pitch had a purpose from the start; this ending redeems it. The emptiness of the open fifths expresses the cleanness of Donne's final word, "white," but because the chords lack a third, the sonority also creates a noncommittal, incomplete effect. The song ends not with the hopelessness of sin, nor with the simplicity of forgiveness, but in the no-man's-land of Donne's "red" imagery: consciousness of guilt, repentance, and the blood of Christ. This mixed image ends the movement with more peace than its beginning, but without resolving its philosophical questions about guilt.

The second movement of Britten's cycle is a setting of Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV, entitled by Britten after its initial words, "Batter my heart." This poem reaches out of the seventeenth century with images that are foreign to modern readers. Its central paradox is that the speaker, who desires to believe, is unable to do so unless God forcibly changes him. The sonnet expresses this through a series of violent and destructive images in which the speaker pleads for salvation, comparing that process to imprisonment (line 12), burning (line 4), the overthrowing of a city in battle (lines 5-6), and even, in the last line, "ravishment" (line 14). Such images were extreme even in the seventeenth century, and for twentieth-century readers far removed from that period (and from the minor prophets of the Old Testament), the effect is disturbing. The unusual imagery constitutes an affectively-charged

study of the reasons for suffering. The poem offers an old intensity to match the new and horrible extent to which the question of suffering presented itself to the world in 1945.

Figure 3

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 6.

To coordinate with the violence and pleading in the text, Britten creates an agitated affect with a relentless, *staccatissimo* triplet sixteenth-note motive in the accompaniment (Fig. 4). In his analysis of *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, collaborative pianist Graham Johnson finds that rhythm to be derived from the spoken rhythm of the opening words, “Batter my heart.”¹¹⁷ The piano echoes this opening batterment in every beat throughout the song, with only a brief change near the middle of the movement. This relentless rhythm creates a new

¹¹⁷ Graham Johnson, “Voice and Piano,” in *The Britten Companion*, ed. Christopher Palmer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 292.

implication for Donne's image of "battering". The piano attacks the vocal part with rapid strokes that sound not like the physical "battering" of fists imaged in Donne's poem, but like rapid machine-gun fire. The rapidity of this "battering" evokes both the impersonality of modern weapons, and the psychological angst of spiritual "battering" from a divine source. Britten's text painting maintains the spiritual emotion of the poem while updating it to a context of twentieth-century war.

Over this relentless rhythmic ostinato the voice maintains a flexible rhythm based on a natural declamation of the text. Like Donne's poetry, Britten's setting struggles against and escapes the mechanical sonnet meter. A sonneteer is in constant danger of being trapped in the rhythm of iambic pentameter, which tends to pause at the end of every long line of text, thus discouraging forward momentum. Great poets who use this genre are known for their ability to transcend the strictures of their structure to create a graceful flow of thought. John Donne's sonnets are less graceful than rebellious. His words often seem forced into the sonnet structure, with liberal use of enjambment (allowing a sentence or phrase to run over a line break) to propel thoughts forward. This creates an aesthetic of urgency, and also forces the reader to consider every particular word and phrase in the text.¹¹⁸

Britten's setting is faithful to Donne's aesthetic in its rhythmic unpredictability, which sounds less like poetry or song than speech, and Britten continues to use the rhythm of the vocal part to communicate his reading of the poem. For example, the first two lines of the sonnet read, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for, you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend". Even from this excerpt it is clear that Donne did not intend to emphasize the rhythm of the sonnet's meter; an iambic inflection of these lines produces

¹¹⁸ For additional exploration of Donne's sonnet rhythm as interpreted by Britten, please see Barbara Docherty, "Sentence into Cadence: The Word-Setting of Tippett and Britten," *Tempo* New Series, no. 166 (September 1988): 3.

stilted, unnatural declamation. Britten arranges the rhythms of his setting to reflect the punctuation of Grierson's editions of Donne, not the meter of the poetry. The initial sixteenth-note triplet/quarter value motive of the phrase "Batter my heart" is followed by an almost exactly similar figure in m. 2, which sets the words "three-person'd God" with an eighth note, two sixteenths and another quarter value (as it becomes when a breath is taken on beat 2 of m. 3). This means that the second phrase emphasizes the word "three," while reiterating the initial idea of a set of three short notes (Fig. 4).

This idea of "three" becomes a unifying factor within the entire movement, continued in m. 4 with Britten's setting of the words "knock, breathe, shine," as three eighth notes (Fig 4). Sets of three ideas recur in the poem, suggesting that the idea of three, or the Trinity, was a structural element for Donne's poem as well. The slower rhythm implied by Donne's "knock, breathe, shine," creates a way for the singer to enunciate the commas, lending weight to each word, since each contains its own separate image. In m. 5, Britten produces another variant of three short notes, this time a dotted sixteenth, thirty-second, and eighth (Fig. 4). With this rhythm Britten emphasizes the word "seeke" more than the word "mend". A reader could reasonably choose to emphasize either of these words, but each emphasis contains a different meaning. Britten's choice produces an accusatory tone, suggesting an inadequacy in God's effort to mend him. Throughout the song, Britten's rhythm emphasizes sets of three, but in a flexible manner that expresses Britten's concept of the spoken rhythm of the poem. This procedure parallels the text's dramatic conflict between form and ideas.

Figure 4

1 Presto agitato (♩ = 152)

Bat - ter my heart, three - per - son'd God;

3

4

5

for, you As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 1-2) features a vocal line with a triplet of eighth notes (marked 'f' and '3') and a piano accompaniment with a driving triplet rhythm. The second system (measures 3-5) shows the vocal line continuing with lyrics and the piano accompaniment changing to a four-stroke pattern. The tempo is marked 'Presto agitato' with a quarter note equal to 152 beats per minute.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 7.

The battering triplet rhythm relents once in the middle of the piece, at a crucial turning point in the text. In m. 24, the rhythm of the accompaniment is reduced to four strokes on beats 1, 3, the and of 1 and the and of 2 (Fig. 5). This creates a window of silence, with strokes of emphasis on key words, against which the voice utters a new ideological direction in the sonnet: “Yet dearly I *love* you, and would *be lovéd faine*.” Again, Britten is observing the structure of Donne’s poem: it is an Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet, designed to transition at the opening of the *sestina* (the last six lines of the poem). This transition is called a *volta*, or turn, and it is a usual element of all sonnet forms. Though the *volta* often it occurs at line 9 in a Petrarchan-style sonnet like this one, it can be moved to different lines depending on the dramatic needs of the poet, and Britten is sensitive to these

transitions of thought throughout the cycle.

Figure 5

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 10.

Here the speaker turns from describing the violence of sanctification, to asserting his own frustrated love for God. Britten emphasizes the speaker's love for God, and desire to be loved, through this distinct alteration of the accompaniment. This is a remarkable emphasis, considering the pain that the speaker describes throughout the poem. Britten reasserts his narrative's redemptive aspect despite its unanswered questions of suffering.

Britten's narrative of mourning continues with No. 3, "Oh might these sighes and tears". This is a much slower, more meditative movement than those preceding, and its primary characteristic is the Baroque sigh-motive. The accompaniment is structured around falling half-steps, beginning with superimposed and rhythmically displaced B—C motives in octaves (mm. 1-2, Fig. 6). The absence of underlying harmony creates a stark and desolate context for the sigh motives. The movement's emphasis of counterpoint rather than harmonic progression is another Baroque archaism. The accompaniment is characterized by half-step movement throughout the piece, both in the slow rhythm of falling octaves in the bass (starting in mm. 4-5), and the gradually faster rhythms of the countermelody later in the movement (mm. 12-21). Britten expands the idea of a sigh-motive, increasing its dramatic intensity in the tremolos and dissonant dyads of mm. 22-28 (Fig. 7). These tremolos are

both modern (a borrowing from nineteenth-century opera piano reductions) and an archaic reference to Baroque ornamentation and idiomatic harpsichord gestures.

The first line of text explains the setting's central sigh idea: "O might those sighes and teares return again/ Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent, / That I might in this holy discontent / Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain" (Holy Sonnet III, lines 1-4). As the poem's speaker longs for more sighs and tears to properly mourn his sin, he wishes that even his past sighs might return for him to dedicate to this purpose. So Britten depicts an atmosphere saturated with sighing, in which the speaker remembers past sorrow while experiencing present grief. Appropriately, the vocal line is also built around sigh motives and slow, stepwise movement (Fig. 6).

Figure 6

The musical score for Figure 6 is in 4/4 time, marked "Andante con moto" with a tempo of quarter note = 48. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a rest for two measures, then enters with the lyrics "O might those sighes and teares, re-turn a-gaine in - to my". The vocal melody is characterized by slow, stepwise movement and includes a triplet of eighth notes in the final measure. The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand, with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *pp* *espress*. The score is numbered 1 through 5 above the vocal line and 3 below the piano line.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 10.

In mm. 12-21, the speaker laments sorrows associated with the past life of which he is now ashamed, and expresses the main paradox of the poem, that the sorrow of his repentance is caused by past sins that were inherently sorrowful themselves. In mm. 22-28, the voice part reaches a dramatic level of anger with leaps to high G and A, and increased dynamic volume, as the text wonders why unrepentant sinners can enjoy the memory of their sin, but repentant ones have only sorrow for the past and present (Fig. 7). For Britten, this seems like a response to the horrors and "insoluble problems" of both the past and

present of Europe after the war. Thousands of civilians had become “displaced persons,” suffering the loss of family, home and security in the wake of tyrannous dictatorships. Hitler was gone, but the terrible effects of his regime would endure for many. The song restates the common and bitter question of why the innocent seem to suffer more than the guilty.

Figure 7

23 *poco animato* *f* 24 25 *piu f* 26

Th'hy-drop-tique drunk-ard, and night scout-ing thiefe, The itch-y lech-er and self-tick-ling proud

f (*trem.*) *piu f*

27 *ff* *dim.* 28

Have the re-mem-brance of past joyes. for re-liefe of com-ing

ff *dim.*

28 *ritassando* *p* 29 30 *Tempo I* *pp* *pp*

ill. To poore me is al-low'd No ease; for,

p *pp* *pp*

Ped. al fine

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 13-14.

In No. 4, “Oh, to vex me,” Britten draws more direct attention to the theme of paradox, by selecting Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIX. In this sonnet the speaker proclaims that to “vex” him, “contraries meet in one”; he is expressing frustration with the unreliability of his repentant feelings and religious devotion. Britten works contradiction into the music in several ways: the regular running sixteenth-notes of the accompaniment underlie a vocal part with a slower rhythm and unpredictable phrase structure. The two parts never seem to line up rhythmically or cadentially, especially since the speedy passagework of the accompaniment discourages a sense of tonality, and the vocal part implies different keys in almost every phrase. The accidentals in the voice part imply A Major in mm. 2-5, E Dorian in mm. 7-15, A again in mm. 16-20, and F minor in mm. 21-24. The chromaticism grows more complex as the piece progresses, moving to the key of E minor in mm. 25-27, G-sharp minor in mm. 28-31, E-flat Major in mm. 32-37, and further afield from there.

To confuse matters further, rhythmic cadences in the voice part rarely indicate clear harmonic cadences, and almost never coincide with ends of sentences in the text. For example, in m. 20, there appears what sounds like a cadence to A Major in the voice part, and a listener might think that the word “contritione” here ends a sentence. It does not; it actually begins a sentence that continues for another 13 measures, and the music indicates this by immediately undermining the voice’s cadence with an E-sharp in the bass (m. 20, Fig. 8). The pause seems irrational, because there is not even a comma after “contritione” in the text. The next musical phrase begins with the E-sharp pedal and extends the phrase of text through four more measures (Fig. 8). The accompaniment quickly forgets the voice’s cadence on “contritione” in m. 20, just as the speaker laments that his “contrition” is “humorous” and “soone forgot” (Holy Sonnet XIX, lines 5-6).

Figure 8

18 19 20

As hu - mor - ous is my con - tri - ti - one

21 22 *f* 23 *pp* 24

as my pro - fane Love and as soon for - gott:

f *pp*

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 16.

Britten is working with Donne’s text to create a sense of chaos. In the previous poems, Britten’s rhythm followed the poetry’s spoken elocution. Here, however, Donne’s run-on sentences purposefully create a sense of infinitely circling self-questioning, which Britten emphasizes through harmonic ambiguity and rhythmic unpredictability. The high point of this affect comes in mm. 63-71, in which Britten sets the phrase “shake with fear” using an extended chromatic melisma (Fig. 9). This figure evokes Baroque word painting such as Purcell used for fearful moments in *The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation* (Z. 196; Britten composed a realization of this piece in 1947). Since the melisma runs in eighth-note triplets over the quadruplet sixteenth-note runs in the piano part, it creates a sense of polyphonic and harmonic chaos and encourages “shaky”-sounding intonation on the singer’s part (Peter Pears emphasizes this effect in the 1965 recording with Britten as accompanist). At this

point in the narrative, the protagonist has become aware of his need to repent, but the instability of his attempts shows that he still finds himself incapable of repentance. At the end of these first four movements, the speaker's attempts to repent have only heightened his consciousness of guilt.

Figure 9

The musical score for Figure 9 consists of two systems of vocal and piano parts. The first system covers measures 63 to 66. The vocal line begins with a whole note 'when' at measure 63, followed by a quarter note 'I' at measure 64, and a quarter note 'shake' at measure 65. Measures 64, 65, and 66 feature triplets of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment includes a section marked 'legatissimo' starting at measure 64. The second system covers measures 67 to 71. The vocal line continues with a quarter note 'with' at measure 70 and a quarter note 'feare.' at measure 71. Measures 67, 68, 69, and 70 feature triplets of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment includes a section marked 'dim.' starting at measure 69.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 19.

A Turning Point: Grieving for Others (Nos. 5-6)

The next two movements of the cycle constitute a turning point in the speaker's perspective. In these, his attention is drawn gradually away from his own guilt, toward the plight of others instead; in no. 5, he encounters the sufferings of Christ, and in no. 6, he grieves for a loved one. These movements introduce Britten's philosophical solution to the "insoluble problems" of the humanity's guilt for the war's atrocities: love.

No. 5, “What if this present,” is based around the motive found in the opening measure, which depicts a march through its emphatic rhythm, its tempo indication (“*Marcia*”) and its drumroll-like octave trills (Fig. 10). In the poem, the speaker imagines the end of the world, and he foresees death, judgment, or both. Ostensibly to comfort himself with the hope of redemption, the speaker describes a “picture of Christ crucified” (Holy Sonnet XIII, line 3).

However, in Britten’s setting, the meditation seems anything but comforting. The percussive ostinato rhythm continues throughout the song, creating a funeral march that could be meant for the singer’s final judgment, or could be a reference to Christ carrying his cross to Calvary (as in the opening movement of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, a work that Britten knew and conducted). The ambiguity of this march’s purpose shows how desperately the speaker desires to be identified with and redeemed by Christ’s death.

But the speaker seems both attracted and repelled by Christ’s suffering. Donne describes the crucified Christ in painfully graphic terms, and in the second half of the poem, he claims paradoxically that Christ’s wounds are a beautiful sight. “To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign’d, / This beauteous form assures a piteous mind.” (lines 13-14). The body of the setting seems to contradict this closing couplet. In addition to the frightening ostinato, the vocal part describes Christ’s suffering in purposefully ugly music. For example, directly after the text asks whether Christ’s countenance can be frightening, Britten inserts a scream-like vocal figure consisting of a slide from a high A-flat to the E-flat when the text refers to Christ’s “teares” (m. 12, Fig. 11a). Britten repeats the motive in m. 15, referring to the “blood” falling from Christ’s head, and surprisingly, he does so again in m. 20 on the word “forgiveness” (Fig. 11b). Here the pitch is raised to a high B-flat, preceded by a

crescendo and emphasized with an accent. This is a difficult tenor note, and in the 1965 recording it sounds like an unearthly cry in Pears's tense and powerful voice.

Figure 10

Alla marcia moderato (♩ = 69)

The musical score for Figure 10 consists of two systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment for measures 1 and 2. The piano part features a complex texture with triplets and trills in both hands. The vocal line is represented by a single note in measure 1. The second system shows the piano accompaniment and vocal line for measures 3 and 4. The piano part continues with similar rhythmic patterns. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "What if this pre - sent were the world's last".

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 20.

For the protagonist of this song cycle, the idea of forgiveness is even more frightening than the idea of Christ's suffering; perhaps because the phrase in mm. 18-24 suggests that torturers and murderers can be forgiven (Fig. 11b). Such a thought would both attract and repel a pacifist like Britten, especially one who had seen the "horrors of Belsen" and knew what modern murderers had done in Nazi Germany. Yet this song suggests that Christ's forgiveness of His murderers means that there is forgiveness for others as well: for the protagonist of the song cycle, and perhaps also those burdened with the guilt of the war's atrocities.

Figure 11a

Figure 11a shows the musical score for measures 12 and 13. The vocal line (top staff) begins with a rest in measure 12, followed by the lyrics "fright, Teares in his eyes quench the a -". Measure 13 features a triplet of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment (bottom two staves) consists of a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand. Dynamics include *tr* (trills) and *tr* (trills) in the vocal line.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 22.

Figure 11b

Figure 11b shows the musical score for measures 18, 19, 20, and 21. The vocal line (top staff) contains the lyrics: "And can that tongue ad - judge thee in - to hell Which pray'd for - give - nesse for his foes fierce spight?". Measure 18 has a *meno f* dynamic. Measure 19 has a *poco a poco cresc.* dynamic. Measure 20 features a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 21 has a *tr* (trill) in the vocal line. The piano accompaniment (bottom two staves) features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 22.

In “What if this present,” the speaker is wrestling with the meaning of Christ’s suffering. As a sinner, he sees himself both as the guilty party behind Christ’s death and the beneficiary of Christ’s atonement. In Britten’s setting, this paradoxical struggle resonates with his twentieth-century context: the guilt incurred by humanity in the Holocaust. This movement evokes more forcibly than the others the emotions of viewing concentration

camps photographs. The graphic descriptions of suffering and guilty feelings of the viewer recall Yehudi Menuhin's impressions of Belsen's ex-prisoners from his autobiography: "to our unaccustomed eyes they appeared desperately haggard..."¹¹⁹ The suffering of Christ becomes a metaphor for the guilt of humanity in the wake of the Holocaust.

The end of the movement eases the funeral march rhythm, and resolves the initial G minor tonality to G Major in the final three measures. This seems to imply a seemingly impossible redemption for the speaker, despite the guilt associated with the horrors he has witnessed during the song. These final measures are a turning point in the cycle, and lead into No. 6, "Since she whom I loved," the cycle's most lyrical movement, where the focus shifts completely from the protagonist and his guilt, to an object of love.

Movement no. 6 is a setting of Holy Sonnet XVII, which Donne wrote in response to the death of his wife Ann in August of 1617. This makes it one of Donne's latest and most moving Holy Sonnets. More than previous movements, Britten's setting of this poem resembles the rhapsodic art song style of early twentieth-century English composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams, William Butterworth, and Ivor Gurney. Like the musical style, the text also harks back to a happier past, as the speaker remembers and grieves for his beloved, and says that his love for her fed his love for God. "Here the admyring my mind did whett / To seeke thee God; so streams do shew their head" (lines 5-6). The speaker seeks to reconcile his love for God with his love for his wife, and reasons that God removed her from his life so that all of his love could be reserved for God. "But why should I beg more love, when as thou / Dost woove my soul for hers: off'ring all thine" (lines 9-10).

¹¹⁹ Menuhin, *Unfinished Journey*, 179.

For Pears, this was the crucial movement in the cycle.¹²⁰ It presents a sharp contrast with the preceding movements through its placid surface and lack of angular leaps. It is also the only movement without a piano introduction. The voice part begins immediately with the downbeat of the accompaniment, on the same G-natural that ended the previous movement. This constitutes a common-tone modulation from G Major to E-flat Major, effecting a seamless transition from the image of Christ's "pitying mind" in the previous movement—an image of love—to the speaker's love for his wife, and the pity (or grief) that accompanies the thought of her departure.

This gentle sonnet never refers directly to the death of the beloved; it merely says that she has "paid her last debt" (line 1), and that her soul has been "ravished" into Heaven (line 4). This imagery is both a milder reference to the violent request for "ravishment" in No. 3, "Batter my heart," and a shift of focus to portray eternal life rather than death. He does not say that she is dead; the speaker only says that "my good is dead" (line 2), that is, her passing has left him with a void and he is grieving. In this movement, the protagonist of the song cycle deals with his inner grief and guilt by focusing outward, toward his love for his beloved, and God's love for him.

Britten sets this tender meditation with an accompaniment of chords in slow rocking triplets, evocative of a lullaby (Fig. 12). Diatonic dissonances, and seventh and ninth chords, create a shimmery effect, like a halo or scene bathed in light. The ever-increasing distance between the right and left hands through the piece creates a sense of openness and depth. Combined with the ever-circling triplets and slow harmonic rhythm, the effect is reminiscent of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*, a later work with philosophical similarities to "Since she

¹²⁰ Peter Pears, "The Vocal Music," in *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on His Works from a Group of Specialists*, edited by Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller (London: Rockliff Publishing, 1952; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 70.

whom I loved.” Pärt’s piece uses calm, circling figures to depict eternity, and Britten portrays something similar in this accompaniment.

Figure 12

Adagio molto rubato (♩ = 33)

pp

1 Since she whom I lov'd hath payd her last debt

pp

sost. con molto Ped.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 25.

The vocal part in is more lyrical than in earlier movements, with expressive soaring lines like that of mm. 8-11, on the text “And her Soule early into Heaven ravished” (line 3). The dissonance of this line against the accompaniment, combined with the sensual beauty and vocal effort of the high tessitura, express both the pain and the transcendence that the speaker experiences when his beloved is taken to Heaven. Britten returns to this melodic line, at a higher pitch, near the end of the song in m. 36 on the text, “But in thy tender jealousy...”, referring to God’s jealousy to have all of the speaker’s love (Fig. 13). This brings the same combination of pain and love to a new plain, expressing not the speaker’s love and longing for his beloved, but God’s love and longing for the speaker.

From here, the vocal line descends through small leaps and downward chromatic progressions, to rest on the mediant pitch of the key, followed by a piano coda full of dissonant, shimmering dyads; the rhythm slows and the music cadences in E-flat Major. Returning to the home key is unusual in this cycle, but here it is appropriate because the

protagonist has found a way for peace to coexist with pain. Pears reacted thus in his analysis of the piece: “Death has been conquered, not by an old man who waits for it resigned and patient, but on the contrary by a still young one who defies the nightmare horror with a strong love, the instinctive answer to Buchenwald from East Anglia.”¹²¹ In this cycle, the solution to fear of death is not to rage against evil and pain, but to find comfort through healthy grieving for a loved one, and to see how suffering can be a sign of God’s love.

Figure 13

36 *f* *poco largamente* 37 38 39 *dim.*
vine, But in thy ten - der jea - lo - sy dost doubt Least the world,

40 41
Fleshe, yea, De - vill putt thee

42 43 44 45
pp
out.
p *p* *pp*
Red. Red. Red. Red. Red.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 28.

¹²¹ Pears, “The Vocal Music,” in Mitchell and Keller, 71.

Reconciling with the Approach of Death (Nos. 7-9)

The cycle's last three movements return to the problem of guilt with renewed hope coexisting with residual doubts. In these movements the protagonist distinctly senses the approach of his own death, and seeks to reconcile his new understanding of Christ's love with his old fears of divine retribution for his sins.

No. 7 adopts a heroic tone, as the voice imitates trumpet calls to evoke the Last Judgment. This movement is a setting of Donne's Holy Sonnet VII, "At the round earth's imagined corners". The protagonist seems to have achieved a victory in the previous movement, because he does not bother to wonder at the paradox about the round earth's corners; he seems to defy the impossibility of the image with a trumpet-like melisma on the word "imagined" (m. 2, Fig. 14). Melismatic vocal trumpeting is another Baroque idea, used in pieces ranging from Handel's "Let the Bright Seraphim" (from *Samson*) to Purcell's "Hark, the ech'ing Air" (from *The Faerie Queene*). The trumpet sound is further emphasized by the key of the movement (D Major, the usual key for Baroque trumpet music) and the accompaniment, which is composed of tremolo dyads like trilling trumpets over tonic-dominant progressions whose basslines move by melodic triads, creating the sound of a fanfare. Both hands are placed in the treble clef, further evoking a brass choir.

Figure 14

Largamente e maestoso ($\text{♩} = 48$)

f 3 2 5

p sempre

At the round earth's im - a - gin'd cor - ners, blow Your trum - pets,

f

Re.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 29.

In m. 6, the voice finishes the phrase with an imperfect authentic cadence on D Major, an unusually strong phrase-ending for this cycle. The triumphant tone continues in mm. 7-15, in which the vocal part continues to utilize trumpet motifs, over an accompaniment with increasingly fast harmonic rhythm. Judging only from the text, this page of the score ought to have been a frightening one, as it described the resurrection of “All those whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow, / All whom warre, death, age, ague, tyrannies, / Despair, law, chance hath slaine...” (lines 5-7). It sounds like a distressingly relevant list of Second World War casualties, but Britten’s setting emphasizes not the horror of these violent deaths, but the triumph of their resurrection. After the climactic high note that describes these victims beholding God (m. 12-13), there is another phrase-ending strong cadence on D, in m. 14.

The brassy accompaniment continues for a four-measure interlude, and as it descends to the bass clef for the first time in the movement, the voice returns at a much lower tessitura and quieter dynamic (m. 19). The thought of the final judgment did not frighten the protagonist in the first half of the song, but here he asks for the judgment day to be delayed, so that he may “mourn a space” (line 9). As the speaker asks for time to mourn, the piano’s bass line and the voice’s dynamic continue to descend, until in m. 28, the protagonist utters a simple summary of all he has tried to say in the preceding songs: “Teach me how to repent” (line 13). Britten slows the trumpet-melisma motif to a syllabic setting of this short phrase of text.

The move toward simplicity continues as Britten sets Donne’s last line-and-a-half of text without accompaniment in the last three measures, with a simple rising and falling line that lands securely on the tonic, D (Fig. 15). This movement’s juxtaposition of triumph and quiet shows that the cycle’s protagonist is finding an ability to mourn.

Figure 15

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major (one sharp) and 7/8 time. It begins at measure 30 with the instruction *con espansione*. The lyrics are: "for that's as good As if thou hadst seal'd my par - don, with thy blood." The piano accompaniment is in G major and 7/8 time, with rests in the first two measures and a whole note in the third measure. The score includes measure numbers 30, 32, and 33. A fermata is placed over the final note of the vocal line.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 32.

No. 8, “Thou hast made me,” is a last burst of anxiety before the song cycle concludes. It starts with the longest piano introduction in the cycle, fifteen measures built on a quick succession of half-steps displaced by one or more octaves (Fig. 16). In this kind of playing, the pianist’s hands appear to chase each other, reflecting the central image of the sonnet (Donne’s Holy Sonnet I). Apart from a couple instances of rubato, this song maintains its desperate pace as the speaker begs God to complete his salvation quickly, for he sees death approaching. “Repaire me now, for now my end doth haste, / I run to death, and death meets me as fast” (lines 2-3). The setting is primarily syllabic, expressing haste, and the only melisma longer than two notes is on the word “yesterday”—a reinforcement of the idea that the protagonist has no time left in the present, only in the past. Britten chose this sonnet, usually numbered as the first of Donne’s set, for the penultimate movement in the cycle. Donne’s sonnet cycle begins with the speaker encountering his own death; the protagonist of Britten’s cycle encounters first his own guilt and the death of others, and his own death last. This narrative approximates Britten’s experience of the German concert tour, followed by illness, personalizing his use of the Holy Sonnets.

Figure 16

Presto agitato (♩ = 132)

1 2 3

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 33.

The final movement in the cycle is a setting of Donne's most famous Holy Sonnet, No. X, "Death, be not proud." In this sonnet, a calm speaker defies a personified Death as powerless and doomed to defeat. Britten casts this sonnet as a chaconne, in one of the cycle's clearest homages to Purcell, whose famous ground bass aria from *Dido and Aeneas*, "When I am laid in earth," is one of English music's most profound expressions of mourning. However, Britten's "Death be not proud" is in many ways the antithesis of a lament aria. Though the ground bass begins with a descending figure, it comes just short of the descending tetrachord common in Baroque laments. The fourth note of the bass line (m. 2) descends not stepwise, but by a sixth, to D-sharp, the mediant pitch in this movement's key of B Major (Fig. 17). The bass line then rises by stepwise motion to F-sharp, and proceeds to rock gently between F-sharp, G-sharp and A-sharp in a lullaby-like rhythm or for a couple measures. In m. 5, the ground bass line finishes by rising a fifth stepwise from G-sharp to E. Though the form of the movement recalls the Baroque lament aria, the hopeful character of the bass line, with its refusal to succumb to falling contours, shows that this is not a typical one.

Figure 17

Allegro molto moderato e sostenuto ($\text{♩} = 63$) *sempre piano*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Death be not proud,

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 37.

However, there is uncertainty lurking beneath the calmness of this chaconne. The key signature implies B Major, the same key that was suggested by the open-fifths which ended the first movement, “O my blacke soule”. In that song, the ending implied an uneasy transition between repentance and redemption. For this final song, B Major would be an unambiguous tonality with a major quality—surely an appropriate and triumphant conclusion to the protagonist’s struggle with sin and death. But the cycle’s ending is not so comfortable. B Major is implied throughout the movement, but never articulated until its final measure. The ground bass begins on the mediant pitch and ends on the dominant, and these pitches are emphasized on the downbeats within the ground bass as well. This creates a veiled anxiety, different from the obvious dissonances and sforzandos in earlier movements. The listener is unsure why the song seems unfulfilled and unsettling, because one waits for a resolution that both the movement and the entire cycle seem to demand. Britten creates a metaphysical conceit of his own: a musical setting that implies a paradox in its text, exuding both too much calmness and too much anxiety.

The voice begins in mm. 6-12 by repeating the chaconne bass line in canon with the accompaniment, uttering the first two lines of Donne’s poem. In this song, the vocal

phrases match the lines of the poem much more than in the rest of the cycle. This is partly because Donne uses less enjambment, creating a calmer, less driven mood. Britten's phrasing reflects this calmness, ending most lines of text with vocal melodic cadences on the mediant or dominant. Measures 21-27 explain the lullaby sounds in the ground bass: "From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures be, / Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow" (lines 5-6). Britten emphasizes the rocking feeling by placing a similar melodic motive in the vocal line. He continues to use this rocking melodic material in mm. 22-34, gently carrying the metaphor of sleep to the reality of death.

The calmness is disturbed in m. 36, where the voice transitions suddenly from *pianississimo* to *forte* and takes up martial dotted rhythms to defy death with the lines, "Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men, / And dost with poison, warre, and sicknesse dwell" (lines 9-10, Fig. 18). As in many of the songs, Britten's change of style observes the transition in the opening of the poem's *sestina*; the sonnet attains another notch of drama at this point. As in No. 7 of the cycle, "At the round earth's imagined corners," this text seems to list elements directly relevant to the circumstances of the war: this time, not people in the struggle, but sources of fear or death. Though the words are defiant, the music gives them a cast of uncertainty. Measures 36 and following include A-naturals and D-naturals which force the voice into the martial D Major of movement No. 7 atop the ground bass, which is still in B Major.

The tension of this bitonality mounts in mm. 44-45, as the voice crushes almost two lines of poetry into two measures: "And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well / And better than thy stroke" (lines 11-12). In m. 46 the voice reaches its highest note in this movement, a *fortissimo* high G-natural on the word "stroke;" a cadence to the dominant, F-sharp Major (Fig. 19). In the 1965 recording of this piece, Peter Pears performs this note

with the same hysteria that he used for the shrieking figures in movement 5, “What if this present.” Even on this last page of the song cycle, the protagonist is still struggling with fear of death: despite his brave words, death’s “stroke” is still the center of his concern and the high point of the song.

Figure 18

The image shows a musical score for measures 36 to 40. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom two staves are the piano accompaniment. The key signature is B major (two sharps). Measure 36 starts with a vocal rest, followed by a high G in measure 37. The lyrics are: "Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,". The piano accompaniment features a ground bass pattern of eighth notes. Dynamics include *f* (forte) and *mf cresc.* (mezzo-forte crescendo).

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 39.

Immediately after this, Britten deflates the anxiety of death’s stroke with a simple gesture: the voice descends from the high G in a sequenced repetition of the opening vocal phrase, which is also the first motive of the ground bass (Fig. 19). The voice lands on F-sharp, back in the realm of the home key. A B-minor pedal chord hangs over the ground bass for a couple measures of interlude, and then drops out to allow the ground bass to naturally reestablish the world of implied B Major. Then in mm. 50-58, the final couplet of the sonnet is set with a return of the opening vocal material, based on the ground bass itself, but now in a slower rhythm. The voice part begins and ends with the melody of the ground bass, but without reaching a harmonic resolution. It merely enters into the bass line’s endless harmonic circling.

Though this movement’s ground bass and subject of mortality connect it with the Baroque lament aria, the bass line’s upward trajectory and harmonic ambiguity distance it from that tradition. It resembles the constant harmonic circling of movement 6, “Since she

whom I loved,” more than it does the expected Baroque descending tetrachord. As the sonnet circles around the question of death without finally putting an end to the question, so the ground bass circles constantly around B-Major without resolving there. The ground bass seems to say more about eternity than it does about death.

Figure 19

The musical score for Figure 19 consists of two systems. The first system covers measures 46 to 49. The vocal line (treble clef) has lyrics: "well And bet-ter than thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a ground bass in the left hand. Dynamic markings include *ff* at measure 47, *espress.* at measure 48, and *dim.* at measure 49. The second system covers measures 50 to 53. The vocal line has lyrics: "One short sleepe past, wee". The piano accompaniment continues the ground bass. Dynamic markings include *p* at measure 52.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 40.

When the B Major cadence finally does occur, it *sounds* like a long-awaited resolution, but it *feels* like a rather brutal anticlimax. In mm. 60-63, the voice is given an exhausting eleven beats of high F-sharp with crescendo on the word “death,” followed by a *fortissimo*, accented dominant to tonic movement on the final statement to Death: “thou shalt die” (Fig. 20). After the gentleness of the ground bass, this gesture seems overblown. The final B Major chord is voiced in close position in the bass of the piano, which creates muddy overtones: it gives the listener too much of the longed-for B Major tonality. The chord also

kills the ground bass. There is no cathartic coda, no opportunity for the ground bass to unravel itself. It simply is stopped.

Figure 20

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano setting. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). It begins with a long note on 'death,' followed by a rest, then 'thou shalt die.' The tempo and dynamics markings are 'cresc. ed allargando' and 'ff'. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature. It features a prominent ground bass pattern in the bass line, consisting of a sequence of chords that repeats throughout the piece. The score is numbered 60, 61, 62, and 63.

Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, 40.

Britten completed this setting of “Death be not proud” on August 19, 1945, less than a month after returning from Germany, but last of his nine Donne settings. In this conclusion of the cycle, the process of mourning, as painted by the ever-circling ground bass, is portrayed more sympathetically than the sudden death of death in the final measures. After nine songs of becoming able to mourn, the protagonist of this cycle is not prepared for his grief to be cut off with a pat answer. He has reached a point in the mourning process where he does not want to struggle with questions anymore, and tries to convince himself that he is done asking; listeners are left with the impression that the solution is premature.

Surely for Britten an easy victory was impossible in the face of the war’s “insoluble problems.” Britten’s protagonist seems afraid to be mired in the questions of death, but the close of this cycle implies that it would be better to give grief as much time as it needs. The conclusion encapsulates Britten’s approach to John Donne in this song cycle. Donne’s Holy Sonnets presented Britten with a mine of thought in which he found expressions that

coordinated to a greater or lesser extent with his experience of grief. Some sonnets presented ideas that he portrayed with great sympathy, like the healing power of love in Donne's Holy Sonnet XVII, "Since she whom I loved." Other sonnets contained elements that did not coordinate with Britten's experience. Holy Sonnet No. X, "Death, be not proud," expresses a level of closure that Britten could not subscribe to after only nine days of grieving, and which he therefore portrayed as self-contradictory. Britten's selection of sonnets, and his portrayal of the ideas contained in them, was a way to explore the process of grief through another's thoughts on grieving. Donne's poetry provided Britten with a process, not a solution: if Britten was searching Donne for answers, what he found was the value of asking questions.

CHAPTER SIX

“When I’ve spun my last thread”

A Work of Mourning

My paper closes with all its characters returning to the stage, as I examine a work that epitomizes voices of the past more fully than any I have presented thus far. In the final year of his life Benjamin Britten returned to the poetry of John Donne, and to English music of the seventeenth century, in one of his last continuo song realizations: Pelham Humfrey’s “Hymn to God the Father”¹²² from *Harmonia Sacra*. In this work, the music of Pelham Humfrey is added to Donne’s voice, and Humfrey’s voice is overlaid with a twentieth-century Neo-Baroque style by Benjamin Britten. Britten’s work does not overshadow that of Donne or Humfrey, but creates a forum for the three voices to coexist. Each voice preserves the work of the past while adding a new layer reflective of its own time, in a collaboration spanning four centuries.

For such a collaboration to be possible, these three artists from different ages would have to share, to some degree, parallel understandings of life. This is achieved in part by the subject of the song, which is mourning, the most universal category of expression to be found in the arts of the human race. The song is a work of mourning on several levels: mourning for sin, mourning in the face of immanent death, and a reflection of Derrida’s *a priori* mourning discussed in my first chapter. Mourning for sin, in the context of Reformation theology, was an immediate and new experience for Donne’s culture; for Humfrey, it was an expression of a more spiritually introspective past, though still native

¹²² Though Humfrey’s song (as printed in Playford’s *Harmonia Sacra* I, 1688) is generally referred to by the text’s first line, Britten’s realization identifies it using the title of Donne’s poem. Thus, in this chapter, Humfrey’s song as realized by Britten will be entitled “Hymn to God the Father.”

expression in a Christian era. For Britten, it was an expression of spiritual searching from a distant, more assured religious period, one that he could portray with admiration and sympathy even if he could not believe it himself.

The song expresses mourning for sin in the context of the end of life, when the speaker has “spun his last thread,” in Donne’s words. All three collaborators contributed their work near the end of life. Donne wrote the poem in 1623, six years after the death of his wife and eight years before his own death. Izaak Walton reports that Donne composed the poem on his sickbed.¹²³ It was one of his last religious poems, written in a stage of his career when most of his literary efforts were devoted to the composition of sermons, and the poetry he did write was mostly concerned with themes of death and eternity. Pelham Humfrey probably composed his setting of the poem while serving as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, at some time no sooner than seven years before his early death at the age of 27. We do not know whether he wrote it during the last months before his death, when the sudden composition of his will indicates that he knew he was dying. It is clear, however, from this and his church anthems, that mournful texts were a major interest during his adult life as a composer. Benjamin Britten, the third collaborator, knew that he was seriously ill when he wrote his realization. This awareness colors not only his selection of Humfrey’s song, but also the work’s instrumentation. Britten made it playable on harp, because his health prevented him from playing the piano, and Peter Pears’ new accompanist was the harpist Osian Ellis. Thus this collaboration contains an element of the artists mourning for themselves, in the context of waning life: possibly, in Humfrey’s case, probably, in Donne’s case, and certainly, in Britten’s.

¹²³ Izaak Walton, “The Life of Dr. John Donne,” 1640, reprinted in *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert & Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 61.

Along with the artists' personal acts of mourning in this work, it involves Derrida's concept of *a priori* mourning as well. As we saw in my first chapter, Derrida suggests that interaction with the work of a dead author contains inherent mourning. He argues that mourning occurs when a person's identity is reduced to a memory, and that the internalization of another's thoughts which occurs when interacting with the work of a past artist presupposes elements of remembrance, loss and grief.¹²⁴

In the Humfrey-Britten setting of Donne's "Hymn to God the Father," each collaborator's work is a reflection of the past. Donne's poem is a systematic recollection of his past life; Humfrey's setting interacts intimately with poetry of a past period of English history; Britten's setting revives archaic aesthetics in both music and poetry. According to Derrida's model, in this song each of the collaborators mourns for those who went before him, whom he knows intimately through their work, but whom he will never meet. He must internalize their thoughts, expressed through the art they have left behind, and in so doing forms a kind of friendship, and engages in the mourning inherent in any internalization of another: for, as Derrida describes, mourning occurs when one's interiorization of a person must replace the person.¹²⁵

So the Humfrey-Britten "Hymn to God the Father" reflects the combined perspectives of different ages, as each new person interacting with Donne's poem places a lens on it for the next observer. The closer one looks, in fact, the more lenses one can detect—for though Donne, Humfrey, and Britten are the only authors named in the score, they are not the only people through whose minds this work passed before it reached us. Donne's poem passed through the editorship of the posthumous 1633 edition of his *Poems*

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 49.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

before the text reached Humfrey. After Humfrey's death, his music was edited by his former student, Henry Purcell, and the publisher Henry Playford, with more textual variants, and probably musical variants, appearing along the way. The *Harmonia Sacra* collection went through three editions, the third edition of Book I appearing in 1714, when it was printed by a new editor, William Pearson, with further alterations in the score. This was the edition Britten owned, from which he produced his realization in 1975-6. The published edition of Britten's realization was in turn edited by its first interpreter, Osian Ellis, in 1998. All the work's performers and listeners are more lenses through which this work passes, and through whom its message and experience of mourning are enriched.

Britten's realization of the "Hymn to God the Father" is thus a multifaceted portrait of mourning, one in which each artist looks to the past to help him address the concept of death. Remembrance is, after all, a common and natural source of wisdom for those who are mourning, as our culture demonstrates through its traditions of funerals, memorials, and elegies. Who better to turn to for wisdom about death than those who are dead?

Benjamin Britten at the End of his Life

Benjamin Britten was already working on musical studies of death in 1972 when his physicians told him that he needed an operation on one of his heart valves. He was in Venice, finishing his opera *Death in Venice*, a study of the nature of love, and of bitter nostalgia for lost opportunities at the end of life. Britten rushed to finish the work before his operation; Britten's biographer Christopher Headington observes that "The second act of the new opera was written at a feverish pace, not unlike the *Donne Sonnets* long before, when he had also written of death under the influence of illness."¹²⁶ On March 8, 1973,

¹²⁶ Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 140.

Britten underwent the operation, during which he suffered a stroke that left his right arm partially paralyzed. This ended his career as a pianist. His recovery was slow and difficult, troubled by bouts of depression. A year elapsed before he returned to composing.

No longer able to accompany Peter Pears on the piano, Britten began writing works for tenor and harp that Pears could perform with the harpist Osian Ellis. One of these was *The Death of St. Narcissus*, a setting of an early poem by T.S. Eliot. Britten dedicated this piece to the memory of William Plomer, a poet and friend, who had composed the libretto to Britten's opera *Gloriana* in 1953. Plomer had died in 1973, and Britten wrote this piece in 1974 while he was still recovering from his operation. Britten suffered another loss in 1975, when his friend Dmitri Shostakovich died in September of that year. It was about this time that Britten began to compose his last set of seventeenth-century song realizations, a collection of five songs about mourning, repentance, heaven, and music, from Henry Playford's *Harmonia Sacra*.

Britten continued to work on this project until the last year of his life. He finished the set in mid-1976, and passed away in December of that year. Britten was very ill and weak in the months before his death, and it is difficult to ascertain his spiritual worldview at the time. It is however important to glean such details as are available, because Britten's spiritual worldview is an important context for understanding his interest in, and interpretation of, these devotional songs from *Harmonia Sacra*. Most records of Britten's spirituality at the end of his life are left by friends and loved ones who naturally desired to see Britten happy and at peace. His sister Beth Welford visited him shortly before his death, and described the final course of Britten's spiritual searchings in her book *My Brother Benjamin*.

Ben had not been a regular churchgoer during the main part of his adult life. Although we were brought up by our mother to go to church regularly, he obviously

felt the need for some kind of worship and had been through many different places. At one time he nearly became a Quaker as he always had a tremendous admiration for them. At another time, the Roman Catholic Church attracted him: I think he felt that their religion seemed more alive than did our Church of England; and he considered their music better. Yet in spite of these searchings, Ben finally returned to his mother's church at the end of his life.¹²⁷

According to his sister, Britten's whole life contained an ongoing spiritual search. Such an experience recalls that of John Donne, who said of his spiritual life, "I used no inordinate hast, nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any local Religion."¹²⁸ Britten's and Donne's journeys ended in very different places, however. Britten never expressed a final religious affiliation as clearly as Donne had the opportunity to do. Beth Welford's assertion that Britten "returned to his mother's church at the end of his life" is probably due to the fact that Britten received the sacrament of Communion in his home before his death. He had been visited occasionally during his hospitalization and subsequent recuperation by an Anglican bishop named Leslie Brown, who discussed spiritual matters with Britten and invited him to take communion. Britten did not wish to do so at first, but finally agreed during the Bishop's last visit to Britten's home. Peter Pears has suggested that Britten did this more to please his friend Brown than as an act of devotion.¹²⁹

In the various reflections on Britten's spiritual life that appeared in memorial addresses after his death, the main impression is of ambiguity, as though those reminiscing are unsure how to reconcile contradictory indications. At the 1977 memorial service for Benjamin Britten held at Westminster Abbey, the sermon was preached by an acquaintance of Britten, the Rev. Walter Hussey. In this sermon Hussey says that "Ben did not feel able

¹²⁷ Beth Britten Welford, *My Brother Benjamin* (Bourne End: Kensal, 1986), 200. I turn here to words of Beth Welford and other acquaintances of Britten to describe his last days, because the projected final volume of the definitive edition of Britten's letters and diaries has not yet been published [Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991—)].

¹²⁸ John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr*, in Charles M. Coffin, ed., *The Complete Poems and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 313.

¹²⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 580.

to describe himself as an orthodox churchman,” yet quotes Britten as saying, “‘I am coming to feel more and more that all my music must be written to the glory of God.’”¹³⁰ It is not clear when Britten made this statement to Hussey (the two occasionally corresponded regarding possible commissions for sacred music). In an interview with Graham Elliott, Leslie Brown said that he and Britten discussed God as the source of creativity.¹³¹ Elliott writes that “Britten talked of his own sense of being taken over by a power when he was composing and he was quite prepared to think of this power as God.”¹³² Apparently Britten considered his music to have a spiritual source, but not in an orthodox Christian sense.

Bishop Brown expressed the doubts and ambiguity of Britten’s spiritual worldview in his funeral address for the composer.

He believed deeply in a Reality which works in us and through us and is the source of goodness and beauty, joy and love. He was sometimes troubled because he was not sure if he could give the name of God to that reality.

Sometimes he looked back nostalgically to the clear, untroubled faith he had as a boy. He was scrupulously honest about his faith, and he wrestled at a deep level with doubt and depression.¹³³

The pieces Britten collected in his *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra* address themes of guilt, struggling with the ability to repent, searching for assurance, and the connection between Heaven and music. The songs are arranged in an unsettling narrative, where images of joy are shadowed by reflections of guilt and doubt. The above records indicate that Britten’s lifelong spiritual search included a period of reflection at the end of his life. The conclusion of this search was unclear to those around him, but it seemed to include the recognition of a higher power as the source of music, together with doubts about the nature of that power.

¹³⁰ From the sermon preached by Walter Hussey at the Memorial Service for Benjamin Britten in Westminster Abbey, 10 December 1977 (Copy in Westminster Abbey Library), quoted in Elliott, 23.

¹³¹ Leslie Brown, conversation with Graham Elliott, February 28, 1984, in Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*, 25.

¹³² Elliott, *Benjamin Britten: The Spiritual Dimension*, 25-26.

¹³³ Leslie Brown, in Welford, 200.

If so, Britten's *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra* reflect in music the final days of Britten's own spiritual search.

“Corporeal eyes won't let us clearly see”: *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*¹³⁴

This set was a culmination of Britten's lifelong study of seventeenth-century English continuo song. Britten and Pears had received their copy of Playford's anthology in September 1945, two months after the composition of *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*. It was a gift from their friend Imogen Holst, daughter of Gustav Holst. The copy consisted of a third edition of Book I and a second edition of Book II, bound together.¹³⁵ Previously Britten's published realizations from *Harmonia Sacra* had focused on works by Henry Purcell, but this last collection consisted entirely of works by lesser-known composers: William Croft, Pelham Humfrey, Jeremiah Clarke, and John Blow. The texts regard topics of guilt, repentance, mourning, and heaven, and most address these topics in the context of music.

The first song in the collection, William Croft's "On Divine Music," does so by positing that music is a mode of communication derived from heaven. The unattributed text searches for the source of music in the world, following a series of ascending images, from the warmth of Spring, to love, to disinterested friendship. It finally concludes that the source of music is higher than these: it is Heaven, "The Centre which at last the Blest ascend, the Seat where Hallelujahs never end."¹³⁶ The song ends by explaining that the truth about the music's origin is difficult for those on earth to comprehend. "Corporeal eyes

¹³⁴ Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra: By Pelham Humphrey, William Croft, John Blow & Jeremiah Clarke; for High Voice & Harp or Piano*, edited by Rosamund Strode Colin Matthews, with Osian Ellis (London: Faber Music, 1998). To my knowledge, there are no previously published studies of this work.

¹³⁵ Rosamund Strode and Colin Matthews, "Prefatory Note" to *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, realized by Benjamin Britten (London: Faber Music, 1998), i.

¹³⁶ William Croft, "A Hymn on Divine Musick," in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 6.

won't let us clearly see, But either thou art Heav'n, or Heav'n is thee."¹³⁷ The whole set pursues the ideas expressed in these lines: the perplexity and frustration of trying to understand spiritual truth with "corporeal eyes," and the place of music in the quest to understand.

The second song is "Lord! I Have Sinned," composed by Pelham Humfrey, with a text by Jeremy Taylor. This is a penitential song in a dissonant, virtuosic and angular style. It backtracks from the first song's joyful revelation of heavenly music to illustrate the struggle of a person burdened by guilt, who wants to repent, but does not know how. The text says, "the Balsom of thy Blood, although it can, will do no good, unless the Wounds be mixed with tears"¹³⁸—that is, Christ's blood cannot cleanse from sin without the believer's tears of repentance. The song ends with a plea for God to provide the gift of repentance, since the speaker cannot find it on his own. "Teach but my Heart and Eyes to melt away, and then one drop of Balsom will suffice."¹³⁹ This text repeats the first song's theme of an inability to understand and reconcile oneself with spiritual truth, but in a darker context.

Pelham Humfrey's "Hymn to God the Father" appears at the center of the set, the third song. Donne's text also describes a difficult, doubt-ridden spiritual journey, but it ends with the set's firmest expression of assurance: "I fear no more."¹⁴⁰ I will examine this work in detail below. All troubles seem to be at an end in the fourth song, "A Divine Hymn" by Jeremiah Clarke, which opens, "Blest be those sweet Regions where Eternal Peace and Musick are."¹⁴¹ Again, music is associated with heaven, but as this song progresses, a rift appears between the speaker and the heavenly joys he describes. It becomes clear that

¹³⁷ Croft, "A Hymn on Divine Musick," in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 7.

¹³⁸ Pelham Humfrey and Jeremy Taylor, "Lord! I Have Sinned," in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 9-10.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Pelham Humfrey and John Donne, "Hymn to God the Father," in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Jeremiah Clarke, "A Divine Hymn," in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 14-15.

“Eternal Peace and Musick” exist in a world other than his own: “We a Ruffled World endure, never Easy, nor Secure.”¹⁴² The song ends by celebrating the “extasies” of the “Souls which dwell above,” in a slow, solemn C minor passage which suggests more the sadness of those left on Earth than the happiness of those enjoying heaven’s eternal music.

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The final song in the set is another plea for the ability to repent, a lamenting passacaglia by John Blow called “Oh! That Mine Eyes Would Melt.” The song’s unattributed text describes the suffering of Christ in graphic images, such as Christ’s “Blood bedabbled arms...spread to entertain Death’s welcome Bands.”¹⁴⁴ The image of “entertaining death’s welcome bands” is a particularly sobering one when set to music by a dying man. The speaker in the poem is frustrated with his inability to mourn sufficiently for Christ’s death, saying that “the very Heav’ns put weed of mourning on; the solid Rocks in sunder rent, and yet this Heart, this Stone, could not relent!”¹⁴⁵

This song (and thus the set) ends with the speaker in an ambiguous spiritual state. In a rather metaphysical paradox, the text wonders why, of all creation, only humanity cannot mourn for Christ, when it was for humanity that Christ died. “Hardhearted Man! And only Man deny’d to weep for him, for whom he only died.”¹⁴⁶ In this ending, the speaker has turned from describing his own spiritual state to lamenting the spiritual state of humanity. He never says whether his eyes were able, at last, to “melt” in repentance as he desired.¹⁴⁷ Perhaps the song’s long and sympathetic description of Christ’s suffering indicates that this

²⁰ Jeremiah Clarke, “A Divine Hymn,” in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 17.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁴ John Blow, “Oh! That Mine Eyes Would Melt,” in *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 22.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

song *is* his repentance—conceivably a repentance as yet unrecognized by the speaker, who is still distracted with the guilt of “hardhearted” humanity.

Britten’s realization gives a hint as to the speaker’s final spiritual outcome. Beneath the singer’s last note in m. 54, a G on the word “dy’d” (referring to Christ’s atoning death), Britten chooses to harmonize the final chord as G Major rather than the perfectly acceptable opening mode of G minor. The major modality is not indicated until a B-natural appears in the last note of accompaniment’s arpeggiated realization. Marked *pianissimo*, this final arpeggio contains the subtlest hint of brightness, as though there is hope beyond the end of the music, hope that is out of sight but of which we catch a short glimpse. Perhaps that is the most we can see with “corporeal eyes.”

“Hymn to God the Father,” by John Donne, Pelham Humfrey, and Benjamin Britten

Britten’s realization of Humfrey’s “Hymn to God the Father” is placed at the center of the *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*. Its spiritual perspective is central to the set as well, drawing together in summary the themes of doubt, fear, and the search for assurance that concern the whole set, and providing the set’s clearest resolution of these issues. While the arrangement remains faithful to Humfrey’s melody and continuo, Britten also asserts his own voice by choosing particular elements of Humfrey’s setting to emphasize, reflecting a reading of both the song and the poem. Britten does this through performance directions in the score, harmonic choices in his realization of the bass line, and ornamentation and countermelodies in the accompaniment. These compositional decisions draw attention to particular words in Donne’s text and gestures in Humfrey’s setting, allowing Britten to provide his own interpretation of the concepts embodied in this song.

Britten asserts his voice subtly. Unlike some of his *Harmonia Sacra* realizations, such as Purcell's "Blessed Virgin's Expostulation," or even the other songs in this set, Britten's accompaniment to the "Hymn to God the Father" contains relatively little new figuration. It even limits the use of arpeggiated chords, a natural option for realizations from harpsichord parts. Arpeggiation is even more natural in the case of this realization, since the accompaniment was designed for harp. Instead, Britten relies heavily on homorhythmic chordal accompaniment figures, which create a solemn background for the text. In so doing he is reacting creatively to Humfrey's subdued and syllabic *arioso* setting, in which the relative absence of melisma and ornament leads to straightforward declamation of the text. When Britten does use arpeggiated chords, they lend extra emphasis to the words and harmonies upon which they fall.

Britten's first arpeggiation occurs in m. 1, on the word "forgive," underlining this central word of the text. The accompaniment utilizes block chords for the rest of the stanza. Britten inserts dynamics into Humfrey's score, starting the work in this measure at *piano*. This tells the singer that the first stanza's questions are to be characterized by the quiet of sadness, fear, or uncertainty, not by distressed and passionate demands for God's attention. Britten draws attention to a second important word, "sin," in m. 2, by inserting the direction *marked* in the accompaniment. The accompaniment doubles the voice's rhythm in two voices, at a fourth and a sixth lower than the vocal line. The direction suggests that the voice may also choose to "mark" these notes, perhaps by singing them in a more detached, world-weary declamation. The "marked" figure outlines both the significance and the ominousness of the text at this point (Fig. 1).

The accompaniment continues subtly commenting on the vocal part throughout the piece. In mm. 7-8, where the voice sings, "Wilt thou forgive that Sin, through which I run,

and do run still,” Humfrey illustrated the text with a short “run” in the vocal line. Britten’s accompaniment echoes the vocal part’s “running” figure immediately afterward, while the voice is sustaining the word “still” (Fig. 2), and emphasizing the idea with a turn in m. 8 that extends the “running” even further. Britten is playing off Humfrey’s ideas, creating a sympathetic dialogue between the voice and accompaniment. Perhaps the accompaniment shows that the speaker continues to “run” in his sin even as he tries to confess, saying he “deplores” his sin in mm. 8-9. It is a comment on the futility of repentance.

Figure 1

The musical score for Benjamin Britten's "Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra, 11" is presented in two systems. The top system is the vocal line, marked [Moderate] and in 3/4 time. It begins with a first ending (marked '1') and a second ending (marked '2'). The lyrics are: "Wilt thou for - give that Sin, where I be - gan, which". The bottom system is the piano accompaniment, starting in the second measure with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *marked* performance instruction. The accompaniment features a falling triplet in the first measure of the second system, which echoes the vocal line's melisma on the word "for,".

Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 11.

Another sympathetic gesture appears in the accompaniment in mm. 10-11. This time there is an echo of the voice part’s melisma on the word “for,” an expressive gesture that indicates the speaker’s sorrow over his inexhaustible list of sins. The accompaniment’s sympathy with the vocal part seems more immediate this time: the echo-sigh is marked *express*. Britten uses the idiomatic English term *expressive*, creating a more natural effect than would the traditional Italian *espressivo*. The accompaniment’s echo begins only a half-beat after the voice’s figure begins in m. 10. The echo extends the thought with a falling triplet in m. 9 as the voice pauses (Fig. 2). The triplet creates a written-out *ritardando*, which combined with Britten’s diminuendo marking and the arpeggiation in m. 12, indicate that the

performers ought to emphasize this moment as the end of a section. The markings of *piano* for the singer and *pianissimo* for the accompanist show that Britten wanted this first stanza to end in a manner even more subdued than its beginning.

Figure 2

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staff. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 7, 8, and 9. The second system covers measures 10, 11, and 12. The vocal line includes lyrics: "do run still, tho' still I do de-plore? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more." The piano accompaniment features a "marked" figure in measure 11, indicated by a wedge-shaped dynamic marking. The dynamic marking *p* (piano) is placed above the vocal line in measure 11, and *pp* (pianissimo) is placed below the piano line in measure 12. The score is in a key signature of two flats and a common time signature.

Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 11.

Though Humfrey begins the second stanza at a higher pitch level than the first, Britten avoids overwrought emotion by again marking the beginning of the stanza *piano*, and maintaining that dynamic for the entire stanza. In mm. 13-14, he again uses the emphasis of the *marked* figure in the accompaniment that underlies the voice's melody line at the mention of "sin." Here, however, the *marked* gesture occurs one beat earlier than it did in the first stanza (m. 2). Donne increased the urgency at this moment in the poem through

enjambment, and Humfrey did so through unexpected harmonic wandering. The early entrance of the *marked* figure is Britten's understated way to increase tension and urgency while still requesting a subdued tone from the singer.

In the middle of the stanza, Britten begins to assert his voice more distinctly through his harmonization choices. Humfrey's bass is unfigured, so any realizer has some freedom to choose how to harmonize the bass line. Sometimes Humfrey's melody includes pitches that are not present in any chord that contains the bass note, indicating that he intends the use of non-chord tones. In mm. 18-21, however, Britten deliberately chooses some dissonant harmonies that Humfrey's score does not require. For example, in the first beat of m. 18, he harmonizes the voice's F-sharp as an appoggiatura resolving upward to the root of a G minor chord. With no G in the accompaniment, and only D and B-flat in the bass, m. 18 thus opens with a sustained augmented triad which would sound dissonant even in the music of Purcell (not to mention his teacher Humfrey). This gesture was foreshadowed subtly in m. 10, where an augmented triad appeared in the accompaniment on beat 2. Britten could more easily have realized the bass here with a simple D Major chord progressing to a first inversion A Major chord in beat three. Instead, Britten highlights the pain in the word that the chord underlies: "Wilt thou forgive that Sin, which I did *shun* a Year or two, yet wallow'd in a score?" (Fig. 3).

He continues to emphasize this thought in m. 19, which begins with an arpeggiated, accented E-natural diminished chord in first inversion, with a sudden jump downward to the bass clef. Again, Britten had a gentler option: he could have used a G minor triad. Britten's realization of Humfrey's bass enhances the tension of the voice part's upper-resolving suspension. Then the accompaniment's *marked* figure reappears beneath the voice's setting of the words "wallowed in a score." Here Humfrey uses the same motive that he used in the

two stanzas' first mentions of sin, but in a much lower vocal tessitura, indeed the lowest of the song, to illustrate a speaker's lowered tone of disgust, and an aural image of "wallowing" in the mire of sin. Britten's *marked* figure appropriately descends as well, to the bass clef, where the overtones of its close position chords produce a murkier character than do earlier appearances of this gesture (Fig. 3).

Figure 3

The image shows a musical score for three measures (18, 19, and 20) from Benjamin Britten's 'Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra, 12.' The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in a lower tessitura, with lyrics: "shun a Year or two, — yet wal-low'd in a score? when thou hast done, thou". The piano accompaniment features a "marked" figure in the bass clef, consisting of a descending sequence of chords. The key signature is G minor (one flat), and the time signature is common time (C).

Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 12.

Simplicity and Eucatastrophe: The Final Stanza

Britten begins the song's final stanza with the brightest and most virtuosic accompaniment gesture in the work thus far. Both Donne and Humfrey have in turn given this closing section a dramatic turn from fear to faith. Britten responds to Humfrey's surprising G Major modal shift in m. 24 by introducing the third stanza with a sweeping written-out arpeggiation of the G Major chord (Fig. 4). This gesture is particularly striking after the end of stanza two, which was deeply mired in G minor. It is a completely unexpected moment of brightness for the listener. Perhaps the best word to describe this effect of sudden hope is found not in musical criticism, or in seventeenth-century literature, but is one invented by J.R.R. Tolkien in a literary essay published in 1964, "On Fairy-

Stories.” In it he coins the term “eucatastrophe,” the “good catastrophe, the sudden joyous turn” found often in stories of a religious or mythical character. This is how Tolkien describes his term:

...A sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal defeat and in so far is *evangelium* [gospel], giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.¹⁴⁸

The surprising brightness of Britten’s gesture in m. 24 (Fig. 4) looks forward to Donne’s text in mm. 30-31, which describes the present shining or revelation of the Son of God. Britten’s extravagant manner of shifting to G Major makes it clear that something new has happened in this narrative: the first sight of the hope that the text discovers in this final stanza. Britten also uses this intense emphasis of G Major, this moment of eucatastrophe, to foreshadow the Picardy third he chooses for the close of the piece in m. 34; and later, for the end of the entire set in its final song. Fears remain to be worked out in the last stanza: as Tolkien says, the eucatastrophic moment “denies universal defeat” “in the face of much evidence;” but the “joy” is real, and another “fleeting glimpse”¹⁴⁹ of it will conclude the piece.

Figure 4
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The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G Major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The lyrics are "I have a Sin of". The piano accompaniment is in G Major and 4/4 time. The first measure of the piano accompaniment features a dynamic marking of *mf* and a fermata over a chord. The piano part has a fingering of 5 on the fifth finger of the right hand. The vocal line has a fermata over the word "Sin".

Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 13.

¹⁴⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” from *Tree and Leaf* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 68. The square bracket translation of “evangelium” is mine.

¹⁴⁹ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader*, 68.

Britten's realization becomes more insistent and virtuosic throughout the final stanza. He makes freer use of countermelody, octaves in the treble and bass clefs, and other departures from the mostly chordal accompaniment in the preceding stanzas. In m. 27 Britten reiterates the *marked* gesture that accompanies mentions of sin, but now in bright treble octaves while the vocalist sings, "when I've spun my last Thread." This dramatic gesture leads to a buildup of tension through mm. 26-27 (Fig. 5). By adding crescendos to Humfrey's score, emphasizing the bass descent with octaves and virtuosic written-out arpeggiation, Britten emphasizes an arrival point in m. 27, at the voice's line, "I shall perish on the *Shore*." Britten further follows this moment with a downward flourish in the accompaniment, a diminuendo, and breath marks in both the piano and voice parts. There is irony in this determined and elaborate arrival at this shore of death. In Donne's poem, the line refers to a fantasized anti-arrival: finishing life's voyage only to perish within sight of heaven. Britten brings out the frantic emotion implied by the contradictory text.

Britten's emphasis of m. 27 also affects m. 28, where Humfrey expresses the text's change from fear to halting faith in a sudden shift from B-flat Major to a swift progression that starts at G Major. Britten marks this measure *piano*, another drastic shift from m. 27, which built to *forte*. This dynamic also tells the performers something about the mood Britten thinks appropriate for this shift. The dynamic *piano* implies perhaps the quiet of a tentative hope. Whatever mood the singer wishes to map onto the dynamic, Britten's dynamics prevent the panic of m. 27 from becoming bombast in m. 28. Despite the desperation of the text's fears and request, this is a prayer of humility and quietness (Fig. 5). Perhaps Britten is contrasting different sides of an individual's approach to death: the cry of desperate fear followed by the quiet of hopeful fear.

The prayer of m. 28 begins gently, but Britten soon builds it to a moment of triumph. He uses octave scales in the accompaniment to underlie the voice's rising line that depicts the "sunrise" of Christ in mm. 29-31 ("but swear by thy self that at my Death, thy Sun / shall shine as he shines now and heretofore"). The rising line of Britten's accompaniment begins a couple beats before that of the voice, as though the speaker watches the sunrise begin in the accompaniment and joins at the end of m. 29 in response to this revelation of glory and salvation (Fig. 5). The accompaniment reaches its highest pitch with the voice in this phrase (m. 30, "as he shines *non*"), emphasizing, with Humfrey's melody, the exultation of the believer's momentary glimpse of heaven.

Figure 5

Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 13.

After this revelation, Britten's score contains a significant performance direction in m. 32. As the voice concludes the thought of the previous measures with the phrase, "and

having done that,” the accompaniment is marked *simply* (Fig. 6). This is the only time this particular performance direction is used in the piece, and it is an unexpected one. “Simply” is not a musical technique: there is no technical standard for playing “simply” like that for playing in a “marked” manner. “Simply” is a state of mind: an expressive nuance characterized by lack of nuance. The concept of giving a philosophical direction as a musical direction contains a bit of Metaphysical conceit’s paradoxical quality.

The paradox continues in the unexpectedness of finding the term “simply” in a musical interpretation of Donne. Simplicity was a rare concept in Britten’s *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, and the state of mind in this Humfrey-Britten “Hymn to God the Father” has been anything but simple, characterized instead by constant self-questioning and doubt. Even the vocal phrase in the measures marked “simply” seems to belie this direction, with disjunct intervals and massive leaps of a rising minor sixth and falling diminished seventh.

Britten’s curious expressive direction expands upon the apparent contradiction between Donne’s text and Humfrey’s music at this point. Donne’s text at this close of the poem is characterized by simplicity, with single-syllable words, metrical evenness, and peaceful ideas: “And having done that thou hast done, I fear no more” (mm. 32-34, Fig. 6). The revelation of God’s “Sun” has accomplished its intent and the believer’s doubts are assuaged and replaced by simple trust. Humfrey’s setting of these lines uses a succession of dissonant, disjunct intervals in the voice part, leading in a rather tortured path to the final resolution of the setting’s troublesome falling-diminished-fourth gesture in m. 34. This vocal setting seems to emphasize not the simple trust expressed in the text, but a last struggle necessary to reach that trust. However, beneath Humfrey’s crabbed vocal setting of these final measures, the bass line utilizes a straightforward tonal progression, unlike with the wild

modulations in the previous sections of desperation, prayer and revelation. Humfrey's setting expresses complexity on its surface but confident simplicity in its foundation.

Britten saw this paradox and encapsulated it for the accompanist and singer in the word "simply." He also promises hope, by realizing Humfrey's final chord not as G minor or an open fifth, but in G Major, the key of the third stanza's triumphant and surprising opening (m. 24). Donne's text says that God has accomplished redemption despite the speaker's overwhelming sense of sin, but the poem only hints at how and why God would do this; all we really know is that for the speaker, redemption seemed impossible, but for God, it was simple. Humfrey's music expresses the frustration of believing something unbelievable. Britten's direction expresses the paradox of simple faith in the unseen.

Figure 6

Benjamin Britten, *Five Songs from Harmonia Sacra*, 13.

My Last Thread

This paper has studied the lingering influence that voices from the past exert upon the present. There was a living train of influence from the past voices of John Donne to Pelham Humfrey to Benjamin Britten to today, with countless small stops in between, including people as diverse as Izaak Walton, Samuel Pepys, Henry Playford, Henry Purcell, Samuel Johnson, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Peter Pears and Osian Ellis. This undying train of

thought provides an alternate perspective for Donne's poetic scenario of death, "when I've spun my last thread..." The thread of one's life may appear to cease when the Fates (or Providence, for Donne) cut it off at death, but there always seems to be someone to take up the thread and weave a new story into it.

Undying, multi-generational threads of thought can provide us with especially clear insight into the changes in perspective that occur with the passing of time. This paper has followed literature and music moving from the celebration of paradox and intellectual emotion in the seventeenth century, toward naturalness and directness in the eighteenth century, and back to a need for complexity as old standards crumble in the twentieth century. It has followed the progress of revolution and war, from Donne's experience of post-Elizabethan monarchy, to Humfrey's world in the wake of a failed commonwealth, to Britten's chilling view of what twentieth-century totalitarianism was capable of. This study has followed changes in spiritual culture, from the experiential, introspective devotion of Donne's post-Reformation faith, to the secularity of Humfrey's life in Charles II's court, to longings for spiritual consolation in the post-Christian exploration of Britten's century.

All these perspectives found expression through the work of Donne, whose mourning for his wife, for his guilt, and for his own life, resonated with those experiencing their own kinds of mourning: mourning for their own approach to eternity, for the victims of atrocity, or simply mourning in the face of death as an inescapably central subject of art. All of the contexts composers found for Donne's poetry were both new, in that they reflected the experiences of centuries after Donne, and yet also old; for mourning for others, for oneself, and for the reality of death are the communal activity of humanity in all ages. This paper examined one thread of many.

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