‘Music, Such as Charmeth Sleep’: Benjamin Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream

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Andrew Porter, music critic of the New Yorker, has commented that Benjamin Britten is one of the very few composers “who set English words with so delicate an understanding of musical values that even the most familiar lines, once heard conjoined to their music, are thereafter remembered inseparably from it.”¹ And this, I think, is the key to the success of Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream: despite that familiarity, despite Shakespeare’s verbal magic, it is impossible to reread the play after getting to know the opera without the memory of the music, of its rhythm and texture especially, insinuating itself into one’s experience. It is this quality of Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream that makes it unique among Shakespeare operas. Since Verdi, at least, a composer writing an opera based on a Shakespeare play has had to deal with the problem of adapting the structure of the play to operatic form while retaining a tone and emphasis that are recognizably Shakespearean. But most of the composers who have set out on this rather daunting task have possessed the considerable advantage of being foreign: they have not had to deal with the additional problem of Shakespeare’s language. And of these English-speaking composers who have tried, none but Britten has succeeded.²

Britten’s solution to this second problem derives not so much from his previous operatic experience as from his song cycles. While in the operas Britten had habitually worked with texts of high literary quality (and often with librettists of literary repute too), he had never been bound by having to retain the language of the original; but in the song cycles, especially those like “Nocturne” which use poems from a diversity of sources, he faced essentially the same problem as with A Midsummer Night’s Dream: how to impose a musical unity on a text whose verbal integrity cannot be violated, a musical unity that must reveal something about the words. So it is surely no accident that A Midsummer Night’s Dream is the only opera for which Britten (with Peter Pears) wrote the libretto himself. It is a remarkably authentic libretto. To avoid “an opera as long as the Ring,”³ he and Pears, working primarily from facsimiles of the first quarto and first folio, shorten the play by about half. Of what remains, only one line is not Shakespeare’s – “Compelling thee to marry with Demetrius” – an addition necessitated by the librettists’ excision of Egeus and the opening scene in Theseus’s court.

In choosing A Midsummer Night’s Dream, however, as the basis for the opera to open the reconstructed Aldeburgh Jubilee Hall, Britten compounded the problem of setting Shakespeare’s own words.⁴ For not only does the play contain so many lines that are very familiar indeed, but it is a work in which music has a crucial role. Besides being necessary for the Fairies’ songs, Bottom’s song, Oberon and Tytania’s dance, and the mechanicals’ Bergomask, music is one of the important images of the play, contributing greatly to its lyrical effect. And this is one reason why from the seventeenth century on it has attracted a number of settings – Purcell’s and Mendelssohn’s being the best known – whose traditions any composer wishing to set the work afresh must contend with.

With A Midsummer Night’s Dream, then, Britten was committing himself to finding a distinctive musical style and structure for the play that would complement and comment upon Shakespeare’s lines without ever being overwhelmed by them. But while conscious that “one must not let through a single ill-considered [musical] phrase because it would be matched by such great poetry,” he felt undaunted by the verbal music of his text because “its music and the music I have written for it are at two quite different levels.”⁵ Britten’s comment indicates one reason for his success: while the music must ultimately be at the service of the words, it cannot do this unless it is strong enough to operate both independently and in conjunction with them. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream Britten approaches this problem in basically two ways. First, the musical and
dramatic structure coincide, thereby enabling him to create a kind of musical shorthand, a motivic structure, that is often audaciously simple but which, because of the complex way it is employed, generates its own resonances, obviating the need for any wholesale translation of poetic images into musical equivalents. Second, Britten never ties himself to matching the musical rhythm of a passage to its verbal rhythm, and this metrical independence in the vocal line often forces a new appreciation of the text. One mark of Britten’s achievement in setting the play is that it is precisely those passages that in the original are most “poetic,” most rich in verbal music – the Fairies’ songs, Tytania’s and Oberon’s set pieces – that are most successful in the opera.

Britten has said that, with writing an opera, the dramatic shape always comes first. In the case of A Midsummer Night’s Dream what attracted him was the existence of “three quite separate groups – the Lovers, the Fairies, and the Rustics – which nevertheless interact.” It is this perception that governs the choice and order of material in the libretto. Clearly, there is no room here for Theseus, and instead the framing role is given over to the wood and the Fairies – a change that allows for a characteristically Britten emphasis on power and sleep. But this dramatic shape also governs the musical structure, for to each group Britten assigns a different instrumental texture – harps and percussion for the Fairies, strings and woodwinds for the Lovers, and brass for the Rustics – setting each off against the omnipresent wood. While this use of sonority as a characterizing device is no new departure for Britten, it works particularly well for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, providing an approach to one of the distinctive features of Shakespeare’s text: the careful differentiation of groups of characters by their use of verse and prose. So the Lovers’ couplets and blank verse, the Rustics’ prose and high-flown poetry, Oberon and Puck’s trochaic lines, Oberon and Tytania’s blank verse and couplets, and the Court’s prose during the Pyramus and Thisbe play find a musical equivalent in Britten’s use of orchestral and vocal texture.

One crucial departure from the play is that the first two acts of Britten’s opera and half of the third take place in the wood. The wood indeed is virtually a character – a musical character – in the opera; no mere background to the action but a living, breathing entity that affects all who enter it. The tightly organized musical and dramatic structure of Acts I and II makes its function and its power immediately apparent. The first act is constructed on an ABCBA principle (A representing the Fairies, B the Lovers, and C the Rustics), but the curtain rises on the wood at deepening twilight to a series of glissandi chords on the strings between a sequence of all twelve major triads. The first portamento, from G to F#, sets up a semitonal opposition that recurs throughout the opera. In these opening bars the all-embracing nature of the wood and its remoteness from human passions are immediately established, an effect that is magnified by Britten’s use of its music as a ritornello between each of the scenes of the act, as an accompaniment to Tytania’s “Come now a roundel and a fairy song” in the fifth scene, and in a variation of the chord sequence for the entry of Tytania and Oberon. In the second act, however, it is not the alien nature of the wood that is stressed, but its healing power: the power of sleep that Oberon uses to resolve the complications of the night. For this Britten uses a series of four sonorities whose notes cover all twelve degrees of the chromatic scale, scored for different sections of the orchestra, developing them in prelude, interlude, and postlude as a quasi-passacaglia. This is indeed “music, such as charmeth sleep,” music that is at once a comment on Shakespeare’s play and a context in which the action can develop.

This restructuring of the play also throws into prominence the character of Oberon. The quarrel between him and Tytania becomes the generating force of the action in the opera. It is a struggle for power:

- Give me that boy, and I will go with thee,
- Not for thy Fairy Kingdom
As in Shakespeare, this quarrel has disrupted the now “mazed world,” but in the opera the couple take responsibility for this situation even more emphatically: “We are their parents and original, we are.” Oberon’s jealousy and desire for revenge dominate the first two acts. His use of the charm on the Lovers is clearly subordinate to his use of it on Tytania. This obsession makes him rather more sinister than in Shakespeare, an impression that is confirmed by his rage and the apparently physical violence directed at Puck in Act II.

Both Britten’s power of musical characterization and his sense of musical structure can be seen in the opening “Ill met by moonlight” duet between Oberon and Tytania. This is a passage that has been used as an example of Britten’s intellectual conception exceeding the practical possibilities of musical execution on the grounds that Oberon’s countertenor is inevitably overwhelmed by Tytania’s coloratura. There is some foundation to such criticism; it is this matter of delicate balance that makes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, despite the relatively large forces it requires, essentially a chamber opera. But with a good countertenor, in a small house or on a recording, the duet works superbly, providing a fine example of Shakespeare’s music and Britten’s operating at different but complementary levels.

After the initial greeting the beginning of Tytania’s wonderful “progeny of evils” speech is assigned in alternate lines to the Fairy King and Queen:

OBERON  Therefore the winds, the winds have suck’d up from the sea
Contagious fogs.
TYTANIA  Therefore the ox hath stretched his yoke in vain,
OBERON  The fold stands empty in the drowned fields,
TYTANIA  The crows are fatted with the murrion flock.

And the rest is condensed to:

The seasons alter: the spring, the summer,
The childing autumn, the angry winter change
Their wonted liv’ries, and the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which;
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissention,
We are their parents and originals, we are

And distributed “variously and repetitively” between the pair. Not only can Britten afford to omit so much of Shakespeare’s poetry, but, from being essentially a set-piece in the play, the lines in Britten become a dramatic and musical symbol of the dissension between the Fairy King and his Queen. Obviously, this effect is achieved partly through the duet’s commanding position in the first scene and by the fragmented distribution of the lines; but, in addition, the very opposition of these two distinctive voices is a musical manifestation of Tytania’s refusal to submit to Oberon’s wishes, while their frequent repeated notes convey the obduracy of both. The use of triads on all twelve notes of the chromatic scale in the Fairies’ introduction to the duet, culminating in its opening, suggests the far-reaching ramifications of the quarrel, and the repeated B-flat/A and C/C# minor bitonality combines to give the passage its sharp edge.

As Tytania departs, jealous Oberon remains brooding on the injury he has received. The many repeated notes, the narrow range of intervals, and the celesta ostinato all emphasize his obsession with revenge. Musically this obsession develops into one of the key images of the opera, Oberon’s charm, as he sends Puck for the magic herb. The narrow range of the vocal line here, with the perfect fifth E flat/B flat, is reinforced in the seconds of the celesta ostinato and in the strings. The near inversion of the second phrase in the melody line is characteristic not just of Oberon but
of the Fairy music generally. In addition, Britten again develops semitonal conflict in association with all twelve notes of the chromatic scale: the celesta ostinato “can be resolved into two totally symmetrical segments of E flat and E minor … and the remaining four pitches are slowly added by the glockenspiel.” 10

The brooding intensity of Oberon’s music dominates the first act, an emphasis that is maintained by his presence in the second scene of the act and by his climactic “Wake when some vile thing is near” at the act’s close. In that second scene the Lysander/Hermes and Demetrius/Helena sections are bisected by Oberon’s

(Be it on Lion, Bear or Wolf, or Bull,
On meddling Monkey, or busy Ape).
But who comes here? I am invisible;
I will overhear their conference.

Britten’s departure from Shakespeare in the repetition of the charm effectively stresses Oberon’s desire for revenge, suggesting that his interference in the affairs of the Lovers is essentially capricious, clearly secondary to the plan to punish Tytania. Thus it is the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of Oberon’s power that Britten concentrates upon. Although ultimately benign, it is non-human and thus beyond the comprehension of the Lovers and beyond the moral standards of their world. So in the course of the Lovers’ long night in the wood its exercise is both disruptive (like the “mazed” world, they no longer know “which is which”) and, in conjunction with the sleep that Oberon induces, healing, allowing each some perception of a deeper reality in finding his or her lover “like a jewel, mine own and not mine own.” 11

The closing of this second scene with Oberon’s “I know a bank” confirms this subordination of the Lovers. Britten’s way of dealing with this passage, one of the best-known and most “poetic” in all Shakespeare, is a testament to his success in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. It might have been tempting to let the words do the work here, to leave the passage as the set-piece it has become from so much anthologizing. Instead, while providing Alfred Deller, the countertenor who created the role of Oberon, with a splendid show piece, “I know a bank” becomes an integral part of the musical and dramatic fabric of the opera.

The air opens with Oberon’s characteristic celesta ostinato and a reiteration of the charm motive: a clear indication of the relationship between his words and his overriding jealousy. This relationship is made brilliantly explicit in the use of a compressed form of the motive for the word “fantasies.” The repeated Gs of “There sleeps Tytania” recall his meeting with “Proud Tytania” in the first scene, while the scalic passages in both vocal line and harp accompaniment for the flowers and the snake not only recreate the beauty of the Fairy Queen’s bower, but, through their association with the Fairy scales and the sinuosity of the wood music, remind us of the non-human character of the wood and its inhabitants. The strange tension of the air also derives from the varied time signatures where the scalic passages in 4/4 with eighth, sixteenth, and thirty-second notes are balanced against the narrow range (E flat/B flat again) of the quarter and half notes of the 3/4 refrain. And in the setting of the words themselves the composer’s sensitivity to syllable and note values is also evident.

This sensitivity to accent and the accompanying awareness of the musical and dramatic uses to which it can be put comprise the second major technique that Britten uses to ensure that his music and Shakespeare’s work at different levels. Although examples could be drawn from almost any part of the opera, the most interesting deployment of metrical devices is in the Fairies’ music so is worth considering here. In their opening chorus, for instance, Shakespeare’s anapaestic lines,

Over hill, over dale,
are set in 6/4 with a quarter note to each syllable so that the musical accents fall on syllables that in Shakespeare are unstressed. This is much more than a stylistic trick, for it is the resulting cross-rhythms, together with the scalar retrograde and inverted motion and the bitonal relationship between the Aeolian F# of the melody and the G pedal of the wood, that create the sharp, even martial quality of the music.12

A similar displacement of accent comes in the final Fairy chorus, “Now until the break of day,” where the Scotch snap displaces the trochaic accents of Shakespeare’s verse, an effect that is compounded by the relationship of harpsichord and harp in the accompaniment. As Peter Evans notes: “one could perhaps use this song as a test-case of any listener’s feelings about Britten’s precarious stylistic poise. Such extreme simplicity can seem exasperatingly perverse, or it can appear an inspired response to verse that Shakespeare has made disarmingly simple.”13 Again, the reapportioning of lines, from Oberon alone to Oberon, Tytania, and Fairies in chorus, is used for dramatic point: harmony has been restored to the Fairy world and, in a reversal of Oberon’s earlier intervention, is now to be bestowed upon Theseus’s court. Most of the audience, I think, regrets that Puck and not this chorus has the last words.

Britten’s achievement with the wood and the Fairy music is extraordinarily impressive. The remote and ambiguous music of the wood in the first act is succeeded by the sleep music of the second, and this provides a structure that generates its own images – images that are independent of and yet which complement Shakespeare’s. Within this structure Britten can develop the contrasted styles of the three groups of characters in order both to shorten the play and to alter its emphasis in a way that remains essentially Shakespearean. His success is most clearly apparent with the Fairy music, but the same process is at work in his handling of the Lovers, and it is only with the Rustics that we become briefly aware of the intractable difficulties of translating the play into operatic form.

First, the Lovers. Their music has been unfavourably compared to that of the other groups; certainly, it lacks the eerie beauty of the Fairies’ music and the sheer fun of the Rustics’. The thin-textured dissonance of the string and wind scoring, the predominant recitative and arioso are not to everyone’s taste. But to criticize Britten for inadequately differentiating the Lovers is to miss the point: if anything, their characterization is more developed than in Shakespeare. As Oberon is obsessed with his revenge of Tytania, so the Lovers, but more helplessly, are obsessed with love, and their scenes show the effect of the intrusion of Oberon’s magic into their world. And Britten’s technique with the Lovers is again very simple: to indicate the narrowness of their horizons, their obsession with the loved one, whoever it may be, he derives almost all their music from one four-bar phrase, Lysander’s “The course of love never did run smooth.” Within this “circle of Love”14 the composer through careful reapportioning of lines condenses the Lovers’ repartee into swift recitative that culminates at crucial moments in brief duets or quartets.

As with Tytania and Oberon in Act I, the effect of this redistribution in conjunction with the musical setting is a dramatic and musical shorthand. So, for instance, Britten can safely omit all of Lysander’s beautiful “Or if there were a sympathy in choice” speech because the “course of true love... I swear to thee” duet conveys precisely this sense of the fragility of love. Similarly, the fugato quartet upon awakening, “I have found Demetrius/Helen/Lysander/Hermia like a jewel,” through contrast with the fragmented quartet of the quarrel in the wood and its partial recapturing of the Lovers’ original music, suggests both the depth of the experience they have been through and the
precariousness of their new balance. One might also note how Lysander’s switch from chromatic to diatonic idiom with leaping intervals and grace notes complements the extravagant language by which Shakespeare indicates his bewitchment. Or how one of the few escapes that the Lovers’ music makes from the circle is Helena’s recollection of her girlhood with Hermia – a time before they were caught up in the tortuous coils of love.

The Rustics, however, are a rather different case. For them, in contrast to the Lovers and Fairies, Britten finds literal equivalences for the text: hence such jokes as Flute/Thisby’s flute, the trombone lion, and the percussion chink in the cello/double bass wall. These touches are all very appropriate as well as being amusing, for this relationship between representation and reality is one that the Rustics in both Shakespeare and Britten insist on interpreting in a singularly literal way. But when this equivalence becomes transformed in the final scene from the play within a play to the opera within the opera, something jars. The parody of operatic conventions is wonderfully funny: Pyramus’s death aria where he sings for several bars after he has supposedly stabbed himself to death, Thisby’s Donizettian mad aria, or Snout’s Schoenbergian *Sprechstimme* as Wall are worthy of inclusion in a Gerald Hoffnung concert, and few audiences, I think, would like to be deprived of them. But it remains that the conventions parodied are, in a way that is not true of Shakespeare’s mechanicals and their play, outside the experience of the Rustics themselves. And, ultimately, this leaves the audience in the superior position of the stage audience – and there is a certain sourness in seeing Demetrius especially, “that notable judge of reality and illusion,” pronounce upon the Rustics’ confusion of the two. Where in Shakespeare the effect is one of delicately poised irony, in Britten the reduction in the moral stature of Theseus (who becomes a rather one-dimensional figure imposing a solution that Oberon has already decreed) and the consequent omission of Theseus and Hippolyta’s “‘Tis strange” dialogue mean that there is no counterpoise to the shallowness of the stage audience. So we can do nothing more than laugh at Britten’s comic invention, and the whole complex structure of the various levels of reality and illusion that have involved the audience as well breaks down.

It is a problem that Britten masks carefully: by the introduction of Theseus’s horns into the wood, by the comic brilliance of the parodies, and by a synthesis of levels in the conclusion. The Rustics’ performance is over, and Theseus’s “The iron tongue of midnight has told twelve/Lovers to bed, ‘tis almost fairy time” prepares us for the return of the Fairies. The composer sets these lines, however, to an accompaniment based on the Pyramus and Thisby I V I cadence that has symbolized the play/opera throughout. It is a bold stroke, and one that finally demonstrates the power of imagination. “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.”

This sudden fusing of onstage actors and audience – two of Britten’s three groups of characters – defines for us the layers of reality and illusion that the opera has investigated. Theseus’s music here makes all the more effective the returning of the opera to the Fairies, especially Oberon who has, after all, stage-managed the whole affair. The Fairies’ concluding blessing on the court of Theseus is a clear demonstration of Oberon’s power over the human world. The human characters in Britten’s *Dream* are all puppets, impelled by forces they but dimly comprehend. Oberon’s will, in association with the natural forces that he can control, has resolved his own problem and the problems of the Lovers; through its exercise even Bottom, that most literal-minded of men, has glimpsed the Fairy world. But Oberon’s revels now are ended, as are our own. For Puck, alas, must banish all these shadows and the visions they have brought, letting them retreat into the darkness like a dream.

[1981]
NOTES


2 Reviewing Samuel Barber’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Porter notes that the opera would probably sound better in a good modern Italian translation.


4 Before settling on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Britten considered *Pride and Prejudice* and *King Lear*.

5 Britten, p. 9

6 Ibid.

7 See, for instance, *Billy Budd*, an opera that relies even more on symphonic organization. Or compare the use of the celesta in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Turn of the Screw*.


9 Patricia Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (1969; rpt Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press 1976), p. 169 suggests that Tytania is being “punished in the Opera as much for her overbearing volume of sound in the first scene as for her refusal to part with the Indian boy.” Certainly Oberon’s assertion of his control takes the form of subduing her vocal power. So, when first awakening under the spell, she adopts both his monotone and his key of E flat. And after Oberon has released her she has very little to sing – all of which is at his behest.

10 Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: Dent 1979), p. 241. Evans provides the most thorough musical analysis of the opera – analysis to which I am indebted – but he is sometimes reluctant to comment on the dramatic effect of the musical techniques he analyses.

11 It is worth noting that in the opera there is no indication that Demetrius has ever been in love with Helena. The importance of sleep suggests the close relationship between the opera and the “Nocturne” song cycle which culminates in the setting of Sonnet 43, “When I do wink, then do mine eyes see best.”

12 “Martial” is Britten’s term. He notes too that the spirit world contains bad as well as good.

13 Evans, p. 255


15 Evans, p. 254, notes that the Schoenberg parody is immediately followed by Hippolyta’s comment that “this is the silliest stuff that I ever heard.” But his remarks make it clear that he is criticizing the parodies for being unsubtle (or occasionally malicious) rather than un-Shakespearean.