

A study of a selection of Benjamin Britten's vocal  
music for mezzo-soprano

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## ABSTRACT

The present study, which will investigate three works of Benjamin Britten for mezzo-sopranos, is envisaged as an aid to interpreters wishing to gain further insights into these works. The study focuses on three vocal works of varying genre: *The Rape of Lucretia*, *A Charm of Lullabies*, and *Phaedra*.

The investigation of each work starts with the historical background, in which Britten's life and career at the time of the work is discussed briefly, including reviews of the work. The performers and librettists, who were involved in the composition, are also discussed.

Secondly, an analytical survey is done on the text and music for each work. Brief background notes on the writers and poets, and on their style, influences and intentions, are included. The historical background of each text is explored, as well as the role of the character within the narrative, dramatic or literary/poetic context. The musical characteristics of each work are highlighted, which reveal stylistic aspects of Britten's writing. The influence of each work's genre (chamber opera, song cycle and solo cantata) on the interpretation of text and character is discussed, as well as how the voice is accompanied.

Lastly, a comparative survey of different recorded portrayals of each work looks at the background history, and approach of the various performers, as well as their advice to other performers.

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# CHAPTER 1:

## INTRODUCTION

For singers to perform a work well, they need to be aware of what the music entails and how the composer had intended his music to be performed. The singer owes it to the composer to research and analyze the music and texts. This dissertation therefore aims to be an aid to interpreters wishing to gain further insights into the three vocal works, concerning the composer's aims, and inspirations, the philosophy behind each work, the methods he used to convey the mood and character of each text, and selected interpretations by renowned mezzo-sopranos.

In preparing *A Charm of Lullabies* for my Masters interim recital, I became aware that insufficient information was available on the work, particularly on textual and character analysis and performance suggestions. I decided to make this work, together with two of Britten's other works for mezzo-soprano, *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Phaedra*, the subject of my dissertation.

A trip to England in August 2005 with the Cape Town Gilbert and Sullivan Society enabled me to visit Suffolk, the birthplace of Britten, where I did research in the Britten-Pears Library at the Red House. There I studied original manuscripts, dissertations and collections of reviews. I also did research on the original performers of the works in The British Library, London, where I listened to broadcast recordings of performances and interviews.

Britten shows an immense understanding for the instruments for which he composes. This study will seek to identify the ways in which he exploits the innate possibilities of the mezzo-soprano voice.

The works are investigated chronologically under the following headings:

1. Historical Background

2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music
3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

The historical background deals with the work's reception by the public and critics, as well as some of the important events in Britten's life and career at the time of each work. His aims, inspirations and philosophy as conveyed through each work are also discussed. This material is located in the specific chapters dealing with individual works so as to make it immediately accessible to someone looking for information on the individual work.

This is followed by a study of the authors and of the texts in question, namely Duncan's libretto based on André Obey's play *Le viol de Lucrece*, Lowell's translation of Racine's *Phédra* and the five poems used in *A Charm of lullabies*. I was able to trace the origins of each text, except for a translation of Obey's play. The musical analysis focuses on the form of each work, and on the many ways in which Britten employs the means at his disposal to interpret the text and portray character.

Finally, a comparative survey of past performances will look at the original performers (Kathleen Ferrier, Nancy Evans, Dame Janet Baker), as well as some mezzo-sopranos who have performed the works since (Jean Rigby, Helen Watts and Magdalena Kožená). Their philosophies of technique and performance are discussed, including their portrayals on CD or DVD recordings.

## CHAPTER 2: THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA

### 2.1. Historical Background

I have made up my mind to return to England, at any rate for the duration of the war...I cannot be separated any longer from all my friends and family - going through all they are...I think I shall be able to continue with my work over there, which is what I most want to do, of course - Britten (Headington, 1981: 57).

Pears and Britten returned to England from the USA on 17 April 1942. The country was in the middle of war and was badly bombed. Several of Britten's school friends had been killed in the war, and his old friend and teacher, Frank Bridge had died (Holst, 1966: 37). Because of their pacifist beliefs, Pears and Britten had declined fighting in the war, and on their return, they were asked to face a tribunal. However, they were exempted because their musical careers were recognized as serving the morale of the English people (Headington, 1981: 58).

It was one month after Germany's surrender and the end of World War II, on 7 June 1945, when The Sadler's Wells Opera Company gave the first performance of Britten's first opera, *Peter Grimes*. The opera was a tremendous success and marked the beginning of a new period when English opera would flourish in its own right. Imogen Holst vividly recounts the reasons for the opera's success.

The drama in the music was utterly compelling from the first note to the last, and each of the characters had a musical personality. The story moved swiftly... and the singers sang real arias with memorable tunes that could be taken home and whistled. When the action needed the urgency of recitative, the sung conversations had all the directness and energy of their own native language (Headington, 1981: 10).

Britten's success with *Peter Grimes* marked a revitalization of English music that was desperately needed. He was finally beginning to establish himself as a major figure in the music world and was thrilled to feel accepted and needed in his home country. Not only was he being recognized as a talented pianist and conductor, but also as a masterful operatic composer. His understanding for the voice and its combination with an instrumental accompaniment was reaching new heights.

Eric Crozier approached Britten about doing another opera, this time based on the production of *Le Viol de Lucrece*, by the French dramatist, André Obey. He presented a copy of the text to Britten in 1944 (Carpenter, 1992: 225). Britten chose Ronald Duncan, a playwright and poet whom he had met in the 1930s, to be his librettist. Britten had turned to him when having problems with Montagu Slater's libretto for *Peter Grimes* and Duncan rewrote Grimes' 'mad' soliloquy in Act III, scene 2. *Lucretia* allowed Britten another opportunity to collaborate with Duncan.

Together they began writing *The Rape of Lucretia* at Britten's home in Snape (Duncan, 1981: 22). Duncan later mentioned that a good working relationship between composer and poet reflects on the work and is one of the secrets to writing a good opera: 'The composer and poet should at all stages be working in the closest contact, from the most preliminary stages right up to the first night. It was thus in the case of "The Rape of Lucretia" ' (Britten, 1948: 8). He recollected how they had written *Lucretia*, 'almost at one desk, each influenced by the other, I willing to add a line or a verse to suit the flow of his music and he equally able and anxious to make the most of any musical opportunity when the librettist accidentally or deliberately gave him one' (Duncan, 1948: 107).

The opera was first performed at Glyndebourne Opera House, Sussex, on 12 July 1946. Glyndebourne was a small house intended for short summer seasons, but since the war had ended, the theatre was struggling to bring together casts to revive the repertoire that audiences had enjoyed there before (Evans, 1979: 124).

*Lucretia* was received by the public quite differently:

The Rape is a more interesting experiment than 'Grimes', but a far inferior operatic work, not wholly, but even in detail, in spite of its brilliant moments. I think it is already true to say that while 'Grimes' still lives, 'the Rape' as a complete operatic work has already died the natural death of all unsuccessful experiments - (Anon., 1948: 108)

The opera certainly utilized a different and new kind of operatic style. Britten chose a smaller, equally balanced cast of two groups of four males and four females, each group comprising of three characters and one Chorus commentator. Britten relies on the careful, ingenious treatment of their vocal ensembles to create dramatic and musical contrasts in the musical texture.

Britten aimed to achieve a new transparent sound in his opera. To do this, he chose a small orchestra of five wind instruments - flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn - and one each of the standard five strings, to which was added harp and percussion. After the massive orchestra used in Peter Grimes, such a small chamber orchestra was a drastic reduction of forces. But Britten did not want to rely on the massive orchestral blocks of sound found in Grimes. He wanted to explore a more subtle and intimate use of instruments in order to achieve the same power of expression. Britten decided to treat not only the voices, but also the instruments as soloists (Kennedy, 1993: 169). Each instrument's individual timbre can be heard as a separate unit in the ensemble and plays a significant part in the musical and dramatic scheme. Each is given the role of depicting particular moods, emotions or characters (Mertz, 1990: 126).

*Lucretia* was Britten's first chamber opera but not his last. His experimentations led to new instrumental possibilities, and proved him to be a genius of sound.

Britten is a master of sound...Nor can his versatility be doubted...He is an experimenter, not after fantastic novelties, but after real new music, and he has certainly revealed new possibilities that will become part of everyday resource (Anon., 1948: 108).

Some of the critics who reviewed the opera battled to accept the premises of the work. They were expecting the mass effects of a second *Peter Grimes*, and disapproved of the libretto's flowery use of language and awkward use of Christian commentary. Britten staunchly defended the libretto as Duncan had provided him with exactly what he wanted (Duncan, 1981: 99). He defended the new style of his opera: 'New ideas have a way of seeming odd and surprising when heard for the first time. But I am against experiment for experiment's sake, originality at all costs' (Kendall, 1973: 97).

Interestingly, the work received three times the number of performances of *Peter Grimes* (Crozier, 1948: 60). Following the opening season between June and October of the same year, eighty-three consecutive performances were given in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and Liverpool, plus a month in London and a visit to the Holland Festival. According to Crozier, such a number has only been exceeded twice by a new British opera since the beginning of the century (Evans: 1979: 124).

Unfortunately, the opera's tour proved to be a financial disaster. Houses were no more than a quarter full. Glyndebourne's proprietor, John Christie, shared most of the critics' disappointments with the opera (Olivier, 1996: 31). He paid the huge sum of £14,000 for financial losses but refused to be responsible for the financing of the improved version of *Lucretia* which was being planned for the following year. Britten and Eric Crozier therefore established their own independent opera company known as The English Opera Group (EPO). In 1947 the group performed the new version of *Lucretia* at Glyndebourne. It was an improvement on the original production and was performed regularly two to three times a week for fourteen weeks between June and October.

The small scale of vocal and instrumental forces makes *Lucretia* a more probable choice for performance than operas that require soloists, chorus and an orchestra the size of a Verdi production, which is not only time-consuming and difficult to produce, but also expensive to put together. Britten's decision to do an opera on a smaller scale made it more possible and easier to travel and perform as a company. The opera's practicality and economy of instrumental and vocal forces has made it a favourite in college performing environments (Canning, 1990: 490).

## 2.2. Textual Considerations

The ancient legend of Lucretia has captivated writers such as Livy, Ovid, Chaucer and Shakespeare (*The Rape of Lucrece*), and composers such as Respighi (*Lucrezia*, 1937) and Handel (*La Lucrezia*, 1708). It remains uncertain whether the story is myth or historical fact. Livy wrote it as a true story in *Ab urbe condita libri* (*The Founding of the City*), but he wrote it some 500 years after the events had purportedly occurred.

According to Duncan it is 'quite irrelevant whether the story of Lucretia has any basis in history. What is important is that it has become a European legend. A legend contains a universal truth, whereas history at its best is often only accurate in fact' (Duncan, 1948: 61).

The plot of the opera, derived from Livy and the later adaptations of Shakespeare and Obey, concerns a drunken bet amongst Etruscan army officers about the loyalty of their wives. Collatinus is the only one to speak with adoration of his wife's fidelity. Incensed with jealousy, the Etruscan Prince Tarquinius rides to Collatinus' home, where he rapes Lucretia. The next morning Tarquinius flees and Lucretia, overwhelmed with shame and shock, sends a messenger to her husband. After Collatinus arrives, she tells him of Tarquinius's wicked deed. Despite Collatinus's ready forgiveness, she is overcome with guilt and, stabbing herself, dies.

Obey's play, upon which Duncan based his libretto, is largely modelled on Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, which closely follows the story as related by the Romans, but there are some aspects of the story that Britten and Duncan decided not to incorporate in the opera. This will be expanded upon later.

Duncan's libretto was highly criticized:

There can be no actual comparison, of course, between two operas so different both in subject and in form as 'Peter Grimes' and 'The Rape of Lucretia'; but for all that I must register my impression that Mr. Britten's second opera does not

fulfill all the expectations set up in us by his first and most of the blame for this I would lay on the libretto (Newman, 1946: 2).

Duncan took over from Obey the idea of using two narrators, the Male and Female Choruses<sup>1</sup>. Through narration, they form a link between the poet, his and the composer's intentions, and the audience (White, 1970: 121). Duncan was criticized for making the two narrators Christian commentators upon a pre-Christian story (Fuller, 2000: 46). They offer background to the plot and comment on the action from a Christian point of view, which causes the libretto to be poetically awkward at times, particularly in the Epilogue.

Britten felt the use of Christian commentary was essential in telling the story in the way he wanted (Duncan, 1981: 75). In the same way Shakespeare brought in a medieval code of chivalry to his poem *Lucrece* to suit the taste of the audience of his time, Britten brought in the Christian epilogue aimed at audiences of a war-torn Europe in 1945.

As Fuller (2000:45) points out, Lucretia's story resonates closely with the situation in Europe after the Second World War. The violence of the Nazis had been opposed by the Allies; many had suffered and died, including the innocent. Lucretia's story reflects on such depths of human wickedness, in which those unable to defend themselves are violated, and where commonly accepted principles of human decency are destroyed. The inescapable cycle continues as evil and violence develop into more evil and violence.

The survivors of the war, who were in desperate need of hope, could probably feel empathy with those mourning Lucretia's death. Through the Christian Epilogue, Britten showed that he wrote music purposely 'for his fellow human beings', wanting to offer an agonized world comfort and hope (Fuller, 2000: 26).

Britten has made theological and religious references in a number of his operas, such as *Billy Budd* (1951), and *Noye's Fludde* (1958), and in his three church parables (1964-68). This would seem to indicate that he had definite religious convictions. Britten was

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<sup>1</sup> The role of the two narrators originates from Greek drama where a group of observers comment on the meaning and consequences of the characters' actions (Mertz, 1990: 132).

brought up in the Christian faith, but his beliefs evidently changed with time. In his statement to the tribunal in 1942, Britten articulated his beliefs by saying, 'There is in every man the Spirit of God'. He later stated at the tribunal, 'I do not believe in the divinity of Christ, but I think his teaching is sound and his example should be followed' (Fuller, 2000: 26). Apart from this statement Britten was mostly reticent about expressing his religious views.

Walter Hussey commented in his address at a memorial service at Westminster Abbey: 'Perhaps partly because of firmly held ethical views, Ben did not feel able to describe himself as an orthodox churchman; but he was a person of deeply thoughtful moral character and believed wholeheartedly in a power greater than the universe' (Fuller, 2000: 45). Whether Britten's faith was unorthodox or vague, he needed Duncan to provide a Christian perspective in order to achieve his aims.

### **2.3. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music**

In this opera Britten is carrying farther his search for a new type of vocal line, new forms of the vocal ensemble that will lift operas out of the dead in which it has been stuck since the death of Puccini - *The Times*, 19 July 1946 (Duncan, 1981: 86).

The thin, transparent texture found in *Lucretia* does not cause the opera to lack in character or dramatic effect. Britten proved that a subject can be dealt with in an intimate manner. With a small-scale orchestra he achieved intensification and clarity, by allowing each instrument's timbre to play an important, individual role in the characterization.

The opera is through-composed, but recitative, arioso and aria are kept distinct from each other. With the recitative, Britten reverts to a *secco* convention by using the piano.

Britten (1948: 7) himself stated that a 'composer must be able to paint a mood or an atmosphere in a single phrase and must search unceasingly for the apt one'. He achieves

this through careful use of the orchestration. He relies on particular instruments to bring out immediate aural connections to familiar sounds, for instance the harp depicting the spinning wheel in Act 1, scene 2 (Mertz, 1990: 27). In certain parts of the score, the instruments ironically comment on the drama; in others, they emphasize the atmosphere and mood. As a result, their timbres can either evoke moments already witnessed by the audience, as in Lucretia's confession in Act 2, scene 2, or foreshadow events that will come, for instance Lucretia's rape in Act 2, scene 1.

Britten not only relied on careful orchestration to achieve characterization and unification in his work, but also the use of motives. Two particular motives persistently emphasize the fundamental conflict in the drama, and promote unity in the score (White, 1970: 134). These two motives are two contrasting musical ideas which interpret the conflict of spirit defiled by fate - Lucretia ravished by Tarquinius.

The first is Lucretia's motive, which incorporates two minor thirds a semitone apart, one rising and one falling (motif x in Example 1). It is first heard in repetitions of her name in Act 1, scene 1. Each time it appears in the score, it is slightly manipulated, which metaphorically emphasizes the manipulation of Lucretia.

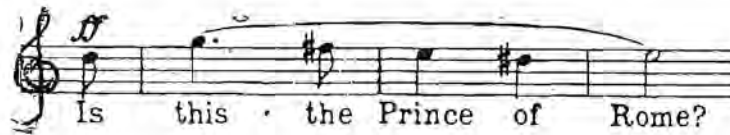
Example 1:

TARQUINIUS

To the chaste Lu - cre - tia!

(Britten, 1949a: 30)

The second is the motive associated with Tarquinius, which is represented by a descending scale-passage:

**Example 2:**

(Britten, 1949a: 207)

Both of these motives are tightly woven into the texture. Their pitches change, but the intervals remain the same. Britten takes characterization a step further by using motivic inter-relationships. He uses scale passages in association with the male race and sequences of thirds in association with the female race. The contrast and interaction of these motives permeate the score and are combined in the Prologue when male and female chorus sing together.

**Character of Lucretia**

‘One observes her fate with a detachment unthinkable in the case of Grimes’ (Kennedy, 1993: 172). Throughout the opera, one will observe that Lucretia appears to be an unapproachable symbol, rather than a woman of flesh and blood. She is identified by society as a chaste and beautiful woman, whose image supports Collatinus’ status and power. Her beauty is a reflection of her faithfulness to Collatinus, yet it becomes a driving force of Tarquinius’ objective to rape her. Ironically, Lucretia’s beauty affirms her virtue but also destroys it. In its juxtapositioning of corruption and innocence, the work touches on a major theme in Britten’s operas, and one which is also evident in *Peter Grimes*, *Albert Herring* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

The opera’s first scene opens with statements from the Male and Female Chorus. The men’s rough drinking song follows, in which Lucretia’s chastity and beauty are viciously spoken of.

### Spinning wheel scene (Act 1, Scene 2)

The scene's opening shows the dramatic contrast between the rough, forceful quality of the men in the preceding scene against the gentle, submissive ways of the women. Lucretia is found sewing while her two women-in-waiting, Bianca and Lucia, are spinning away at their wheels. The spinning wheel not only spins their cloth, but figuratively spins their dreams and desires. Their thoughts continue to turn over in their minds, just like the unceasing spinning wheel. The harp depicts the turning motion of the ladies' spinning-wheels. Its delicate trickling contrasts with Tarquinius's tense and boisterous ride from the Roman camp and the men's questing missions of the previous scene, and instead establishes the quiet serenity of the ladies' presence on stage as they busy themselves with their quiet, time-consuming duties.

The use of the harp reveals a typical device used by Britten in several of his operas, where he allows the musical texture to be dominated by a distinctive timbre of one or two instruments. In *Lucretia*, the harp is used more than any other instrument to create a particular evocative, feminine atmosphere, and symbolically weaves throughout the texture of the spinning aria, linking each woman's deep thoughts together (Kennedy, 1993: 169).

Behind their mundane, homely duty, one observes the role that women were expected to play in Roman society, and can identify Lucretia with the many women in the history of patriarchal societies. Coppélia Kahn, quoted by Newman, states that most of the story of Lucretia is concerned with meaning and continuation of patriarchal political values, forms, and their role as sexualized objects which reproduce patriarchal norms (Newman, 1999: 316).

The scene exposes Lucretia's yearning for Collatinus while he is away on military duty, and her anger and frustration with men and the selfish, nonchalant manner in which they leave their women to wait. When Lucretia's voice enters in response to the Female

Chorus [58<sup>2</sup>, Act 1], she is accompanied by a pulsation on the gong and a combination of sustained and strummed chords in the strings. The strummed chords, marked *pesante* (heavily), seem to underscore her heaviness of heart. Their steady heart-beat pace is in contrast to the harp's smooth quaver passage.

As she repeats Collatinus' name, the instruments pause on a droning pedal, suggesting her thoughts have stopped and have drifted away to her loving husband. The instruments patiently wait for her to move on, while the harp alone continues to trickle. The passage is reminiscent of the suspension of momentum that occurs in Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* when Gretchen recalls Faust's kiss.

Her yearning for Collatinus is illustrated through the accented chords in the strings which return to pulsate when she speaks of her and Collatinus 'both waiting, each wanting' [11 bars before 60, Act 1], and by the sudden rise of a 9<sup>th</sup> interval in the vocal line to two high, suspended Es, on which she sings 'waiting' and 'wanting'. The interval is also associated with yearning in the aria 'What harbour shelters peace' from *Peter Grimes*.

Lucretia's line 'then ride away' [3 bars before 73], in which she reveals her irritation and helplessness at having her needs and desires overlooked for the political needs of society, is sung to a dotted rhythm which fits in rhythmically with the strings' regular four beats. The rhythm suggests a galloping horse, which supports the metaphor of her husband 'riding away' from his loving duties. The phrase also evokes the vigour and virility of the men in contrast to the 'spinning' passiveness of the women.

Faithful Bianca, who is a source of protection, hope and guidance for Lucretia, advises her that 'it is better to desire and not to have than not to desire at all.' Bianca later expresses her disgust with men [Act 1: 77]. The bass and side drums play quick rhythmical semiquavers which illustrate the horse's galloping hooves striking against the stone roads, and are reminiscent of Tarquinius' fearless ride from Rome. The strings play tremolo *sul ponticello* nervously below, creating a hard, metallic tone quality.

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers in bold refer to rehearsal numbers.

A contrasting duet between Female and Male Chorus again shows the contrast between the passive women and the active men [Act 1: 78]. The Female Chorus, accompanied by the woodwind, sings tranquilly and poetically of the city at night, while the Male Chorus describes Tarquinius riding to Lucretia's home to an *Allegro con fuoco* accompaniment of strings and drums. As Tarquinius rides closer to Lucretia's home, the Male Chorus begins to overwhelm the slow, peaceful statements of Female Chorus. Her phrases of four bars shorten to two bars in length, as the Male Chorus fiercely interrupts with stark images of horse's hooves striking against stone and 'drunken whores going home'. Eventually, at the dramatic climax of the duet, the *fortissimo* Male Chorus overwhelms the *pianissimo* Female Chorus. Loud knocking is suddenly heard at the door. The instruments rapidly descend in frenzied semiquaver scales. Lucia answers the door to Tarquinius who enters and seeks hospitality from Lucretia for the night. Wise Bianca observes Tarquinius closely and suspects he is up to something: 'What brings the Prince Tarquinius here at this hour of the night? His coming threatens danger to us.'

The three ladies say goodnight to Tarquinius before retiring to bed.

### **The Rape (Act 2, Scene 1)**

The second act opens with the Male and Female Chorus narrating the historical background of how the Etruscans took over power from the Romans. The Etruscan's 'rape' of Rome strongly parallels with the Etruscan Prince Tarquinius raping Lucretia, and foreshadows Lucretia's fate towards the end of the scene.

The rape scene that follows is the dramatic and musical climax of the whole opera in which one witnesses in the musical score Tarquinius overpowering Lucretia. The curtain rises to reveal Lucretia peacefully asleep in bed with a candle burning by her side. The muted horn, alto flute and bass clarinet's hollow, distinctive timbres conjure up Lucretia's lullaby, which contains the feminine minor third found in Lucretia's motif [Act 2: 13]:

## Example 3:

13 Allegretto comodo (♩ = 32)

Alto Fl. in G *ppp legatiss.*

Ob. *ppp*

Bass Cl. in B $\flat$  *ppp legatiss.*

Bsn *ppp con sord.*

Hn *ppp sempre sostenuto*

(Britten, 1949a: 180)

The gentle mood of the lullaby is interrupted by the foreboding, soft beatings on the bass, tenor and snare drums, and the cymbal, which mysteriously punctuate the deathly silence [Act 2: 18] The Male Chorus begins a speech-song description of Tarquinius' stealthy approach towards her chamber, As he does, he passes a bust of Collatinus. The marble feature's 'impotent blind eyes' mirror Collatinus himself, who is unaware of Tarquinius's betrayal and his wife's cruel fate. Tarquinius approaches her bed and watches her as she sleeps, devouring her body with his eyes.

Tarquinius' beautiful tranquil arietta [Act 2: 22] shows his adoration of her. At the end of each of his phrases, the strings and timpani pause, while the minor third, associated with Lucretia's lullaby, gently recurs for a bar. Tarquinius begins to coax the sleeping Lucretia with repetitive minor thirds in his melodic line, which suggests his obsession with her beauty.

Duncan, like Shakespeare, cleverly wove metaphors throughout the libretto which animate the text. He uses one of the most common metaphors in Western art, where darkness is associated with evil, and light with good. Light symbolizes Lucretia's innocence and virtue, and the peace that accompanies those values ('within this frail crucible of light'). Darkness symbolizes Tarquinius's sin. With the line, 'How lucky is

this little light...it envelops her as darkness', he metaphorically compares himself to the darkness that will destroy her virtue (Duncan, 1948: 34).

Tarquinius's character is the personification of evil, and he treats the city of Rome 'as if it were his whore' (Duncan, 1948: 11). He is willing to destroy the very virtue, which powerfully upholds the honour of Collatinus. Shakespeare summed up his character:

Those that much covet with gain so fond  
That what they have not, that which they possess  
They scatter and unloose it from their bond,  
And so, by hoping more, they have but less;  
Or, gaining more, the profit of excess  
Is but to surfeit, and such griefs sustain  
That they prove bankrupt in this poor-rich gain (Alexander, 1965: 134-140).

Tarquinius kisses Lucretia, and she, thinking that his lips are those of Collatinus, returns the kiss. She suddenly wakes to see Tarquinius standing over her. Her shock and confusion is mirrored by the nasal and penetrating timbre of the oboe in its low register and the stopped horn. The oboe and vocal parts dwell obsessively on a three-note segment of Lucretia's motif, which consists of a minor 2<sup>nd</sup> followed by descending minor 3<sup>rd</sup> (refer to Example 1x: the retrograde of notes 1-3 of motif x).

Startled and confused, she hurriedly confesses:

In the forest of my dreams you have always been the tiger (Duncan, 1948: 35).

Do Lucretia's words reveal a subconscious attraction to Tarquinius' brute strength, or rather a fearful wariness of the evil of which he is capable? Evans implies the former by stating that Tarquinius has 'exercised a powerful fascination in Lucretia's dreams' (Evans, 1979: 141).

I see the meaning differently. Lucretia is too chaste for such sinful desires and there is no other mention of such desires in the libretto. Her love for Collatinus is far too great for such adulterous feelings. The tiger rather suggests a metaphor for a prowler, who is ready

to spring on his prey when she least expects it. In a state of fear and confusion, Lucretia becomes suddenly aware of the distrust she had subconsciously and instinctively felt about him.

Duncan perhaps borrowed his imagery from William Blake's famous poem 'The Tyger':

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (Philip, 2000: 182)

The effective imagery certainly emphasizes the power Tarquinius possesses over his subjects, and now his most recent victim, Lucretia. Shock and fear mount in her as Tarquinius demands sexual consummation and confronts her with his passionate urgings [Act 2: 28]. She vehemently refuses each of his increasingly insistent demands. The texture rises in tension as the timpani rumble while the strings descend in alternating semitones and thirds. The music rises to a climax in which she sings a sustained F-sharp on her final 'No!' [Act 2: 30] Tarquinius has driven her to the edge, but she seems to gather her self control and willpower with which she begins to adamantly confront Tarquinius. Her compressed vocal line of accented monotones [Act 2: 2 bars after 30] is accompanied by the ostinato figure of motif x in Example 1 now played on the clarinet, suggesting her trembling, fearful state. The clarinet continues to intertwine her melodic line with this repetitive figure.

At the climax her words, 'What you have taken never can be given', is followed by Tarquinius's question, 'would you have given?' Lucretia does not answer him directly. Instead she replies, 'How could I Tarquinius...' which suggests a certain ambiguity in her response. The phrase 'Collatinus... without whom I am lonely', seems to be one of the awkward ambivalent moments in the libretto, in which Lucretia chooses to subjectively reveal her own fragility at a time when she should be denying it. Her phrase almost seems to invite the consolation from Tarquinius, who reads her body language as inviting and aroused. She does not state that he leaves her cold, but merely that she denies her 'blood's dumb pleading', which can mean two things: either that she denies that there is

desire on her part, or that she refuses to give in to it. The latter meaning is certainly implied when to Tarquinius' 'Can you refuse your blood's desiring', Lucretia responds 'Yes, I refuse!' The text seems careful to avoid any expression on Lucretia's part of physical disgust with Tarquinius' person.

Tarquinius' growing physical excitement gives rise to a contrasting lighter instrumental accompaniment [Act 2: 32]. He tries to convince her that her features betray the desire she refuses to acknowledge, to which the bassoon plays a trickling passage, consisting of an ascending arpeggio preceded by two notes, in syncopation with the harp:

Example 4:

The musical score for Example 4, Act 2, Measure 32, features three staves. The top staff is for Clarinet in A (Cl. in A), the middle for Bassoon (Bass), and the bottom for Harp. The tempo is marked 'molto animato'. The bassoon part is marked 'pp sempre' and the harp part is marked 'près de la table'. The harp part begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The music is in 4/4 time and the key signature has two sharps (F# and C#).

(Britten, 1949a: 199)

The strings and side drum, on the other hand, strongly and directly support Lucretia's obstinate denials on every second beat. Her single-mindedness is portrayed by the 'unyielding' repetitions of a motif that in its zig-zag shape recalls the motif found at 31: bar 5. The latter and its inversion symbolize the opposites of the love of Collatinus and the rejection of Tarquinius.

Lucretia becomes more aware of his motives and her growing, contending will power. She begins to combat him with her strength and in doing so, takes charge of her soul, and remains rooted in her faithfulness to Collatinus, infuriating Tarquinius even more. At 35



Lucretia continues the battle to protect her chaste body and mind. Despite the subconscious attraction which her earlier words might seem to suggest, Lucretia never yields to his advances, and is driven to rebuking him with a broad and dignified phrase: 'Is this the Prince of Rome?' [Act 2: 37] Her melody contains Tarquinius' original motif in augmentation. The tempo becomes deliberate and broad, as Tarquinius' motif descends slowly among the instruments, suggesting his fall from righteousness. The music gradually diminuendos before Tarquinius finally takes her in his arms and utters her name twice, using the Lucretia motif. The whole orchestra has sunk to pianissimo and, as if in dread of the inevitable tragedy, they earnestly punctuate the hushed dialogue between the two characters. Lucretia, exhausted from fear and battle, manages to stand her ground one last time: 'Though I am in your arms I am beyond your reach'.

From this point in the scene, Britten slows down the pace [Act 2: 38]. Almost in slow-motion, the audience is able to see the grave tragedy slowly unfold before them and the consequences of such a crime echoing in the future. The woodwind, harp and gong play an accented chord at the beginning of each bar, while the strings frantically accompany the voices of Tarquinius, Lucretia and the two pleading Choruses that have joined in.

At 41 [Act 2] Tarquinius finally mounts the bed. The whole orchestra interrupts with quick, frenzied interjections of the first three notes of  $x$  (in Example 1) reversed, occur in between the four characters' statements, in unison. At 42 [Act 2] Britten slows down the pace further, pausing the forward motion of the dramatic action. All four characters take a step back and narrate, unaccompanied, Tarquinius's final triumph over Lucretia.

The curtain falls as the battle continues [Act 2: 43]. The Female Chorus and Male Chorus conclude the scene with the Epilogue, in which two single strands, one in the woodwinds and one in the strings are heard locked in musical combat, with each gesture in one strand being freely inverted at close distance in the other, while the voices sing broad phrases that consist of a free augmentation of the orchestral figures.

### Lucretia's confession (Act 2, Scene2)

The scene of the next morning opens with Bianca and Lucia's singing of the morning's beauty. In Shakespeare's version, he writes 465 lines for Lucretia's soliloquy, in which she expresses her shame and hopelessness, her hatred of Tarquinius, her longing for revenge and her resolution to take her own life. In comparison, Duncan's libretto shows a loss in terms of the depth of her character and motivation. Lucretia enters, on the recitative [Act 2: 67], dazed in shock and unconscious of her maidens' joys, which is in jarring contrast to her pain (a typical operatic use of contrasting dramatic context to heighten the expression of individual suffering). She replies to her happy hand-maidens greetings in phrases of low monotones that break into a minor third rise and minor second fall (notes 1-3 of *x* in Example 1). The monotones illustrate her expressionless façade of shock and have significantly replaced her previous lyrical melodies of love and yearning. The audience, like Bianca and Lucia, are unaware of her innermost thoughts.

Bianca brings Lucretia orchids for her to arrange. When seeing them, Lucretia breaks free from her state of bewilderment into sudden madness [Act 2: 68]. The ascending minor second is heard in the oboe and bassoon, while the strings sustain the first note, creating a strong dissonance. The trill on the second violins and cello is delineated by the minor second of the winds, against Bianca's reply.

The tension rises as the instruments repeat the passage in rising sequence during Lucretia's expression of disgust with the flower. The strings nervously tremolo below Lucretia's orders for a messenger and Lucia's fearful reply. The tension builds further as Lucretia seizes the orchid and urgently orders Lucia to send a messenger to her husband, telling him to ride straight home to her. The strings play an accented phrase of minor thirds and major seconds in crotchets with the oboe and clarinet's quaver passage of minor seconds, leading to a new motif *x1* (consisting of the notes of *x* in Example 1 in the order 3-2-1-4, especially from 'Give him this orchid' against the descending third with semitone):

## Example 7:

ff impetuoso  
Give him this orchid.  
Gib ihm die Blume.

(Britten, 1949a: 268)

The strings play four bars of descending minims in seconds and thirds, against Lucretia's hysterical demand: 'Give him this orchid' [Act 2: 71]. Her vocal line once again contains the ostinato pattern of *x1* that shows Lucretia's irrational outburst of fury and shame. The tension is at its height when Lucretia uncontrollably bursts into ironic laughter [Act 2: 73]. Her frenzy is supported by the woodwinds playing *x1* while the strings sustain the first notes in forte-piano minims. The horn, harp, double bass and tremolo on timpani are sustained under her furious conclusion that 'all men love the chaste Lucretia', and crescendo to a double sforzando on which they stop to allow Lucretia to sing the motif to her name unaccompanied, as it was first heard in the toast to her virtue in Act 1, [8 bars after 18].

She is overcome with shame and guilt, and as she arranges the orchids in a wreath [Act 2: 75], she speaks of the flower's true perfection, against whose chastity she feels starkly exposed. The aria establishes the atmosphere of a funeral march that will unobtrusively dominate the rest of the score (Cooke, 1999: 100). The consecutive rising thirds in the rape scene [Act 2: 40 (bars 4-5), 42 (bars 4-5)], which were heard at the beginning of the scene to the handmaidens' joyous song, 'O what a lovely day' as a motif of delight, become the mournful oboe and bassoon accompaniment that weaves through Lucretia's vocal line:

## Example 8:

75 Andante lento (♩ = 48)  
pp espress.  
pp espress.

(Britten, 1949a: 273)

Her dark depression and guilt are suggested through her dreary, static vocal line of monotonous. The funeral-march pace is accentuated by the double bass pizzicatos on every alternate beat.

One observes that her victory of preserving her mind in the previous scene was only temporary. Not only has Tarquinius ravaged her body, but also her love for Collatinus and her will to live. The orchids represent her life once undefiled by lust and sin and the love and pride she initially felt for them have turned to hatred.

Her sudden assumption of guilt remains unexplained in the libretto. She did not encourage Tarquinius or give him license to rape her, which gives her good reason to mourn, but not to blame herself. Perhaps the ambiguities in her responses to Tarquinius are designed to indicate that she felt an unspoken (and possibly subconscious) attraction to him, which causes her to blame herself for what happened.

However, there is an important incident in Shakespeare's poem that Duncan and Britten decided to leave out of the libretto:

If thou deny, then force must work my way,  
 For in thy bed I purpose to destroy thee;  
 That done, some worthless slave of thine I'll slay,  
 To kill thine honour with thy life's decay;  
 And in thy dead arms do I mean to place him,  
 Swearing I slew him, seeing thee embrace him (Alexander, 1965: 1290).

The omission further weakens Lucretia's position as a helpless victim in Britten's work, giving her less reason for compliance. Her guilty feelings could also be the result of her becoming a rape victim, even though she did not consent to Tarquinius' actions. Philip Brett argues that 'Lucretia...dramatizes the shame and guilt involuntarily experienced by rape victims even though they are totally innocent and have been wronged in a particularly horrible manner' (Fuller, 2000: 48). She sees herself as a defiled woman who gives her love freely to all men, including the messenger, the stable boy and the coachman.

Collatinus arrives with Junius. Lucretia, dressed in purple mourning, meets her husband. [Act 2: 81]. A funereal passage for cor anglais and strings precedes her reunion with Collatinus. The instrumental accompaniment shows Purcellian economy. The high-pitched timbre of the mournful cor anglais solo, developed from permutations of the inversion of  $x$ , seems to express both her dignity and her anguish.

Lucretia begins to confess the truth in an unaccompanied, monotonous vocal line [before 86], suggesting her lonely, painful predicament. As she tells Collatinus of her shame on a monotone of low B, the orchestra punctuates her confession with passages that symbolize memories of each stage of her rape: 'Give me your lips' [Act 2: 28], 'Yet the linnet in your eyes lifts with desire' [Act 2: 32], 'Easier stem the Tiber's flood' [Act 2: 36], 'Love's indivisible' (3 bars before 40, Act 2). The repetitions of these phrases out of their original context emphasize the horror that she is left to bear.

Collatinus speaks to her with calmness and loving devotion [Act 2: 82]. The strings sustain beneath the uneasy tremolo of the timpani, while the cor anglais plays in equal quavers the original form of Lucretia's motif (with the last note up an octave), which is echoed in Collatinus' vocal line. It seems to suggest Collatinus's love of Lucretia's virtue and beauty, which remains intact. His later avowal of unaltered love is also based on it [Act 2: 92]. Lucretia's answer is in monotones [Act 2: 83], while the hesitant sobbing of the cor anglais plays the mournful melody above, accentuating the inevitable tragedy of their love.

In Shakespeare's version, Lucretia pleads for revenge before she reveals the name of Tarquinius. Duncan's Lucretia makes no vengeful utterances. She sees death by her own hand as the only way to rid herself of her shame. From a Christian perspective her decision would appear a sign of weakness and of defeat in the battle to preserve her soul. But one must acknowledge that the Romans often regarded suicide as a heroic release from dishonour, which opposes the Christian idea of redemption, where suicide is never an option (Garrison, 2000).

The forgiveness that her devoted husband is willing to show is not enough to restore hope within Lucretia. She stabs herself and dies, and by doing so, reveals the truth of her own words, 'Death is women's final lover in whose arms we lie forever with our hearts all broken' (Duncan, 1948: 25).

At the climax of the scene the timpani crescendos as Lucretia reaches the high G on which she sustains the word 'now' [Act 2: 94]. The timpani's fortissimo roll and sudden gust of power from the lower registered instruments violently dramatizes the moment she stabs herself. Gradually, as she dies, the vocal line falls in thirds and the instruments fade. Her final gasps of breath are dramatically illustrated by a rapid three-note figure outlining a falling and rising minor third, which is heard in the lower registers of the orchestra, and becomes a feature in the ground-bass pattern of the following sextet.

The sextet takes the form of a funeral march over a two-bar passacaglia theme, consisting of a rising quaver scale which leads to the demi-semiquaver three-note figure that accompanied Lucretia's death [Act 2: 95].

**Example 9:**



(Britten, 1949a: 294)

The sextet builds up over this figure which continues throughout the Epilogue up until **101**.

Collatinus words 'Is this it all' echo our thoughts. Is this all Lucretia's beauty and chastity come to? The answer is no. Lucretia's death acted as a catalyst for a Roman rebellion against the Etruscan oppressors (Allcroft & Masom, 1936: 38).

Her body was taken into the marketplace where Junius, who had been waiting for an opportunity to seize political power for the Romans, incited the assembled people to avenge her (Allcroft & Masom, 1936: 38). The Romans drew arms against the Etruscans, and, as a result, Tarquinius was banished and later put to death by the citizens of Gabii. The Romans succeeded in overthrowing the government and replaced the monarchy with a republic in the year 509 B.C.

Like the Nazis, Tarquinius was defeated, but Britten could not celebrate the military victory. His pacifist beliefs probably deterred him from including this violent, if triumphant, conclusion in the opera. Junius's inciting of the Romans forms part of the final ensemble, but he then (rather incongruously) joins the others in proclaiming 'It is all!' Instead, Britten and Duncan offer Christian consolation. They provide a spiritual response in the commentary of the Male and Female Chorus who proclaim that Christ's suffering has redeemed the suffering of mankind.

The failure of Lucretia's character to engage us emotionally, particularly noticeable in her final scene, cannot be laid at the door of her interpreters, which have included some of England's finest mezzo-sopranos. Some critics have blamed it on the inappropriate morally-Christian ending (Newman, 1946; Shawe-Taylor, 1946; Sackville-West, 1948). I disagree. Britten and Duncan's concept of including such an ending is not at fault, but rather the way it was musically constructed. The timing and planning of the conclusion seems too hasty and abrupt, as was the case in the conclusion to the rape scene, and the tensions of the drama remain unresolved.

It is the way Lucretia has been projected by the composer and librettist that makes us feel detached from her character. However the ending was not part of the original plan for the opera. Duncan (1981: 75) describes how Britten felt that, with the original ending, the work was complete from Duncan's point of view, but that it remained 'musically not finished'. When Duncan provided Britten with the verses for the epilogue, Britten supposedly stated that these were 'Just what I wanted' (Duncan: 1981: 75). The fact that Britten intended or accepted such an unresolved conclusion, could suggest that his interest in Lucretia as being of flesh and blood was less intense than it had been with

Grimes. Britten was interested in Lucretia as the protagonist who is too patently symbolized as ‘virtue assailed by sin’, instead of an individual with deeper human emotions. Her rape is the focus of the opera, whereas Shakespeare’s focus was more on Lucretia’s series of laments and her prolonged meditation on a painting of Troy, in which she became more significant as a person and not just a character. That is not revealed in Britten’s version. The final scene is too swift to accommodate her complex reactions to her rape and the reasons for her suicide.

## 2.4. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

Lucretia can only be well performed by artists whose sincerity expresses itself through an excellent technique of singing and acting. Sincerity alone is as unsatisfactory as technique without feeling (Crozier, 1948: 55).

Mezzo-sopranos who take on the role of Lucretia should be aware of Crozier’s challenging but valuable advice. Lucretia is an extremely difficult role to portray. The performer must undertake the difficult task of deciphering for herself the true psychology of Lucretia in order to give a sincere portrayal.

It is imperative to not only listen to a recording of the work but to also watch either a live or recorded production of the opera, to understand both the singing and acting demands on the performer.

I have studied three recordings of the work. The first is of Kathleen Ferrier, the original Lucretia, singing the role in the Glyndebourne production, in which the English Opera Group Orchestra is conducted by Reginald Goodall. The recording is taken from a BBC broadcast on 11 October 1946, with certain parts of Act 2, Scene 2 from the Dutch Radio broadcast of the previous week with the same cast. The second is of Janet Baker performing with English Chamber Group, conducted by Steuart Bedford. The third is of Jean Rigby, performing in Graham Vick’s studio production of *Lucretia* with the English National Opera Orchestra, and conducted by Lionel Friend.

Kathleen Ferrier performed the first Lucretia in the opera's premiere on 12 July 1946. Two years before, at the time when Ferrier was achieving a remarkable reputation as recitalist and oratorio singer, Britten had first heard her beautiful contralto voice at a performance of the *Messiah* in Westminster Abbey (Campion, 2005).

Ronald Duncan recalled the day they auditioned the nervous and embarrassed Kathleen Ferrier for the role of Lucretia:

We were both so moved by the quality of her voice that neither of us spoke. I had been impressed too, by the genuine feeling of purity which came over. This was a very necessary quality for the part. The poor girl wanted us to speak, not knowing why we were silent. Thinking, that she had made a mess of her audition, she burst into tears. We then had a job to reassure her (Duncan, 1981: 69-70).

Not only was Britten impressed with her voice but with the true innocence and purity with which she portrayed the character (Duncan, 1981: 91). However Keith Grant recalled how Britten was not comfortable about Ferrier performing Lucretia in the first place. He was worried that the role was too low for her. 'He was still dubious after she had first begun to sing it, but as time went on, she swept away any doubts he may have had' (Blyth, 1973: 22).

The first run was a grueling feat of endurance for the company - twenty-nine performances in thirty-two days in three different cities. Two casts were chosen for the roles. Kathleen Ferrier (first cast) and Nancy Evans (second cast) alternated the role of Lucretia. At first, Ferrier approached the role gingerly and did not have the sophisticated charm or technique to bring it off fully. But as Ferrier matured in the role, she gradually found that the role sat better in her voice. She overcame the difficulties and nervousness she had to begin with, and discovered an extraordinary dignity and poise that an authoritative interpretation of the role needed (Blyth, 1973: 22).

Janet Baker performed Lucretia with the English Opera Group in Liverpool, 1966. Stanley Sadie commented on her performance: 'She acted her first scene like a woman transfigured by love pre-echoing Lucretia's words in the morning-after scene. The

complex of her emotions in the rape was caught with fearsome clarity and her final outburst was movingly impassioned. Ms Baker's enunciation of both music and words was beautifully clear' (Blyth, 1973: 46).

Rigby has sung a number of demanding roles with the EPO, such as Bizet's *Carmen*, Octavian in Richard Strauss' *Rosenkavalier* and Jocasta in Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, and is regarded as one of Britain's leading concert performers.

With regards to musical direction and interpretation all three singers give similar portrayals of Lucretia. There are instances, such as the emphasis on particular words or a change in tempo, in which they have achieved different, but as effective, interpretations to the character.

For instance, in the spinning-wheel scene of Act 1, Ferrier and Baker both apply weight to particular words and consonants in their solos for dramatic emphasis. Ferrier subtly emphasizes the second syllable of 'Col-la-ti-nus' which adds a lamenting lilt to her husband's name that she longingly recalls. Baker's interpretation of the line 'we live within each other's heart, both waiting, each wanting', shows a slight emphasis on the word 'live' and the 'w' consonant of 'waiting' and 'wanting', the latter assisting the voice to leap up a ninth to the high E. Rigby makes a dynamic contrast between 'waiting' and 'wanting', by making the second softer than the first.

In the passage that follows from Lucretia's 'How cruel men are to teach us love', Ferrier and Rigby performs the passage slightly slower and more deliberately than Baker does, particularly on the *ritmico* phrase 'then ride away', which is marked *con moto moderato*. The mood, as a result is more oppressive and sadder than Baker's quicker phrase in which she portrays greater annoyance and sarcasm with the male race.

In the rape scene of Act 2 when Lucretia's obstinate denials to Tarquinius reach a climax, all three singers effectively show Lucretia's loss of restraint. On the line 'you lie', Ferrier emphatically throws out the words by shouting them, whereas Baker and Rigby both treat the line in a more restrained, *sprechgesang*-manner. Ferrier treats the word 'go' in the

line 'for pity's sake please go' in the same forceful manner, which adds dramatic emphasis to her anguish.

In Act 2, Scene 2, when Lucretia enters in shock and bewilderment, Ferrier subtly adds more emphasis to certain words in her monotone phrases, such as 'dream', 'nightmare', 'heavily', 'death' and 'prettily', and also gives shape to certain lines, such as 'and how wonderful are all these flowers'. Ferrier does the same with Lucretia's phrases of confession to Collatinus, in which she reveals more emotion of despair and pain, even allowing the voice to break off on the last syllable of the word 'broken' ('Tarquinius has broken'). Ferrier portrays Lucretia in a fully-conscious state, showing a deeper insight into the thoughts and emotions of her character. The audience is able to feel more empathy for Lucretia than one does with Baker and Rigby's portrayals. They tend to sing the phrases with as little expression as possible, giving a more blank and dazed portrayal of Lucretia's state. Rigby, in particular, achieves this as she confesses to Collatinus in quite an emotionally uninfected manner. She stands beside Collatinus and stares obliviously into the distance as she recalls the night's happenings.

On the climactic phrase to her handmaidens, 'For all men love the chaste Lucretia', (in which Lucretia sings her own motif), the voice is instructed to sing the phrase *fortissimo* and *furioso* in the lower register, making it harder for the mezzo-soprano to project. Baker uses the harsh timbre of the mezzo-soprano's forced chest register, which causes a throatier, hollow tone quality to underline her angry sarcasm and hatred with, not only Tarquinius, but herself.

In performing on stage, Baker follows a very definite practice: 'I try to listen to the actual words others are singing to me and react as though I were hearing them for the first time. If possible, I like to re-create the situation anew each time. If the other artist is doing the same thing, it can be a wonderful experience' (Blyth, 1973: 40). Rigby's performance was the only performance I could study from a stage-acting point of view. From her portrayal one observes that in opera the dramatic emphasis lies in the music, which shows the composer's understanding of the text. Without unnecessary movement that can detract attention from the opera, the singer and audience can rely and focus on the music

as the source of characterization. The acting, therefore, is confined to portraying the singer's inner thoughts and emotions through the musical phrases.

Lord Harewood recognized Baker's valuable ability of suggesting 'a kind of stillness and repose which singers, who have always been able to convey drama and excitement - the more violent emotions - have never had and will probably never have' (Blyth, 1973: 23). One can observe the same ability in Rigby. She gives a captivating performance in two scenes in which a lack of movement is needed to portray the dramatic and intimate side of her character: the spinning wheel (Act 1, Scene 2) and Lucretia's confession (latter part of Act2, Scene2). As Rigby sings 'Flowers alone are chaste' (Act2, Scene 2), the detail of her portrayal of Lucretia lies in her face and eyes, on which the camera gradually zooms to a close up.

However, dramatic bodily movement and a larger use of the stage are needed to support the climactic and boisterous moments in the score. Throughout the rape scene Rigby has the demanding task of singing with full voice while undertaking vigorous movement, from crawling on the stage to being thrown onto the bed. Rigby undertakes the challenging performance of singing in positions that easily hinder comfortable breath control. For instance, on Lucretia's line, 'What peace can passion find', Rigby is lying on the corner of the stage with her head falling over the edge, while the character Tarquinius lies on top of her. At the point when the Male and Female Chorus join in, she is seen struggling in Tarquinius's arms.

Ferrier would probably have felt uncomfortable with such explicit dramatic action. She admitted herself that opera was a medium with which she was not instinctively comfortable. She felt intimidated by its customs of moving about freely on stage and physically expressing with her face and limbs. She much preferred the conventions of oratorio and recital singing where she felt she could communicate deeply with her audience without any distraction of movement. However, for the role of Lucretia, she learnt to overcome this discomfort, and did not allow it to limit her gift of capturing an audience (Fifield, 2003: 9).

## CHAPTER 3: A CHARM OF LULLABIES

### 3.1. Historical background

‘Only a composer of genius could make a set of lullabies so varied, and so full of subtle expression’ - Nancy Evans (Hwang, 1988: 67).

After returning from America, Britten found himself to be consciously an Englishman, both musically and personally. He felt needed in England. After 1945 the war was over and after completing two operas, *Peter Grimes* and *The Rape of Lucretia*, he was beginning to establish himself as a major figure in English operatic music.

Britten had found a regular, busy pattern in his work. He was usually occupied with planning and writing a new opera, as well as having to squeeze in other compositions. He was also attending several engagements as conductor and pianist and doing recital tours with Pears (Headington, 1981: 63).

Routine was extremely important in Britten’s work. The self-disciplined and organized way in which Britten worked showed an influence of his teacher, Frank Bridge. He would spend about eight hours a day composing, or twelve hours when scoring (Kendall, 1973: 71). He would have breakfast at eight and begin work by nine. He would work until one o’clock, have lunch and then would take a walk before returning to work at five. He would then continue until eight that night, going to bed as early as possible.

However sensitive and deeply complex Britten was there was the side of him that was deceptively simple - a countryman at heart. He hated the loud, modern and busy ways of London, and only was really at peace in Aldeburgh (Culshaw, 1984: 63). He liked simple meals prepared for him and enjoyed stimulating walks by the sea. When he was made an Honorary Freeman of the Borough of Lowestoft in 1951, he said:

Suffolk, the birthplace and inspiration of Constable and Gainsborough, the loveliest of English painters; the home of Crabbe, that most English of poets; Suffolk, with its rolling, intimate countryside; its heavenly Gothic churches, big and small; its marshes, with those wild sea-birds; its grand ports and its little fishing villages. I am firmly rooted in this glorious county (White, 1954: 82).

Britten was a gentle person. His appreciation of the soft and quaint traits for Mary Potter's paintings, found on the walls of the Red House, show evidence of this side of his nature. His gentleness and enjoyment with children, as well as warm memories of his happy, secure childhood may have inspired him to create a work concerning the subject of lullabies. He loved working with children and heightened many children's musical education by writing several works for them to enjoy, such as *Friday Afternoons* (1935), *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942), *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* (1945), *The Little Sweep* (1949), *Noye's Fludde* (1958), *The Golden Vanity* (1966), and *Children's Crusade* (1968).

Britten's music had a greater purpose than that of just being performed. He wanted his music to be useful to people, for their enjoyment and enhancement. Britten once said to John Culshaw, when discussing a casting problem, 'Frankly I'm not very interested in beautiful voices as such. I'm interested in the person behind the voice' (Culshaw, 1984: 63).

Britten had a respect for professional musicians who were dedicated and had a good sense of musicianship, and he was often open to their thoughts and ideas about his works, which were geared towards individual capabilities and vocal timbres (Hwang, 1988: 13).

Britten knew Nancy Evans's voice and dramatic range through working with her in the original productions of *The Rape of Lucretia*. Evans had been recommended by Kathleen Ferrier to share the role of Lucretia with her. In autumn 1947, while singing the opera in Holland, Nancy was asked to return there in the following January for a recital tour. On hearing about the invitation, Britten offered to write some songs for her to sing in her programme.

Britten completed *A Charm of Lullabies* for mezzo-soprano and piano, along with *Canticle I*, around the time he was moving to Crag House in Crabbe Street, Aldeburgh (White, 1970: 59). He finished composing the cycle in December 1947 and dedicated it to Nancy herself:

Nancy darling

- Here, at long, long last...so very sorry, but I'm sure you won't find them difficult. If you can arrange to come down, we can work at them together...! The title, thought up by Eric and me, is only provisional; do you like it!

In haste - looking forward lots to the Broadcast - sing nicely as you always do.

With lots of love,

Ben [17 December 1947] (Hwang, 1988: 35)<sup>3</sup>

On the first printed copy that Britten gave Evans, he inscribed for her:

For my dearest Nana, who has made them hers already.

With my love and admiration - Ben, Aldeburgh, 1949 (Hwang, 1988: 35).

Nancy Evans performed the cycle for the first time at The Hague on 3 January 1948, accompanied by Felix de Nobel. Britten was not present at the original rehearsals of the cycle with her in Holland. He worked with her on the cycle for the first couple of performances in England, where Evans was accompanied by Ernest Lust for the BBC, and by Norman Franklin at the first London Concert performance, and then by Britten himself at the Aldeburgh Festival and at other festivals.

One feels great sadness to know that no recordings exist of Nancy Evans singing the cycle. Neither the Britten-Pears Library archives nor the British Library has a recording. In a letter she wrote to Philip Reed (8 February 1996), she mentioned: '...of about ten broadcasts of the "Charm" which I did, I don't think any have survived, which is disappointing for Archive material' (Hwang, 1988: 34).

<sup>3</sup> The above letter was sent by Britten with his autograph fair copy to Nancy Evans (Letters from a life: 2004: 343). The letter remained in Evans's possession until 1992 when she gave it to the archives of the Britten-Pears Library

Nancy Evans stated in a letter to Der-Shin Hwang:

I have sung these songs many, many times and I cling closely to the way I interpreted them, having had the privilege of close association with the composer. When hearing, or working on them with other singers I am aware of the difficulties of getting everything just right. That is why I think my notes on them may be of help (Hwang, 1988: 34).

Evans' notes and suggestions, found in the front of the Boosey and Hawkes publication of the cycle, provide the closest idea of how she would have performed the work, and therefore important to note for the benefit of a good performance.

The oldest original recording of the cycle I could get from the Britten-Pears Library was by the contralto Helen Watts, accompanied by Britten on the piano. An analysis of this rare recording can give one a closer look on how Britten would have liked the cycle to be performed, taking into account that Britten would have been open to Watts's vocal quality, ideas, suggestions and personal touches of the cycle, which probably differed to Evans.

The other recording is of the Czech mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená, accompanied by Malcolm Martineau. I heard her perform the cycle in her song recital at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2005.

From listening to different recordings and from performing the cycle myself, I have discovered that one can be more flexible with the interpretation of the cycle, accompanied by piano, than with any other work written for voice and chamber orchestra, such as *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Phaedra*. The fact that no recording is available of Nancy Evans performing the cycle means that mezzo-sopranos have no model of reference to rely upon for their portrayal. This enables performers to give freer, individual interpretations of the cycle.

*A Charm of Lullabies* is a charming cycle of five pieces ranging in mood from gentle and quaint to playful and menacing. The gentle dissonances of the beginning and ending

songs epitomize the feeling of a lullaby, but the playful, tragic and intimidating characters of the middle three songs can give a completely different impression.

The title for the cycle was Crozier's suggestion, not only because of including the poem 'A Charm' by Thomas Randolph, but also because a 'charm' is the collective noun for a flight of goldfinches, derived from the Latin word for song or incantation, 'carmen' (Britten, 1949b).

A lullaby is well known for its soothing, charming and innocent qualities that coax children to fall asleep. However, a lullaby is not merely an incentive to sleep, but also an invitation into the many unlimited, visionary worlds of dreams. Britten has used five lullabies as entries to five different worlds for the performer and listener to explore.

Eric Crozier wrote:

The idea of setting a group of lullabies was, of course, his, but I helped him in the search for poems sufficiently contrasted in mood and style to keep the audience alert and interested. That necessity largely accounts for the fact that several of the poets are unfamiliar (Nicolai, 1992: 25).

Britten found the texts for the cycle in an anthology edited by F.E. Budd, 'A Book of Lullabies 1300-1900'<sup>4</sup>. In the book's prefatory note, Budd wrote:

In the present anthology I have made an attempt to bring together from the last six centuries of English literature a representative collection of the best of our lullabies and cradle songs (Budd, 1930: 1).

From this anthology, Britten carefully chose five texts for his cycle. Each of the poems has a unique and fascinating background, relating to different places and times in history. They were written by five writers whose lives together spanned two and a half centuries,

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<sup>4</sup> When I visited the Britten-Pears Library, I read through the same copy that Britten had bought and worked from. As I paged through the book, I discovered, with great excitement, Britten's signature written in pencil on the flyleaf and many pencil markings on the poems chosen. Scribbles, such as 'A' 'B' or 'C', were probably written to show the various parts he wanted to use and in what sequence.

from 1560 to 1827: William Blake, Robert Burns, Robert Greene, Thomas Randolph and John Phillip.

## 3.2 “A Cradle Song”

### 3.2.1. Textual Considerations:

- V1 Sleep! Sleep! beauty bright,  
 Dreaming o'er the joys of night;  
 Sleep! Sleep! in thy sleep  
 Little sorrows sit and weep.
- V2 Sweet Babe, in thy face  
 Soft desires I can trace,  
 Secret joys and secret smiles,  
 Little pretty infant wiles.
- [As thy softest limbs I feel,  
 Smiles as of the morning steal  
 O'er thy cheek, and o'er thy breast  
 Where thy little heart does rest.]<sup>5</sup>
- V3 O! the cunning wiles that creep  
 In thy little heart asleep.  
 When thy little heart does wake  
 Then the dreadful lightnings break,
- V4 From thy cheek and from thy eye,

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<sup>5</sup> Britten eliminated the stanza in brackets, probably for structural purposes.

O'er the youthful harvests nigh.  
 Infant wiles and infant smiles  
 Heaven and Earth of peace beguiles.

(Sampson, 1905: 160)

### **William Blake (1757-1827)**

Blake was born into a society that had as dominant philosophy the oppression of the human mind: 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains' - Rousseau (Beer, 1982: 6). The mind was 'like a closet, shut from light, with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblance or ideas of things without' (Beer, 1982: 5). The guilt-ridden religious teaching of the time was a big factor in this (Beer, 1982: 6).

Blake's nature rebelled against the increasingly depersonalized and plutocratic way of life, which was the social result of the Industrial Revolution, and its 'satanic mills', as Blake characterized the factories of the time (Beer, 1982: 6).

Blake was gifted with intense imaginative powers. He had eidetic vision which is a condition in which 'human perception projects physical images so powerfully that the projector cannot easily tell the difference between them and images of the natural world' (Beer, 1982: 7). He believed he saw angels and strange figures gathering around him as if they were friends. Such strange visions freed Blake from the material world.

His poetry shows differing mind states and moods that vary from enthusiasm to fear. His poetry varies in contexts and moods, from poetry for children to more serious works, such as *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and various 'prophetic' books, such as *Jerusalem* and *Milton* (Burgess, 1974: 151).

Wordsworth recognized a simplicity in all of Blake's works:

Blake's writing, like his pictures, was as fanciful as the thoughts of an active-

minded child, but with truth at the heart of it. He stands alone, a complete original, who can be read with understanding in childhood, but his symbolical meanings sometimes baffle the wisest (Mee, Vol 6: 3954).

The strangely ambiguous *A Cradle Song* was written as contrary poem to the innocent 'Cradle Song' of his *Songs of Innocence*, but was not part of the published work. It remained in Blake's book of notes and sketches, commonly known as 'The MS. (manuscript) Book', which contained sketches, poetry, and prose covering twenty years of Blake's life (Sampson, 1905: 138).

One may describe the poems in *Songs of Innocence* as moral songs for children in the eighteenth century (Glen, 1978: 32). The poems' simplicity and illustrations seem to be intended for children to enjoy. In all the poems of *Songs of Innocence*, Blake reveals his belief that childhood is the time when imaginative powers are at their most intense (Beer, 1982: 13). Imagination in its primal state is untouchable and powerful. It has great beauty without being manipulated and beguiled by growth. In the baby's innocence there lies a power of imagination that has not yet been controlled by the world. The danger is that the further one moves from the state of innocence the less intense become the powers of the imagination<sup>6</sup>.

Blake had a simple method of using concepts of states and symbols. Like many artists, Blake used a central group of related symbols to form a dominant symbolic pattern. In *Songs of Innocence*, his symbols are the child, the father and Christ, representing the states of innocence, experience and a 'higher innocence' (Gleckner, 1966: 8). These symbols give the context for all the other minor symbols in the songs.

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<sup>6</sup> Britten could have probably felt a connection with Blake. As Britten grew older, he became more disappointed with adulthood. His idyllic childhood of security and nurturing comfort was very different to the troublesome, unnerving emotions of adulthood. Many of his operas also deal with the corruption of innocence.

The line 'Then the dreadful lightnings break' adds a startlingly different mood to the poem. It seems to reveal a darker element, foreshadowed in the earlier stanzas, of the manipulative mind that comes with the advance of childhood and adulthood.

The final stanza foretells the seasons of time associated with the 'harvests', which hold the child's future years of change and growth. But for the moment, we observe that even the innocence of the child contains the germs of future corruption.

### 3.2.2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music:

The piano was Britten's chief instrument and he started playing it at an early age. Although he held a scholarship for composition, his final qualification from the Royal College of Music was in piano playing (Headington, 1981, 29). His published works include the suite for piano, *Holiday Diary* (1934), and the *Piano Concerto in D* (1938) (Kendall, 1973: 71).

He was a master of piano technique and a formidable interpreter and accompanist at the keyboard. He understood the characteristics of the piano - its enormous compass, its percussive quality and its suitability for figuration - and he knew how to exploit them. His experience and skill as accompanist are clearly reflected in the accompaniment of his songs, which I will expand upon later.

*A Cradle Song* focuses mainly on the child and the father as symbols representing innocence and experience. First, let us study the symbol of the baby. The poet describes the baby's gentle beauty as it sleeps. The baby lies in a state of perfect innocence, that same innocence which was intended for man in Eden. Such innocence, revealed in the baby's smiles, joys and dreams, separates the baby from the world.

The symbol of the father is represented by the poet, as he observes and writes from a perspective of a man knowing and understanding the real world. He recognizes the baby's innocence which at first seems untouchable and infinite. But behind the baby's

gentleness, there is a hint of vulnerability and fragility. Particular words, such as ‘sorrows’, ‘desires’, ‘wiles’, are gradually introduced into the text as elements of corruption that have already embedded themselves in the mind of the child. Sleep momentarily shields the baby from the world of fluctuating, perpetual change, but sleep will inevitably come to an end, allowing the child’s innocence to be further contaminated by experience.

Britten establishes a gentle, swaying mood that suggests a lullaby, even if the conventional 6/8 time is absent. In the unaltered diatonic idiom of the first two bars, before the voice enters, the mood and key is established by the piano’s crotchets in the bass line that rock gently from tonic to dominant pitches (Hwang, 1988: 35). Throughout the first verse, the charming innocence of the sleeping babe is musically painted in the broad lines of the voice, while the wavy, rocking motion of the piano suggests the gentle motion of the cradle.

The regular 4/4 metre lends itself to the balanced rocking motion. The voice enters unexpectedly on the weaker second beat of the bar [bar 2]. A pleasing hypnotic effect is created by the voice clashing at the second with the piano’s upper line, which then resolves. The hushed, *legatiss.e dolciss.* way in which the singer expresses the first word, ‘sleep’, immediately connects the listener to the charm and mystery of the song. Already in bar three Britten subtly suggests ambiguity in the text through a hint of bitonality in the accompaniment. The bitonality seems to suggest the tension between the child’s present innocence and his future experience:

**Example 10:**

The musical score for Example 10 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in G major (one sharp) and a piano accompaniment in G minor (two flats). The vocal line begins with a dotted line, followed by the lyrics 'beau - ty bright,'. The piano accompaniment features a wavy bass line and a more active upper line. The second system continues the piano accompaniment.

(Britten, 1949b: 4)

One can observe the parallelism of seconds between the voice and piano, the voice usually singing a step higher (Nicolai, 1992: 76). The right hand of the piano is a chromatic counterpart to the vocal line. A three-quaver pattern on the piano (consisting of a two-quaver upbeat plus downbeat) often foreshadows in diminution the three or four-note descending scale with which many of the vocal phrases start.

The second verse begins to hint at the hidden meaning behind Blake's simple words. The line, 'secret joys and secret smiles' [bars 14, 15] shows a gradual change of mood. Britten introduces chromaticism in both the voice and piano which hints at a more sinister, ambiguous meaning behind the simple words.

At the opening line of the third verse, 'O the cunning wiles', Britten further enhances the growing mood change [bars 17, 18]. The dynamics dip to *pianississimo*, and the vocal style changes from *legatissimo e dolcissimo* to *parlando*, meaning in a 'speaking-like manner', while its broad, wavy melodic line is suddenly simplified to monotones on G. The piano's bitonality reaches its greatest intensity here, with the right hand's white key pattern being 'sullied' by the left hand's keys. With 'When thy little heart does wake' the music begins to crescendo, growing to *forte* on the sustained word, 'wake'. The climax is reached on the next line, 'Then the dreadful lightnings break' [bars 22 - 24]. The melody suddenly breaks out of the monotones and rises to an accented E-natural, after which it descends in a scale of *tenuto* crotchets. The major second clashes, which lent an air of gentle mystery to the opening verse, are here used as pungent dissonances against the singer's descending *tenuto* line. The singer should take care to stress the *tenuto* notes in order to enhance this effect which enhances the tragedy of the child's inevitable loss of innocence.

Britten uses the melodic device of a descending scale again over the line, 'O'er the youthful harvests nigh'. This time the vocal line is lower and softer than it was at the climax, and gradually the mood comes closer to its original key and calmness.

With the last two lines of the poem, Blake rounds off the song by freely reprising the opening material and returning to the opening's mood. Britten creates dichotomy between

his peaceful music and the uneasiness expressed in the text. The complete resolution into peacefulness in the coda, in the unaltered key of E-flat major, seems to comfort us with the message that the child's time to seek experience has not yet come.

In the last two bars the voice is sustained on a B-flat, while the piano quietly continues to trickle away. As it pauses on a fermata on the last note, the resonating sound drifts off into the distance, tempting the listener to savour the drowsy sonority.

### 3.2.3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

To capture the rocking motion of the lullaby, Evans suggested that the flow of the piano should be gentle and smooth. The very first word 'sleep', with which the voice enters, is emphasized through its repetition. Kožená and Watts add weight to the word by accentuating the consonants, 's' and 'p'. This immediately captures the mood of the mother gently coaxing her child to sleep.

To capture the graceful mood of the song the performer must ensure good breath control. Both Kožená and Watts achieved a *legalissimo*, broad feel to the vocal phrases that intertwine with the accompaniment, even though they breathed in different places. For instance, Watts breathed after every four-bar phrase in the first stanza, in which Kožená breathed inconsecutively after 'beauty bright' [bar 3] and after the second 'sleep' [bar 7], continuing through till the end of 'weep' [bar 9].

Watts follows Evans suggestion of adding a slight *ritardando* on the last beat of bar 4, to help lift the melody line onto the word 'night'. Kožená instead achieves a smooth melody line by maintaining the rocking momentum of the phrase without using a *ritardando*.

The melody rises on 'Sweet babe' [b 10], and anticipates a change of mood. Evans suggested that the two words should not be sung too passively, advising the singer to rather swell on the words, and then diminuendo on the following line 'in thy face', which

Watts and Kožená both do. Evans suggested that the line ‘in thy face soft desires I can trace’ should be sung in one phrase. If a breath mark is needed, it should be taken after ‘Sweet Babe’.

Particular words that refer to the baby’s beauty and playful innocence should be emphasized. Kožená subtly adds weight to the words ‘joys’, ‘smiles’ and ‘wiles’ in the second stanza, and in the third stanza, Watts playfully accentuates the word ‘little’ [b 19, 21], by shortening the vowel ‘i’ to emphasize the double consonant ‘t’.

In Watts’s recording, Britten quickens the tempo of the third stanza (‘the cunning wiles’ [b 18]). This emphasizes a change of mood that suggests the child’s gradual loss of innocence, and adds urgency to the dramatic build up that reaches the climax. The tempo then slowly returns to the opening’s original tempo on ‘oe’r the youthful harvests nigh’ [b 26-27].

The original manuscript of the cycle has certain markings that Evans and her accompanists made as reminders of what Britten wanted and approved, which were not included in the publication, as well as Evans’s personal additions to the autograph which received approval from Britten. One instance of this appears in the climax on the line ‘then the dreadful lightnings break’. There is a *forte* in the piano line, but not in the voice part in the Boosey and Hawkes edition [b 22]. Evan’s added *forte* in the voice part, but Britten probably didn’t because the E-natural on ‘then’ was already in the voice’s high register and would be louder than the rest of the vocal line. Because the line is the climax of the song, most performers, for instance, Kožená, tend to sing it with full mezzo-soprano dramatic colour that adds gravity to the phrase. Even though the notes in the descending scale are emphasized, Evans suggested that the line should be sung instead with humour and delight, taking into account Britten’s reminder to her: ‘Don’t forget they are *baby* lightnings’ (Britten, 1949b).

Evans suggested that the singer should accommodate a slight *ritardando* on the line ‘harvests nigh’ [b 27], to give them time to pronounce the consonants that are close together clearly. On the words, ‘Heav’n and Earth’, Evans advised that the placement of

the voice should remain high to avoid a dark more ‘chesty’ sound. Kožená manages this by starting the words at a quieter pianissimo than what she began at ‘infant wiles’ [bar 29]. She continues the rest of the line ‘heav’n and earth of peace beguiles’ all in one breath, whereas Watts accommodates a breath before ‘of peace’ [b 32] to accommodate a longer sustained note on ‘beguiles’.

### 3.3. “The Highland Balou”

#### 3.3.1. Textual Considerations

- [1] Hee-balou, my sweet, wee Donald,  
Picture o’ the great Clanronald;  
Brawlie kens our wanton Chief  
Wha gat my young Highland thief.
- [2] Leeze me on thy bonie craigie,  
An thou live, thou’ll steal a naigie,  
Travel the country thro’ and thro’,  
And bring hame a Carlisle cow.
- [3] Thro’ the Lawlands, o’er the Border,  
Weel, my babie, may thou furdur:  
Herry the louns o’ the laigh Countrie,  
Synne to the Highlands hame o me.

(Kinsley, 1968: 865)

The song is quite different from the rest in the cycle because of the use of the Scottish vernacular. Some of the meanings are unclear so a standard English translation follows, using Budd’s interpretations and a word and phrase concordance:

- [1] Lullaby, my sweet little Donald  
 Picture of the great Clanronald!  
 Well knows our wild Chief  
 Who begat my young Highland thief.
- [2] Blessings on your lovely throat!  
 If you live, you will steal a horse,  
 Travel the country through and through,  
 And bring home a Carlisle cow!
- [3] Through the Lowlands, over the Border,  
 Well, my baby, may you succeed:  
 Harry the rogues of the low country,  
 Then to the Highlands home to me!

### **Robert Burns (1759-17)**

Burns was 'the satirical poet, the ironic observer of contemporary man and manners, the shrewd and humorous critic of religion and politics, of human character, of the Scotland of his day' (Daiches, 1957: 8). He assumed the persona of the national poet of Scotland.

Burns rebelled against the social order of his day and emerged a bitter satirist of religious and political thought that condoned inhumanity. He worked as a farmer all his life and grew to detest the upper classes that 'possessed superior advantages' (Daiches, 1957: 14). Apart from receiving some informal education, Burns was essentially a self-educated man. He learnt to read French and Latin and English literature by Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. He was brought up on Scottish folksongs and folktales and soon began writing poetry as a pastime.

Burns identified himself with the Scottish folk tradition. He rescued, completed, restored, and rewrote hundreds of Scottish popular songs. After having success with his poetry, he

collaborated with music engraver, James Johnson, to collect and publish a series of volumes of Scottish songs, known as 'The Scots Musical Museum'. As a result, Burns toured the Western and Central Highlands and Stirlingshire and acquired the words and music for over 360 songs that had long been forgotten. We are indebted to Burns for preserving and giving new importance to a whole body of Scottish songs.

National or folk songs... are the expression in the idiom of the people of their joys and sorrows, their unaffected patriotism, their zest for sport and the simple pleasures of a country life... Folk songs are the true classics of the people, and their survival, so often by tradition alone, proves that their appeal is direct and lasting... (Crawford, 1960: 329).

Unfortunately Burns was not disciplined in recording his own accounts of his travels, and as a result very little is recorded about where and from whom he discovered the song 'Highland Balou', which was one of the songs, also set by Schumann, that was sent for publication. All we know is that it is a Gaelic nursery song which was passed on to him by a Highland lady (Nicolai, 1992: 43). The identity of this lady remains a mystery.

### 3.3.2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music

As Eric Crozier explains, 'This is a lullaby sung by an entirely different type of mother from the rest - she is a wild Scottish Highland lass who is highly proud of the man-child the chief of the clan has fathered upon her and who looks forward to the day when he will grow up and become the scourge of the Lowlanders' (Nicolai, 1992: 44).

In the poem a mother is singing a lullaby to her baby, whose name is Donald. She is dreaming of her son's future as a man. The baby's father is chief of the Clanronald, who well knows that he is the father of the child.

James Johnson set the poem to the music seen in **Example 10**. One can see that Britten's composition (**Example 11**) two hundred years later has a strong, Scottish nationalistic

flair similar to that of Johnson's melody. The attractive dotted rhythmic scheme, that was present in Johnson's melody, is present throughout Britten's song in both piano and voice, and he adds a Scottish snap feeling to the ending of many of his phrases<sup>7</sup>. Certain words in almost every line of the text are enhanced by the Scottish snap. For instance, the child's name, 'Donald', and his paternal origin 'Clanronald' are given particular significance through this special treatment, as well as 'thief', 'craigie', 'naigie', 'further', 'countrie', and 'me'.

**Example 11:** James Johnson's melody



(Crawford, 1960)

**Example 12:** Britten's melodic derivation from Johnson's melody:



(Britten, 1949b: 8)

Britten marks the song *Andante maestoso* which further characterizes the strong, forthright pride the Scottish Highland mother has for her child, who is the son of the chief.

The sustained fifth in the bass line of the piano characterizes the drones of the Scottish bagpipe. The droning bass was also found in the French musette, a type of gavotte with a

<sup>7</sup> The Scottish tradition consists of a short note on the beat followed by a longer one, usually semiquaver and dotted quaver. Britten uses two short notes, rather than just a single one, and follows this with a much longer value.

drone bass that suggested the type of bagpipe fashionable in Louis XIV's time, when the pastoral ideal was developed in French music.

Apart from the rhythm, the melodic line in the voice also lends the song a distinctive Scottish quality. Britten has built almost the entire vocal part on the opening motif of Johnson's melody. The piano supports the strong Scottish flair through the right hand accompaniment, which consists of two contrasting melodies: the top line is a zig-zag arpeggio, and the bottom line has descending scales. With the two melodies played together, clashes of the second are produced often and produce descending chains, as in the first song:

**Example 13:**



(Britten, 1949b: 8)

Burns's lyrics are well-balanced in three four-line stanzas. The first stanza establishes the boy's identity. In the second stanza, the mother is speaking of the child's future. He will do the daring deeds of stealing a pony and cattle, travelling all over the country to do so. Donald's future rebellious ways reflect the innate individualism appreciated by the romantic poets, like Burns.

Why does the mother wish her son to follow such lawless customs? The poem can reveal a little about the circumstances of the highlanders of the time. During his tours of the Highlands, he noticed huge differences between his native Lowlands and the Highland Scotland where he visited (Brown, 1973: 60). Economic changes had altered life in the lowlands. They were influenced by the language and customs of the English who were settling there, especially after 1707 when England and Scotland became one country. The

men of the highlands resisted the English transformations and clung to their native Gaelic, their clan chiefs and traditional ways customs. The Highlanders rebelled against such changes. There were certain parts in the Highlands that bordered the Lowlands, where cattle-lifters were known to steal cattle from the Lowlands (McIntyre, n.d.). Those who stole were usually broken men, or men who did not belong to a particular clan, owned no chief and were seen as outlaws.

The vigorous dotted rhythms of Britten's setting seem to foreshadow the boy's exciting, heroic future. The vocal phrase crescendos to the song's climax, which describes Donald's daring deed of stealing a Carlisle cow [bar 14]. The first two lines in the third stanza is the transition back to the opening theme. Britten changes the rhythm a little in the third stanza, by adding two triplets [bar 20, 22]. The contrast from a choppy, crisp dotted rhythm to a smoother cantabile makes the return of the theme delightfully fresh.

The last seven bars act as a codetta in which the voice repeats the first line of the poem, accentuating the mother's affection for her child. The repetitive descending sequence helps to return the song to the quiet lullaby mood in which it began. The repetitive 'balou' adds a soft, soothing and evocative lilt to the closure of the lullaby.

### 3.3.3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

One of the most characteristic aspects of the song is the Scottish snap, which Nancy Evans suggests should have 'nervous energy and vitality', in order to convey the mother's pride in her son and his future. In the opening bars, Britten plays the snaps short and energetically on the piano. All the words throughout the song that have the Scottish snap, namely 'Hee-ba-lou', 'Donald', 'Clanronald', 'thief', 'craigie', 'naigie', 'further', 'countrie', and 'me', should be treated in the same way. Martineau did not play the dotted rhythms as quick as Britten, which slightly lessens the roguish, patriotic flair of the song.

Evans revealed that the 'Hee ba-lou', at the end of the first stanza [bar 9], was placed in parenthesis by Britten to serve as 'humming-like' echo during the break of the vocal line, so singers need to take note of the *pianissimo* above it.

In both recordings the tempo is slightly pushed and pulled back throughout the song, giving a lighter, more playful expression to the piece. Kožená moves the tempo slightly on the phrase 'brawlie kens our wanton chief' which also crescendos to the following line in which she pulls back the tempo. Watts moves the tempo more in the second stanza on the phrase 'Leeze me on thy bonnie craigie' [bar 10], and pulls back on the phrase 'and bring hame a Carlisle cow', which playfully and energetically illustrates the mother's wild, roguish dreams for her child.

On the next phrase, 'thro' the lawlands, o'er the border' [bar 16, 17], Evans suggests that the voice should colour the *pianissimo* texture mysteriously, which Britten and Watts do quite distinctly. On the following line 'weel, my babie, may thou furdur', Britten adds a slight *ritardando* and *diminuendo*, and then a return back to *a tempo* in bar 20, which accentuates the transition to the return of the opening theme.

Kožená begins the phrase 'Herry the louns' in a hushed manner, almost whispering the word 'Herry'. She proceeds to crescendo on the word 'Highlands' [bar 22-23] in the same way as she crescendos on the Scottish snap of 'me' [bar 23]. The swelling of sound effectively leads the listener to the climactic moment in the score, 'Hee ba-lou, my sweet wee Donald', which is marked *poco f*. Each repetition of the line must vary in dynamic level through a gradual decrescendo.

On the voice's repetitive 'balou' at the end, Evans emphasized the importance of not cutting short the 'ba' of 'balou', and not to slow the tempo down. This helps to keep the piano's demi-semiquavers in time after the voice's semi-quavers. Britten makes the last demi-semiquaver-quaver figure [bar 29-30] contrastingly slower than the rest in order to conclude the piece. Evan's added accent markings in her score on the final 'ba-lou' in bar 29 to remind herself to sing the grace note very clearly (Hwang, 1988, 24), and suggested taking time on the barline before the final 'ba-lou' [bar 29], but make sure the Scottish

snap on ‘lou’ remains crisp and rhythmical. Kožená and Watts make sure their final note comes off exactly with the piano in bar 30.

Particular words in the song are from the Scottish vernacular and have unusual pronunciations, James Porter, an Ethnomusicology Professor from the University of California, advised the following pronunciations (Hwang, 1988, 8):

1. Hee balou, loun: ou reads like the English diphthong oo.
2. craigie, naigie: ai reads like German ee.
3. hame: a reads like German ee.
4. laigh: gh as well as ch in Scottish always have the guttural sounds as in the German word *ich*.
5. Syne: y reads like long i in fine.
6. Highland was meant to be pronounced like H i land (German ee)
7. cow: pronounced like English diphthong oo.
8. As a rule, one should always roll the r in Scottish.

### 3.4. “Sephestia’s Lullaby”

#### 3.4.1. Textual Considerations

*Weep not, my wanton, smile upon my knee;*

*When thou art old there’s grief enough for thee*

- (1) Mother’s wag, pretty boy,  
 Father’s sorrow, father’s joy;  
 When thy father first did see  
 Such a boy by him and me,  
 He was glad, I was woe;  
 Fortune changed made him so,  
 When he left his pretty boy,

Last his sorrow, first his joy.

*[Weep not, my wanton, smile upon my knee;  
When thou art old there's grief enough for thee*

Streaming tears that never stint,  
Like pearl-drops from a flint,  
Fell by course from his eyes,  
That one another's place supplies;  
Thus he grieved in every part,  
Tears of blood fell from his heart,  
When he left his pretty boy,  
Father's sorrow, father's joy.]<sup>8</sup>

*Weep not, my wanton, smile upon my knee;  
When thou art old there's grief enough for thee*

(2) The wanton smiled, father wept,  
Mother cried, baby leapt;  
More he crowèd, more we cried,  
Nature could not sorrow hide:  
He must go, he must kiss  
Child and mother, baby bliss,  
For he left his pretty boy,  
Father's sorrow, father's joy.

*Weep not, my wanton, smile upon my knee;  
When thou art old there's grief enough for thee*

(Greene, 1927: 29)

<sup>8</sup> The original song has three stanzas. The second stanza, which Britten omitted, focuses on the father's grief at parting from his son. He probably excluded it for two reasons. One was that the liveliness of the verse music was not suited to the doleful text of the second verse, and the other was to prevent the song from becoming repetitious, as the same music is used for both verses, and for the three refrains.

### Robert Greene (1560?-1592)

Robert Greene was an Elizabethan writer and played a very important role in the history of English fiction, drama and lyric poetry (Hwang, 1982: 45). He also wrote autobiographical novels and pamphlets. After his university years, he chose a life of indulgence for which he became well known. Unlike Blake and Burns, Greene was a weak-willed man, and as he became more highly influenced by his actor friends, he began to descend into an immoral lifestyle (Nicolai, 1992: 56). He squandered his wife's dowry, and abandoned her and his child in order to return to the drama circles he enjoyed.

He was more of a novelist than a poet and enjoyed writing romances in prose. His best known poems originated as songs in the lyrics of his romances, and showed his humour and vital interest in life. 'Sephestia's Lullaby' is one of the most popular of these lyrics (Collins, 1905: 140).

'Sephestia's Lullaby' is from Greene's romance, *Menaphon*, which was published in 1589 (Greene: 1589, 1). The meaning of 'Menaphon' is a prose romance, with interludes of verse. The romance was reprinted as 'Greene's Arcadia' in 1599.

'Sephestia's Lullaby' was originally known as 'Sephestia's song to her childe'. The poem is concerned with the mother, Sephestia, the father, Maximus, and their child, Pleusidippus. Sephestia's father, Democles, the king of Arcadia, despises the love Sephestia shows her husband, Maximus. He banishes his daughter, her husband, Maximus, their child, and his own brother, Lamedon, 'without oare or mariner to the furie of the merciles waves' (Greene, 1927: 82).

On their journey, Maximus is forced to say goodbye to his wife and child in a terrible storm. Sephestia, accompanied by her companion, Lamedon, is shipwrecked on a Greek island. In her overwrought state, Sephestia becomes emotionally dependent on her child:

The poore babe was the touch-stone of his mothers passions; for  
when he smiled and lay laughing in hir lappe, were her heart

neuerr so deeply ouercharged with her present sorrowes; yet kissing  
 the pretie infant, shee lightened out smiles from those cheekes that  
 were furrowed with the continual sources of teares: but if he cried,  
 than sighes as smokes, and sobbes as thundercracks, foreranne  
 those showers, that with redoubled distresse distilled from her eyes;  
 thus with pretie inconstant passions trimming vp her babie, and at last  
 to lull him a sleepe, she warbled out of her wofull breast this dittie.

(Greene, 1927: 27)

### 3.4.2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music

The structure of the song is well balanced with the three refrains which vary in mood, tempo and metres from the two stanzas, resulting in A-B-A-B-A-coda form. The *Lento* refrains are in 4/4 and the *dolce* expression of the voice depicts Sephestia as she soothes her baby. The stanzas, on the other hand, are in 2/4 and the tempo doubles to *allegretto*. The character of the voice changes to *leggiero*, as Sephestia begins to narrate her story and the reason for her present despair.

The weeping refrain (*piangendo*) sets the mood and character. It unifies the whole piece, by appearing at the beginning [bar 1-4], the middle [bar 27-30] and the end of the piece [bar 53 - 57]. It contains both baleful encouragement and warning from Sephestia to her child: 'smile' little 'wanton', for when you grow 'old' there will be enough 'grief' for you to bear. The piano's accented downbeats gives the impression of the baby's unceasing crying, while Sephestia's feelings of yearning and sorrow are revealed through the piano's sharp, clashing seconds created by the F-sharp and A-sharp in the right hand against the B and G in the left hand (Hwang, 1988: 18):



with sorrow (Greene, 1927: 72), dreading what the future would hold for them, but was also filled with joy: ‘the chamber bright with his beautie when he was born, and chacte the night with the golden rayes that gleamed from his lookes’ (Greene, 1927: 73). The second stanza shows the baby’s ignorance of his parents’ pain and suffering. In his sweet innocence and ‘bliss’, he is shielded from their sorrow. The more the baby cries with loud shrills of pleasure, the more Sephestia and Maximus weep with sadness at their separation.

The stanzas convey a different mood to the refrains. They are more playful, quicker in tempo, and lighter in style and seem to suggest the mother bouncing the baby on her knee to distract him. The piano doubles the main beats of the vocal line at the upper octave, while the appoggiaturas suggest a more animated, playful narrative style in which Sephestia tells her story (Nicolai, 1992: 76). Her words become more like a narrator’s, telling the story from another point of view. For instance, she uses the word ‘mother’ instead of ‘I’ (Hwang, 1988: 56). She turns herself, her husband and her child into characters which are fitting for an animated, fictional story with which she can comfort her child. But the elements of sorrow and bitterness tend to come through nevertheless.

After a growing crescendo, the dynamics change to *pp* on ‘he was glad’ [bar 17, 43] which adds a surprising, even teasing effect to her storytelling. The change in direction is further enhanced by the reversed melodic contour of the vocal line. The mood begins to darken before the refrain returns, illustrating Sephestia’s overwhelming grief. The bass line of the piano, which remained on the dominant pedal in the refrain, gradually descends chromatically to the tonic, which reaches the climactic *sforzando* chord at the start of the next refrain.

Der-Shin Hwang (1988: 65) suggests that the second stanza, which was left out by Britten, portrays Sephestia becoming more rational and accepting whatever Nature brings her. I think that her feelings become more intensified towards the end. In the second stanza more emphasis is placed on the father’s desertion of mother and child, which would seem to suggest an intensification of the tragic mood, rather than acceptance.

The story however does not end with Sephestia's pain and sadness. Maximus survives and after many years is happily reunited with Sephestia. Democles seeks forgiveness from the reunited couple and crowns Pleusidippus, their son, as king of Arcadia.

### 3.4.3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

Both singers give different interpretations of the refrains, through varying tempos, and the accentuation of particular words. Watts takes her time by broadly singing the phrase 'smile upon my knee'. She does the same with 'there's grief enough for thee' by sustaining the E longer on 'there's'. Kožená, on the other hand, takes the refrain at a quicker pace and with less freedom of tempo, and remains within the rocking, *piangendo* momentum of the piano. She only word she adds particular weight to is 'wanton'. Watts pays special attention to the tenutos and accents on certain words, particularly with the accent on 'smile' and the tenuto on 'wanton'. By accentuating these markings, Watts dramatically affects the interpretation of Sephestia, which seems to suggest Sephestia's focus is more on her own despair and pain, while Kožená's seems to suggest Sephestia's focus to be less on herself and more on her task of comforting her crying baby.

Evans placed special emphasis on the importance of the *portamento* on the phrase 'there's grief enough for thee', stating that Britten purposefully included it to add expressiveness to the phrase. She had also added four *tenuto* markings on each semiquaver note for 'grief enough for thee', [bar 4, 30 and 56]. It is probable that Britten approved of these markings, as Helen Watts followed her example in the recording. Kožená could not add as much emphasis to the phrase because of her slightly quicker tempo.

Evans warned that the stanzas are often taken too fast when they should rather relate more to the opening. If taken too fast, the meanings of the text cannot be understood. To assist singers in conveying the story through a more playful, but even tempo, Evans gave the analogy of the mother playfully dancing with her baby from side to side. Britten, like

Martineau, plays the marked quavers lightly, which effectively portrays the playful, story-telling character of Sephestia.

Towards the end of the stanzas, there are two markings *poco allargando* which Britten didn't have in his autograph (Hwang, 1988, 26). It requires the singer to stress each of the three syllables under it. Evans emphasizes that the singer should sustain, and *crescendo*, the note on 'joy' right up to the next chord of the piano in 4/4 time.

In the final refrain on the sustained high E on 'old', Britten slows the tempo of the quaver-crotchet figures below, which gives weight and support to the sustained note in the voice. Both singers pause a little before entering on the final line 'there's grief enough for thee', which they take in their own time. Watts applies weight to each semiquaver, while Kožená takes time with the portamento and then moves through the rest of the semiquavers. Both ways give a bigger contrast to the piano's returning *allegretto* quaver-figure.

### 3.5. "A Charm"

#### 3.5.1. Textual Considerations

Quiet, sleep! or I will make  
 Erinnyes whip thee with a snake,  
 And cruel Rhadamanthus take  
 Thy body to the boiling lake,  
 Where fire and brimstone never slake;  
 Thy heart shall burn, thy head shall ache,  
 And every<sup>9</sup> joint about thee quake;  
 And therefore dare not yet to wake!

<sup>9</sup> Britten changed 'every' to *ev'ry*.

*Quiet, sleep! Quiet, sleep! Quiet!*<sup>10</sup>

Quiet, sleep! or thou shalt see  
 The horrid hags of Tartary,  
 Whose tresses ugly serpents be,  
 And Cerberus shall bark at thee,  
 And all the Furies that are three -  
 The worst is call'd Tisiphone, -  
 Shall lash thee to eternity;  
 And therefore sleep thou peacefully

*Quiet, sleep! Quiet, sleep! Quiet!*

(Ford, 1996: 126)

### Thomas Randolph (1605-35)

Thomas Randolph was an English poet and dramatist. He was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he became known as a writer in Latin verse (Drabble, 1985: 809). In his short life, he was a prolific writer. His principal plays are *Amyntas*, a pastoral comedy, *The Muses Looking Glass* (1638) and *Hey for Honesty* (1651). He used his knowledge of Aristotelian logic to create a unique kind of comedy (Hwang, 1982: 65).

The text used for 'A Charm' was taken from his comedy play, *The Jealous Lovers*, a full length play of five acts, published in 1632<sup>11</sup> It was well received at Cambridge where it was performed for King Charles I.

The opening scenes of the play deal with a young prodigal who is being trained, under the guidance of his tutor, how to 'spend and buy his pleasures' (Day, 1928: 800). Their

<sup>10</sup> Britten's additions are in italics.

<sup>11</sup> I studied the original copy of the play, published in 1632, at The British Library, London.

studies include gaming, drinking and quarrelling. Randolph, like some of his contemporaries, 'plundered whenever and whatever he chose' (Day, 1928: 806). For instance, Scene Three from Act IV was based upon on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act V, scene 1), and his *Aristippus* has several lines taken from the Prologue in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The poem 'A Charm' is found in Act IV, Scene V of the play. The setting is a graveyard where the sexton and his wife, Staphyla, who are land pirates, decide to approach the open coffins of two corpses and steal the clothes off their backs. However, the two corpses, Tyndarus and Techmessa, turn out to be mysteriously alive and jump out of their coffins, much to the horror of the sexton and his wife. The corpses then chant the above threatening incantation to them, terrifying them so much that they 'fall into a swoon'. The corpses then place them in their coffins (Hwang, 1988: 13).

### 3.5.2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music

Out of the all the previous songs this lullaby contains the most terrorizing moments and is the furthest from depicting a typical kind of lullaby. In fact, the song's mood seems to indicate that the "charm" in question is a baleful incantation, rather than a song to induce peaceful sleep.

The song cycle's dedicatee, Nancy Evans, was unaware of the original context of the poem. Britten never explained it to her (Hwang, 1988: 98). Perhaps Britten didn't want the singer to have the plot of the graveyard scene in the forefront of their minds. Perhaps he wanted the singer to interpret it in a different way, by taking the words out of the graveyard context and using them to interpret a mother's intimidating or perhaps spooky warning to her child to sleep.

In the same way as Britten used A-B-A-B-A-coda in 'Sephestia's Lullaby', he uses a refrain in this song as a unifying element [bar 1-3, 17-19]. An abbreviated form of the refrain recurs at the end of each stanza: 'Quiet, sleep! Quiet, sleep! Quiet!' [bar 13-16, b

29-33]. The song opens with a dissonant *sforzando* chord in the piano that contains the clashing seconds which so often appear in the cycle. The clashing minor second interval plays a central role in the harmony of the song and adds to the mesmerizing effect. In the refrain, the piano starts with a chord, which contains the minor seconds between C-sharp and D, and between G-sharp and A. These are played as tremolos in the refrains, and then as detached chords in the two theatrical stanzas, which enhances the dramatic mood contrast.

The piano is marked *colla parte* which means that the tempo and expression of the accompaniment should follow those of the soloist. The expression marking *largamente - ad libitum* reveals Britten's intention for the singer to sing the phrase broadly and freely. The vocal phrase is very menacing with *sforzando* wedges, *tenuto* signs and accents on every word of the mother's threat. The piano supports the voice's intimidating command and raises suspense with a growing tremolo. The fermata on the final verbs of the refrains ('make' and 'see') further characterizes the mother's frightening bed-time story.

The two B-sections, marked *prestissimo furioso*, are neatly tucked between the commanding refrains. They contain the horrid 'story-telling' parts in which the voice animatedly dramatizes the nightmarish characters. Britten enhances the eeriness of the stanzas by using a dotted rhythm in the vocal line, which allows the singer to deliver the text with energetic punctuation.

One can observe how Britten uses a witty treatment of chromatics to characterize the spooky story-telling atmosphere. As in 'A Cradle Song' and 'Sephestia's Lullaby', parallel seconds characterize the relationship between the piano and voice. In bars 6-10, the voice doubles the upper note of the seconds in the piano's right hand. The voice rises in an octotonic scale (alternating semitones and tones) from E to E. The left hand of the piano follows with a scale against the voice's sustained E, building to a fortissimo climax in which the scalar motion is reversed. The voice's then descends with a threatening command, in which each syllable is accented.

Throughout the song the piano contributes enormously to the highly theatrical character. The dynamic markings on the downbeats range from *fz* to *fpp* and *fp*, and *pp* and give momentous support to the mother's vivid story and vehement commands. For instance, throughout both stanzas a dynamic pattern recurs. The first four bars have a *fpp* on the downbeat and a crescendo over the last three beats, which grows until the following first beat. In this way the sound seems to shrink and grow throughout the stanza, imitating the sudden surges in volume that are so typical of the way in which spooky tales are told to children.

### 3.5.3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

In the refrain, all the consonants need to be clearly pronounced, particularly the softer consonant 'p' of 'sleep'. Kožená sings the word 'quiet' with a stark, straight sound, without vibrato, which immediately characterizes the mother's indignant chastisement of the child. She uses more of this vocal colour as she proceeds further into the song, right up until the last hushed word 'quiet', which humorously illustrates the mother's growing exasperation with the child. Watts uses a whisper instead which gives the ending a mystical, darker mood.

The 7/4 stanza begins immediately after the piano's tremolo. For the voice to start correctly with the piano, Evans suggested that the singer should count five beats in bar 3 at the same tempo as in bar 2. Kožená strongly emphasizes the consonant 'k' of 'make' after the fifth beat of bar 3, loud enough for the pianist to hear when to begin the first beat of the stanza. Watts and Kožená strongly pronounce each consonant in delivering the threatening lines. Britten makes sure to keep the piano pianissimo below the voice. Even though there is a crescendo at the end of each bar where the voice descends into its lower register, by keeping the piano's texture crisp and transparent, he ensures that it does not overpower the voice. Kožená follows the crescendos in every bar as Watts does, but adds a *forzando* on the words 'brimstone' (bar 7) and 'bark' (bar 22), which seem to suggest the mother making the child jump with fright.

Evans (Britten, 1949b) warns that it is imperative for singers not to make the tempo too fast which would cause the words to become unclear and ‘gabbled’. Even though Kožená takes the piece slightly quicker than Watts, each word remains crisply audible. Martineau encourages a great deal of tug and pull with the tempo, which adds to the spooky eeriness of the mood.

For instance, Martineau accelerandos his ascending piano scale beneath Kožená’s sustained notes on ‘quake’ (bar 10) and ‘-ty’ of ‘eternity’ (bar 26). This dramatically helps to swell the music to the accented descending vocal line marked fortissimo.

On the second and third refrains (bar 13-14, 29-30), Watts adds a slight fermata between the exclamations of ‘quiet’ and ‘sleep’, which makes a bigger contrast between the *forzando* and *piano*. Kožená does the same for the third refrain, but avoids taking any time in the first, which adds playful variety to her portrayal.

### 3.6. “The Nurse’s Song”

#### 3.6.1. Textual Considerations

*Lullaby baby, lullaby baby,*

*Thy nurse will tend thee as may be.*

Be still, my sweet sweeting, no longer do cry;

Sing lullaby baby, lullaby baby.

Let dolours be fleeting, I fancy thee, I,

To rock and to lull thee I will not delay me.

*Lullaby baby, lullaby baby,*

*Thy nurse will tend thee as duly as may be*

[What creatures now living would hasten thy woe?

Sing Lullaby, lullaby, lullaby baby.

See for thy relieving the time I bestow,

To dance and to prance thee as prettily as may be.

*Lullaby baby, lullaby baby,*

*Thy nurse will tend thee as duly as may be.]*<sup>12</sup>

The gods be thy shield and comfort in need!

Sing lullaby, lullaby, lullaby baby.

They give thee good fortune and well for to speed,

And this to desire I will not delay me.

*Lullaby baby lullaby baby,*

*Thy nurse will tend thee as duly as may be.*

(Ford, 1996: 126)

### **John Phillip (approx. mid sixteenth-century)**

John Phillip was a member of the Queen's College, Cambridge and an author of tracts, elegies, ballads and plays. He is hardly remembered today, and little information is available on him.

The text is from his play, *The Plaie of Patient Grissell*, which was published in 1565 (Nicolai, 1992: 82). The play opens with the nobles persuading Marquis Gautier to marry so that he may have an heir (Wright, 1928: 424). To make his subjects happy, Gautier consents to wed, provided that he has the freedom to choose his bride. He pleases his subjects by choosing a maid from low birth among his subjects. Politicke Persuasion, who is the Gautier's vice, is displeased with Gautier's choice of a bride, because of her inferior origin.

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<sup>12</sup> Omitted by Britten.

As a result, Persuasion and Gautier attempt to make Gautier's wife, Lady Grissel, lose her patience and her simple faith in believing that whatever happens is the will of God (Hwang, 1988: 34). They take both of her children from her at birth, telling her each time that they must be killed, while the children are actually sent to Gautier's sister.

In the middle of the play a scene occurs where the old nurse cradles one of the infants in her arms:

Sweete babe be still, and take thy quiet rest,  
 Thy nurse still to lull thee, doth give her consent:  
 To rocke thee a sleep, I mynde to do my best,  
 Nurse little babie, no longer do lament (Phillip, 1909: no pg number given).

Full of admiration, she promises to take care of him and sings him a lullaby. No sooner had she finished singing the lullaby, than Diligence enters with his sword, demanding to kill the child. The nurse protects the child from harm.

### 3.6.2. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music

The soothing, lulling mood of 'A Nurse's Song' is in stark contrast to 'A Charm's' contrasting, menacing mood. Out of all the lullabies in the cycle, 'A Nurse's Song' is the closest to a straight-forward lullaby, with no ambiguities, sadness or fear, and is a very appropriate conclusion to the cycle. It is the only song in the traditional lullaby metre of 6/8.

The unaccompanied voice, representing the child's loving nurse, opens the song with a refrain that is marked *senza misura*, suggesting the phrase should be sung unrestrictedly. The 6/8 metre is articulated by a rocking quaver-crotchet rhythm in the piano part, which occurs throughout the stanzas of the song, where again the clash of a second appears on each pulse, resolving upwards on the second quaver. The song is full of hope and comfort, as the nurse wishes the child a peaceful sleep and a blessed future

Like all the other songs in the cycle, Britten shows a clear balance in the construction of the song. As in the three preceding songs, the refrain, consisting of 'Lullaby baby, Lullaby-laby baby, thy Nurse will tend thee as duly as may be. Lullaby baby!' is heard at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. The verses, which are snugly enclosed within this warm, comforting promise of the nurse, also contain a second refrain: 'Sing lullaby baby, lullaby baby', as the second line.

The rhythmic, syllabic structure of the word 'lullaby' naturally supports the warm, rocking theme, with its oscillating minor seconds. Each time the refrain recurs, Britten extends the word 'lullaby' by adding the nonsense syllables 'la-by'<sup>13</sup>. In the second refrain, a further 'laby' is added, and in the third, yet another. The augmenting repetitions of the drowsy oscillation associated with the syllables also emphasize the sleep-inducing intention of the song. While the voice sings the second refrain 'Sing lullaby baby, lullaby baby' [bar 12], the piano's right hand plays a rapid rising and falling motif, creating an almost mesmerizing effect.

Repetitions of certain lines help to reinforce the nurse's hopes of strength and wisdom for the child. The song reaches a powerful climax with the line, 'The gods be thy shield and comfort in need!' [bar 19], which is repeated in sequence a minor third upwards. The line 'and this to desire I will not delay me', is also repeated, accentuating the nurse's prayer with a feeling of great urgency. The repeated 'laby' at the end creates a hypnotic feel and suggests that the baby has fallen asleep at last. It could also suggest the nurse nodding off to sleep.

### 3.6.3. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances

As in 'A Cradle Song', the broad, controlled phrases are important in portraying the nurse's soothing gentleness towards the child. Britten's expression marking *senza misura* refers to the voice's unaccompanied opening phrase, which Evans suggested should be

<sup>13</sup> Similar extensions are not uncommon in lullabies. See, for instance, the 'lulla, lulla, lullaby' in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act II, Scene II.

relaxed, free and natural. Although the phrases are not in strict time, and Kožená's pace is slower than Watts, both singers maintain the rocking lullaby feel of 6/8, without slowing the pace down too much. This enables them to still convey the lilting feel.

Evans suggested that when the piano joins in with the voice, the tone should be warm and *legato*, which Britten and Martineau both exemplify. All the dynamic markings should be closely followed, particularly the crescendos, which help to shape the musical texture. One example of this is including a crescendo on the final phrase 'as duly as may be', which will ensure the *diminuendo e ritardando* towards the end.

Kožená adds her own dynamics in bar 6 to create a soothing echo, by singing the second 'lullaby baby' more hushed than the first. In the climax in bars 27 and 28, she expresses the phrases *appassionato*, by putting a crescendo over each sustained high E-natural ('-by' of 'baby'), allowing the voice to swell over the piano accompaniment.

Kožená takes a breath before the second 'I' in the line 'I fancy thee, I' to accommodate the long phrase through to the following line 'to rock and to lull thee'. When the piano does the semiquaver runs marked *rapido* [bar 13], Evans advises that it should sound like a 'flourish' of notes.

By the time the last refrain is reached, the song in itself has made a complete cycle. Britten slows the tempo down a little in the piano's two-bar interlude that precedes the voice's final refrain. This enables the singer to pause, listen and reflect before concluding the cycle. Despite Evans' advice that the singer should not enter with this refrain too quietly after the piano interlude, I find Watts and Kožená's pianissimo on the refrain 'sing lullaby baby, lullaby baby', very effective. In fact, its hushed volume characterizes the nurse not wanting to waken the sleeping babe. Both singers lazily slow down on the repetitions of 'laby' in a very free manner.

## CHAPTER 4: PHAEDRA

### 4.1. Historical Background

*Phaedra* was Britten's last solo vocal work, written in 1975 for the mezzo-soprano Janet Baker. It was based on a verse translation of Racine's play *Phèdre*, by Robert Lowell, whom Britten had met in New York in 1969.<sup>14</sup> It was a solo cantata modeled on the Italian cantatas of Handel, using a harpsichord for the recitatives. A few years earlier, Britten had wanted to write an opera on Racine's *Phèdre*, but because of illness and lack of strength, he was forced to confine his ideas to a smaller vocal work.

Janet Baker had worked with Britten previously as she played the role of Kate in *Owen Wingrave* (Evans, 1979: 395). She had also performed Lucretia on stage and in the opera's recording, which Britten conducted in 1970, interpreting the character with great success. At the 1975 Aldeburgh Festival, she performed Berlioz's cycle *Nuits d'été*. Britten was so inspired by her performance that he finally decided to write his solo cantata for her to perform (Olivier, 1996: 207).

For a man who did not smoke and kept himself fit, it seems cruelly ironic that Britten's health was failing him at a fairly young age. He had loved the outdoor life, walking regularly in his busy working timetable. He enjoyed small pleasures which showed another side of the shy public figure - swimming, playing tennis, and enjoying good food and a drink when accompanied with witty conversation.

Britten's health had deteriorated shockingly by early 1976. His doctors had realized that the operation to replace the valve in his heart had failed. There were discussions of further operations, but there was little hope of his surviving any of them. He still received

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<sup>14</sup> The poet travelled to Snape to attend *Phaedra's* first performance (Britten, Warner Classics: 2002).

visitors but only for brief periods. The strength he could muster had to be spent on what little work he could do. He still managed to complete an arrangement of the piano accompaniment of his *Lachrymae* for small string orchestra, as well as writing more folk song arrangements for voice and harp for Pears and Osian Ellis' repertoire. His friend, John Culshaw, recollected Britten's approach to his work in those last few months: 'He was very frail, but he made a massive and perhaps damaging attempt to attend as many events as possible. It was the right thing for him to do, whatever the risk, because it was not in him to admit defeat' (Culshaw, 1984: 67).

When writing *Phaedra*, Britten was unable to play satisfactorily through the work on the piano. He had to ask Colin Matthews to do this for him (when he composed). He would sit beside Matthews at the right-hand end of the piano and play the vocal hand with his left hand. With Matthews' assistance, Britten finished *Phaedra* on 12 August 1975 (Carpenter, 1992: 574).

*Phaedra* premiered at the 1976 Aldeburgh Festival. Audiences were once again astounded at how the work demonstrated his undiminished imaginative powers. Culshaw related this occasion to be the last time he saw him witness the triumph of his work:

The audience may have marvelled at how, under such adversity, he could have written such a piece, and it was an emotional moment when he rose to acknowledge the applause; but finally it was the music that was being applauded because it had communicated, and for Ben, communication was what music was all about (Culshaw, 1984: 67).

Through *Phaedra*, Britten once again communicated his philosophy which inspired the work he wrote for Janet Baker to perform at the Festival: 'I certainly write music for human beings - directly and deliberately. I consider their voices, the range, the power, the subtlety, and the colour potentialities of them. I consider the instruments they play - their most expressive and suitable individual sonorities...I also take note of the human circumstances of music, of its environment and conventions; for instance, I try to write dramatically effective music for the theatre. I believe, you see, in occasional music...almost every piece I have ever written has been composed with a certain

occasion in mind, and usually for definite performers, and certainly always human ones' (Kendall, 1973: 85).

Phaedra can be seen as a successor to the protagonists of *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Death in Venice*. Like Lucretia and Aschenbach, Phaedra's story is one of fated love, the end of which is death. Death might well have been on Britten's ailing mind at the time of writing *Phaedra*, but his waning strength is never apparent in the work.

During the festival Britten was to achieve further success. It was announced in *The Times* on 12 June that he had been made a life peer in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. Britten jokingly said that such an honour would save him a lot of energy, since it was only necessary now to sign his letters 'Britten' (Olivier, 1996: 209).

It was in the early hours of December 4, 1976 when Britten's end came. Pears was alone with him as he died peacefully in his arms. 'He was certainly not afraid of dying' said Pears. 'There was no struggle to keep alive...his greatest feeling was sadness and sorrow at the thought of leaving...his friends and responsibilities' (Palmer, 1980).

His funeral took place in the parish church the following Tuesday. The cortège, with police escort, made a ceremonial drive through Aldeburgh as flags flew at half-mast and the High Street shops closed in respect (Carpenter, 1992: 583). The choir sang the *Hymn to the Virgin* which he had written when he was sixteen. He was buried in the annexe of the Aldeburgh churchyard, near the sea where Pears was also laid to rest in 1986, ten years later (Matthews, 2003: 155).

## 4.2. Textual Considerations

### Jean Baptiste Racine (1639-1699)

Racine was known to be an ungrateful, bad-tempered, and cold-hearted man, but was, more importantly, the master dramatist of French classical tragedy (Hartnoll, 1967: 786). His seven successful tragedies have remained in the repertory of the Comédie Française. Most of his plays contain plots of intense human passions. His characters, particularly his women, are known to be of 'abounding vitality and passion'. This one will discover in one his most famous, *Phèdre*.

At a young age Racine studied French, Ancient Greek, and Latin, as well as rhetoric, which comprised composition, diction and declamation (Hartnoll, 1967: 785). He was fascinated with the Greeks, reading, translating and interpreting works by Aristotle, Plato, Sophocles and Euripides. Though somewhat undisciplined, he made an excellent scholar in these subjects that equipped him for his future dramatic career (Rose, 2001: vi).

In 1658 Racine went to Paris, which was at that time still the seat of the Court as well as the government of France. Racine skilfully entered the circle of the cultural elite. His close friends at the time were Molière, La Fontaine, and the poet, Boileau.

With *Andromaque* Racine was recognized as a great dramatist. His other successes include *Les Plaideurs* (1668), *Britannicus* (1669), *Bérénice* (1670), *Bajazet* (1672) and *Iphigénie* (1673-4) (Hartnoll, 1967: 786). By 1673, Racine had become known as 'the king of tragedy' at the Hotel de Bourgogne. He was highly involved in the production of his plays by studying the parts with the actors, and accomplished his best stage effects by reciting his verses out loud as he wrote.

On 1 January 1677, Racine wrote *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, which was published in the collected works of 1689 as *Phèdre* (Rose, 2001: xi). He created the role of Phèdre for the actress, La Champmesle, who had replaced La Du Parc on the stage and as Racine's

mistress. She was the finest actress of her day, and had already played two other Racine roles, *Bérénice* and *Iphigénie*.

*Phèdre* is recognized as Racine's masterpiece, but at the time of its production, the play was abused by many of his enemies, one of them being the mediocre writer, Pradon, whose play on the same theme was produced simultaneously to Racine's *Phèdre* in rival theatres. Pradon's version gained more success, but, after the Sun King approved of Racine's play, Pradon's version sank into oblivion (Hartnoll, 1967: 786).

Racine's career as a playwright for the theatre-going public ended abruptly after *Phèdre*. His career advanced further up the social ladder when he became employed, along with Boileau, as historiographer to the king, earning him a gratification of 6000 livres (Rose, 2001: xii). He later turned his focus to recording contemporary French history, and died of cancer in 1699.

### **4.3. An Analytical Survey of the Text and Music**

The structure of *Phaedra* reveals Britten as a careful and accurate musical architect. The structure is well balanced with a prologue and two arias, separated by recitatives, showing the influence of Handel's solo cantatas. With its passages of varying themes and moods, it lends itself to the portrayal of the various facets of *Phaedra*'s character and her differing states of mind.

For reasons of ill-health, Britten compressed a time span and scenario of what could have been a full-length opera into a modest span of a fifteen-minute solo cantata. Apart from this, there is little evidence of a fatally ill composer at work.

The four sections of the text that constitute the cantata are all from Phaedra's speeches<sup>15</sup>. As a result, one is only shown the situations from her perspective. A background of the play, and an explanation of the context of the scene from which each extract is taken, can give one a better overall idea of Phaedra's history, an in-depth explanation of her character and can allow one the chance to have empathy for the other characters involved in the drama, for instance, Hippolytus and Theseus.

Lowell's translation is simple, succinct and clear. When he translated the play, he stated that it was an impossibility to translate Racine's plays correctly. Racine's use of syllabic alexandrines does not exist in English, thereby making it impossible to reproduce his language in English (Lowell, 1961: 8).

My version is free, nevertheless I have used every speech in the original, and almost every line is either translated or paraphrased. Racine is said to have written prose drafts and versed them. We do not have the prose drafts, but I feel sure that necessities of line rhyme, etc. made for changes of phrasing and even of meaning. In versing Racine, I have taken the same liberty. Here and there, I have put in things that no French classical author would have used. Examples are the Amazon in Theramenes's first speech and the muck and jelly in Phaedra's second act speech. Such interpolations are rare, however (Lowell, 1961: 8).

When reading Lowell's translation of Racine's play, one is impressed by the swift flow of the plot. This fluency is further enhanced in the cantata by the condensed selection of excerpts and the intensity of Britten's settings of Lowell's words. One can follow the natural progression of the plot from Phaedra's narration of the past events to her present thoughts, feelings and actions, which then lead towards her foreseeable suicide. As a result, there is never the feeling of the time-scale being awkwardly compressed into a cantata. Phaedra's internal conflict of passion and guilt so powerfully dominate the action throughout the work that one does not feel the absence of the other characters.

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<sup>15</sup> When researching at the Britten-Pears Library, I looked at Britten's copy of *Phaedra: a verse translation of Racine's Phedra*, by Robert Lowell. I studied the pencil markings which showed the excerpts he chose for his cantata.

The simplicity of Lowell's text lends itself to Britten's musical expression of Phaedra's character. Phaedra's words are distinctively enhanced through his choice of rhythms, and are subtly characterized by the instruments' tone colours and techniques.

It is very true to say that Britten was concerned not only with the world of music, but also with the world of man. This can be seen in his writing particular works for particular performers. But I think Britten also shows his interest in man, by the way he musically interpreted the protagonist of the play. Britten found in the text the self-reproaches of another Aschenbach, as Phaedra faces her guilty lust for her step-son. Britten leads the listener through her states of mind and the stages of her actions (Carpenter, 1992: 573). In the space of a short solo cantata we can appreciate and understand the development of her character in the same way that one can with an operatic role, such as Lucretia.

It seems hardly possible to achieve this as successfully with an orchestra of reduced instrumental forces. Britten restricted his work to a single singer and an instrumental accompaniment that lacks the seductive tone colours of the winds and harp found in *Lucretia*. Instead he borrowed from the Baroque convention by having the recitative sections accompanied by harpsichord and cello. The arioso sections are accompanied by strings, timpani and percussion. The groups alternate as they would in a Baroque opera to great musical and dramatic effect<sup>16</sup>.

Britten depended on such a style to convey a depth of dramatic effect. He showed an understanding of each instrument's capabilities, which probably stemmed from his broad musical capabilities as composer, pianist, viola-player, conductor, research-scholar, as well as musical editor, and he was willing to explore the innate possibilities of each instrument.

The emotional and dramatic scope of this work makes it hard to believe that one has had the experience of listening to only a cantata work, and not a full-length opera. Beneath

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<sup>16</sup> The Baroque solo cantata was comparable to an operatic scene, where a single character dominates the stage, and the dramatic action and emotion continue to be developed (Evans, 1979: 395).

the restrained clarity of the cantata's orchestration, the depth of Phaedra's emotions and the various facets of her character are explored to the full.

The story of *Phédre* is preceded by a Greek mythological history of guilty passions, adultery, monsters, labyrinths, bad kings and thoughtless heroes. The story goes back to the beginnings of Greek mythology when the Sky and the Earth mated and gave birth to Titans, Time and the Sun (Rose, 2001: xviii). Phaedra's father was King Minos of Crete, directly descended from Jupiter, the King of the Gods, while her mother was Pasiphae, the daughter of the Sun.

Minos and Pasiphae married and had two daughters, Phaedra and Ariadne. But Pasiphae had sexual relations with a bull and gave birth to a monster, known as the Minotaur, who was half-man, half-bull. As a result, Pasiphae became a cursed victim of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and fertility (Anon, 1978: 1335). The Minotaur was kept by Minos in the Labyrinth and was killed by Greece's greatest hero and Phaedra's future husband, Theseus. Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and helped him, with a ball of string, to retrace his steps out of the Labyrinth after he had killed the Minotaur (Anon, 1978: 1335). Theseus took Ariadne with him, but abandoned her on Naxos.

Theseus was the son of Aegus, king of Athens. He succeeded his father as king, and then made war upon the Amazons, whose captured queen, Antiope, bore him a son, Hippolytus (Anon, 1978: 1348). Theseus was known to seduce and abandon women, like Ariadne, until he found his match in Phaedra, who had the power to tame his wandering eye and marries him (Rose, 2001: xx).

The story of Phaedra involves a doomed love-chain: Theseus loves his wife, Phaedra, who loves his son, Hippolytus, who loves his father's enemy, Aricia, who loves him in return but cannot legally have him. At the beginning of the play we discover Theseus has been absent for six months. Hippolytus is fretting for him and decides to venture again on another search for him. He is in love with Aricia, who is the surviving sister of the power-hungry Pallas brothers killed by Theseus. Aricia is restricted as a political enemy. She is held hostage by Theseus and is forbidden to marry.

## FIRST EXCERPT

The first excerpt comes from Act 1, scene iii, in which Phaedra reveals her secret to her nurse, Oenone, confessing she loves Hippolytus, her husband's son.

### Prologue

Phaedra fears the night less than she fears the day that strives to light the universal ennui of her eye - this dying woman, who desires to die!

(Lowell, 1961: 13)

The broad opening melody, characterized by successive leaps spanning minor and major ninths in the strings, dramatically foreshadows the mood of Phaedra's opening phrase. The clashing cymbal and timpani, played with wooden sticks, play interjections over the sustained strings and accompany the entry of the voice. The percussion's agitated rhythms subtly hint at the despair and anguish of Phaedra's state.

The spare, direct and angular style of the music illustrates Phaedra's character as a desperate woman, struggling with her own passions and consumed with her own guilt and self-pity. She stumbles about under the weight of her veils and adornment, which uphold her queenly state. She is weak in spirit and body, and is trying to starve to death. She weeps in remorse and pity for herself, and much more, she wants to die with her secret.

Phaedra tells her nurse that she first met Hippolytus on the day of her wedding in Athens. He is a handsome young man, who strives to be chaste and untouched by Venus' power. Phaedra immediately fell hopelessly in love with him, but realized that it was sinful and blasphemous to have such overwhelming incestuous desires for her husband's son.

The flowing melody of the voice matches the instrumental opening. As the E of 'day' is sung, the note's resonance seems to match the tone-colour of the tubular bell which sounds again. The single chimes of the bell seem to evoke (like Phaedra's words 'Death was smiling in the aisle') the two ceremonial moments between which the drama unfolds,

namely Phaedra's marriage and death. The faster rhythmic figures on the timpani and pizzicato variant of the opening idea seem to suggest Phaedra's agitation.

### **Recitative 1**

By making the last word of the final phrase of the Prologue ('I saw his face turned white!') overlap with the first agitated entry of the harpsichord and solo cello that accompanies the recitative [at 3<sup>17</sup>: bar 1], Britten suggests a shift in her mood through changing pace, timbre and texture.

The harpsichord is both percussive and melodic, like the pizzicato strings. It takes up the semiquaver movement of the pizzicato in a more agitated form. Phaedra now begins to talk subjectively of her first memory of Hippolytus and the passionate overwhelming emotions she began to feel for him. The bareness of the accompanying texture seems to illustrate her self-exposure.

Phaedra blames Aphrodite not only for her own evil passions but also for her mother's downfall and death. Like her mother, and sister, Phaedra is cursed by Aphrodite, who has sovereign power over all creation, and fills woman's hearts with the frenzy of passion (Guirand, 1959: 148). Phaedra tries her utmost to ignore her desires by relentlessly worshipping Aphrodite, hoping her desperate pleas of ending her love for Hippolytus would be answered. It is all in vain; Phaedra realizes that Hippolytus has become her 'new lord'.

### **THE SECOND EXCERPT**

The second excerpt, in which Phaedra, overcome with emotion, declares her love for Hippolytus, is taken from Act 2, Scene v.

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<sup>17</sup> Numbers in bold refer to rehearsal numbers.

At this point in the plot, news has arrived that King Theseus is dead. Oenone persuades Phaedra that his death legitimizes her love for Hippolytus. There is an urgent need to put aside her pretence of hatred and to win his friendship, binding him to her side for political reasons. With the king's death there is an uncertainty who will reign next over the kingdom: Phaedra's own son, Hippolytus, or even Aricia. While Hippolytus confesses his love to Aricia, he is interrupted by Phaedra.

### **Aria 1: Presto**

The Presto begins on the final, accentuated words of the recitative ('my new lord') [at 5]. The loud quaver-figure in the timpani, first heard in the Prologue, returns to further enhance the sudden alteration of mood. It also assists the scene change. The words 'my new Lord' serve as a link from Phaedra's narration to her nurse, Oenone, to her confession to Hippolytus. The link serves as a fast-forward of action in the plot. The quick and sudden transformation is dramatic, as we witness Phaedra standing before her stepson. She, hoping to win over Hippolytus by consoling him for his father's death, immodestly confesses her love to Hippolytus, much to his horror and embarrassment. She no longer hides behind the façade of majestic disdain which she had shown towards Hippolytus in the past, and her torturing lust gradually weakens her sense. The fast and impulsive strings join in with Phaedra's frenzied outburst, symbolizing her whirling mind.

She reveals how much she violently struggled against her monstrous obsession, and nobly did all she could to free herself from her feelings and to preserve her 'sound intelligence and honour from this lust' (Lowell, 1961: 44). In doing so, she mistreated him, banning his name and persuading Theseus to exile him to Troezen, the town in southern Greece where Theseus had spent his childhood. Hippolytus feared her for her cruelty and power. He would 'crouch before her outburst like a cur' (Lowell, 1961: 13).

In the time Hippolytus was away, Phaedra had two sons by Theseus, and lived an arid but blameless life of a virtuous wife and mother, but when Theseus decided to go on yet another of his heroic adventures, he left Phaedra in his son's care at Troezen, and in so

doing, undid all of Phaedra's work. Phaedra had to fight once again to overcome her secret passion, pushing herself to the point of sickness.

A change of mood is conveyed to the listener at 8. The 'heartbeat' of the timpani and the frenzied descending semiquavers of the strings suddenly give way to a grand passage, dominated mainly by the strings which play a repeated passage of descending four-note fourth chords in the upper strings. The bass and tenor drum and the cymbal mark the steady pace of the passage. The texture is slightly enhanced by the bass drum rolls [5<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> bars of 8] which suddenly crescendo and then decrescendo, creating a shuddering effect, which dramatically anticipates the destruction and pain that her madness will inflict. Here Phaedra is revealed in a new powerful and majestic light, as she repeats the phrase 'Phaedra in all her madness stands before you'. Even though she finally gives in to her madness by revealing the truth, her character quite ironically is enhanced and magnified into a more powerful and dignified one. For the first time in the play, she breaks free from being a pathetic oppressed woman and conveys the qualities of a proud and upright queen, the qualities for which she was once feared, particularly by Hippolytus.

At [9] the agitated semiquaver descent on the strings return with the timpani figure now reduced to an intermittent 'heartbeat' pattern. The semiquaver pattern is reduced to quavers, against which the solo cello plays in duet with the vocal line. Its free imitation of Phaedra's part seems to symbolize the beautiful image of Hippolytus that obsesses her. It plays predominantly in its warm middle register, which corresponds to the range and timbre of the baritone and tenor voices, instead of the more brilliant upper range, which would normally be used for a solo, especially against a body of strings. The obsessive accompanying figures in the upper strings and the 'heartbeat' figure in the timpani have dipped to pianissimo as they continue to rumble beneath the vocal line. They seem to suggest her own horror at her confession.

However, the mood of her cantabile vocal line illustrates that she has regained a little more composure over her emotions by attempting to persuade Hippolytus of her initial disapproval of such feelings. But her composure does not last very long. As soon as she

speaks again of losing her reason ('till I lost my reason'), the crashing timpani and swirling strings return to overwhelm the texture.

The vocal melody is stretched into broad minims on the word 'Alas', which is repeated a step higher [11]. The tension grows further as the voice swells through the repetition in a higher register. After the sudden rise of tension, the vocal melody descends to the deeper vocal register, as the voice softens on the words 'inhuman' and 'hateful'. 'Hateful' is accentuated with the sudden loud timpani 'heartbeat' figure which follows.

The accompaniment returns to the obsessive semiquaver pattern in the strings. This time the double bass plays a cantabile line in free imitation of the voice. In the same way the cello represents Hippolytus, the double bass seems to suggest the character of Theseus, of whom Phaedra is speaking [2 bars after 12]. The cello solo, representing Hippolytus, returns [2 bars before 13] when Phaedra's thoughts return to the youth.

The grand majestic passage that was heard before during Phaedra's first confession, returns louder than ever, as she declares her love to Hippolytus once again [14]. The mood of the music mirrors the pride and strength Phaedra reveals as she indignantly confesses her truth. The passage almost parodies a royal march which reveals the dramatic irony of Phaedra's confession. At the same time that she, in her majestic power, confesses her love for Hippolytus, she falls from her honourable status as queen.

Now at the end of her declaration Phaedra, sick with lust and disgust for herself, calls herself the monster. Phaedra invites him to stab her through the heart with his sword. As she takes Hippolytus' sword, the repeated-note figure, first heard before 'You monster!' [5], is heard in the strings, starting in the first violins and ending low on the violas against the 'heartbeat' figure on the timpani [7 bars before 17]. The final spasms on the strings finally die away, making the whole passage a striking illustration of Phaedra's 'I want your sword's spasmodic final inch'. She is stopped by Oenone.

### Percussion Interlude

Britten reduces the instrumental forces further to just percussion [17]. The timpani plays its repeated-note patterns in alternation with the cymbals and bass and tenor drums, which develop the rhythm they played in the grand funeral march of the previous Presto ('the wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus'). The interlude seems to suggest the dramatic events that occur between the second and third excerpts.

### THE THIRD EXCERPT

The third excerpt is from Act 3, Scene iii, when Phaedra is speaking to Oenone. News has arrived that Athens has elected her son king. An envoy has come to place the sceptre in Phaedra's hands.

Oenone, whose only concern is for Phaedra, despises Hippolytus for the grief he has unknowingly brought upon her. Despite Oenone's scorn for him, Phaedra feels lifted from the depths of despair to new hope. She imagines she will be able to tame Hippolytus, and bring him round to loving her in return. She has high hopes that he will return and take her place as instructor to her son. She pleads with Venus to rise and conquer Hippolytus, 'who mocks the graces and the power of Venus' (Lowell, 1961; 51).

But, an ironic turn has occurred in the plot. News arrives that Theseus is alive. His return seals her doom, just at the time she had decided to live. She must gather her pride and self-control and meet her husband. Her love for Hippolytus is once again blasphemous. She is concerned about Hippolytus: 'Will the stern prince stand smiling and approve the laboured histrionics of my love for Theseus, see my lips, still languishing for his, betray his father and his king?' (Lowell, 1961: 52) Would he spare her by revealing nothing?

Phaedra's love for him turns to fear: 'I see him as a beast, who'd murder us' (Lowell, 1961: 54). She realizes that her outburst to Hippolytus has brought her more shame and grief, and blames Oenone for persuading her to reveal her secret. She yearns for the

freedom of death, for she fears if the truth ever became known, her crime would nullify her son's authority over his subjects.

Oenone hopes that Phaedra's will to live can be revived through hatred towards Hippolytus. Oenone convinces Phaedra that suicide will merely expose Phaedra's guilt. There must be stronger evidence that will explain Phaedra's self-destruction. Phaedra must expose Hippolytus by accusing him of attempting to rape her. Phaedra still has his sword which is evidence to prove him guilty. There is hope that Theseus will believe her. He has consented once to banishing his son.

### **Recitative 2**

The strummed cello and harpsichord introduce the scene of Phaedra speaking to the gods in Oenone's presence [18]. The cello plays on every beat of the bar with the harpsichord, taking over the 'heartbeat' pulse from the timpani which fade away to nothing. The instruments' deliberate and somber pace symbolizes a stylized funeral march. Phaedra is getting closer to her final confession to Theseus and her death. The steady strumming of the harpsichord and the pizzicato of the cello create a gradual growth in tension. With each unaccompanied phrase, the vocal melody and the upper voices in the chordal accompaniment rise with Phaedra's growing dread and anguish, which is enhanced by a harpsichord trill and accented chords from the cello. The dotted rhythm of the harpsichord illustrates a heartbeat figure, which could suggest her quickening pulse rate.

According to Loppert (1979: 829) the melody of the line 'Death to the unhappy's no catastrophe' [3 bars before 21] joins Grimes' 'What harbour shelters peace?' and the Curlew River Madwoman's 'Let me in! Let me out!' as being among Britten's vocal lines 'designed to dig themselves firmly into the listener's memory; lines once heard, never forgotten'. It consists of slow ascending minims in E major which reach a culminating whole-tone passage. Motifs of the phrase are later used in the instrumental interlude and her final aria of confession to Theseus.

Unfortunately, Phaedra is too easily persuaded and allows Oenone to bear false witness to the story which Theseus believes. Jealous and angry, he calls on Neptune to curse Hippolytus, who begs for his father's loyalty and respect, and confesses his love for Aricia. Phaedra hears the curse, and for the first time breaks free of Oenone's oppression. Filled with remorse and anguish, she is about to confess Hippolytus' honesty, when Theseus tells her of Hippolytus' adoration for Aricia. Filled with jealousy and hate: 'this howling monster, able to disprove my beauty, mock my passion, scorn each prayer, and face me like a tiger in a lair - he's tamed...' (Lowell, 1961: 71). She decides to keep quiet and, in so doing, precipitates Hippolytus' undeserved gory death.

### Instrumental interlude

A grave yet chilling meditation of her final line begins, in which the strings accumulate in dense blocks of low sound from mainly scalar movements, culminating in the whole-tone passage mentioned above [21]. The string body is divided into ten parts. The repeated pattern of slow ascending minims is repeated four times. Each repetition rises in tension as the parts enter in staggered order. The first statement uses five parts, the second and third seven parts, and the last the whole body of strings in a ten-part texture, gradually increasing in density and culminating in a chord containing all the notes of the C major scale (at the end of bar 4 before [23]). The chord resolves to a D major triad at the poignant climax of the passage. As the gong and roll of the timpani is sounded, the whole-tone phrase, that was heard before on Phaedra's words 'no catastrophe', is heard in the violins in parallel major sixths:

### Example 15:

The image shows a musical score for two violins, Vln. 1 and Vln. 2. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The music consists of a series of whole notes, forming a whole-tone scale. The notes are: Vln. 1: G4, A4, B4, C5; Vln. 2: F#4, G4, A4, B4. Dynamics markings include 'mf' (mezzo-forte) and 'pizz' (pizzicato). There are also accents and hairpins indicating phrasing.

(Britten, 1977: 24)

This phrase is echoed four times by the other strings in descending registers, finally reaching the double basses.

One can imagine Phaedra finally reaching the moment of committing her fatal act of suicide. The music suggests her taking Medea's poison and her feeling its first subtle effects, as she slowly gathers all courage to meet her husband and confess the truth.

#### **THE FOURTH EXCERPT**

The fourth and final excerpt is taken from Act 5, Scene vii. Oenone has killed herself and Phaedra stands alone before her husband to reveal the truth at the cost of her life. She reveals Aphrodite's curse over her that caused her to lust for his son, and confesses Hippolytus's innocence. She has consumed poison that she brought with her from Crete, and she slowly dies before her husband.

#### **Aria 2**

A sudden transformation in mood is characterized with a loud crash on the cymbal and timpani, from which follows a flurry of descending semi-quavers, which is in diminution form of the cantata's opening melody that appears in the first and second violins [23]. Its appearance seems to be linked to the agitation that her hidden passion causes her when in the presence of her husband. It also occurs at eighth bar of [18] between 'go to meet my husband' and 'at his side will stand Hippolytus'.

But the frailty of body and mind that she showed at the beginning of the drama seems to have dissolved as she begins her confession. Her end is near, but her calm acceptance of imminent death brings no fear.

On each of the three lines, the vocal line gradually rises until, at the end of the third line, she reaches a recollection of the whole-tone triadic passage which was first associated with her thoughts on death [1 bar before 24 & 25]. The rising melody of each line seems to suggest her mounting courage:

## Example 16:

The flames of A-phro - - di - - te maddened me.

(Britten, 1977: 27)

forced me to de-clare I loved - your son.

(Britten, 1977: 29)

The strings develop this idea further by having solo viola, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> violin enter consecutively with the scalar motif from the end of the preceding recitative against each successive line.

A sharp ring of the bell (at the same pitch as heard at the opening) introduces Phaedra's broad, proud phrase, in which she reaches the climax of her confession [4 after 25], and announces the imminent end. The music dies down to sustained chords in the strings, which slowly fade away. The mood becomes disquieting and still. Phaedra speaks of 'Medea's poison' in monotones, and as she begins to confess her suicide, the slow rising minims of the strings from the instrumental interlude start up again to accompany her to her last dying phrase [27].

Phaedra's solemn passage to her death is along a series of ascending plateaux. Each new vocal phrase starts on a monotone, first C, then G, C and E, and each is accompanied by the rising minims. The entire passage is a varied reprise of the interlude. Each scalar passage is again denser than the preceding, and each culminates in a statement of the

whole-tone motif in the unaccompanied vocal line. The strings, like the poison, begin to rise against Phaedra's monotones, building in dynamics and textual richness. The sequence of increasingly opaque chords also seem to gradually restore Phaedra to her original majestic self. The music illustrates Phaedra dying but the feeling of sadness and oppression that usually goes with a sinful death is absent. Instead, the music seems to lift Phaedra out of the misery and hopelessness that disturbed her life. The voice takes one last step to G, on which Phaedra finally achieves the 'purity' that has eluded her in life, as the strings resolve onto an 'untainted' C major sonority (a tonic triad with added 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>).

### Coda

The coda [29] acts as an instrumental conclusion containing fleeting recollections of Phaedra's passion, madness and death. It is a remarkable and moving ending to the cantata, consisting of a gradual diminuendo over a long-held octave C in the basses.

In just thirteen bars, Britten enabled the orchestra to review Phaedra's story. After her final word, 'purity', there is a moment of release as the solo violin plays its opening melody (in A), while the lower strings sustain the C and the 'heartbeat' motif fades away on the timpani. The strings join in briefly with their fast semiquaver passage, which was heard in her first aria [5 after 6]. A recollection of her regal dignity is then heard as the cymbal and bass and snare drum play the rhythmic pattern first used at 'The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus' [14], this time much slower than before. Phaedra's final thoughts of her beloved are suggested by the cello's solo that was first heard in her confession to Hippolytus [6 after 9]. The strings are the last to recollect her story as they play an inversion of the passage of descending fourth-chords heard at 'Phaedra in all her madness stands before you' [8]. After this series of spectral fragments, the sustained C is left alone to die away.

It is interesting to see the similarity between the characters of Phaedra and Lucretia in this final scene. Phaedra's dying words would not have seemed misplaced if given to

Lucretia: 'My eyes at last give up their light, and see the day they've soiled resume its purity'.

However there are also contradictory aspects of the two characters. While Lucretia was blackened by another's sin and lust, Phaedra was her own victim. One can argue that Phaedra's helpless downfall could be blamed on Aphrodite's power over her, which consumes her mind. She refers to Aphrodite three times: 'Aphrodite, my mother's murderer!', 'Venus assigned her alter to my new lord', and 'The flames of Aphrodite maddened me'.

Racine ends his play with Theseus honouring his son's request. He declares Aricia as his daughter and the heir to the throne. However, Racine did not include the rest of Hippolytus' story. Like Britten, Racine probably preferred to focus on Phaedra, the protagonist who reveals an inner struggle of both good and evil conscience, instead of Hippolytus, whose goodness seems too predictable and one-dimensional.

In Greek mythology, Hippolytus is restored back to life by Diana, the chaste goddess of the moon (Bulfinch, 1978: 914). He never exposed Phaedra's adulterous feelings for him, even when his father accuses and exiles him. Courageously, he loved and honoured his father and remained quiet for his father's sake: 'Shall I point to his soiled bed, tell Athens how his marriage was foresworn, make Theseus curse the day he was born?' (Lowell, 1961: 77)

#### **4.4. A Comparative Survey of Past Performances**

Whatever I'm interpreting - whether it is opera, lieder or the [St] Matthew Passion must for that moment be reality, and if you can achieve that, other things will come naturally - Dame Janet Baker (Blyth, 1973: 4).

Britten wrote for people. He was professional in his work and expected others to be the same. He once stated, 'what annoys me...is the ineptitude of some professionals who

don't know their stuff. I have no patience with that' (Kendall, 1973; 71). He expected both singers and musicians to be good and to be prepared to take criticisms in order to develop.

For a mezzo-soprano to portray the character of Phaedra, she needs to encompass a wide dramatic and emotional range. The role is as demanding as that of Lucretia, both in singing technique and character portrayal, and Britten therefore chose a mezzo-soprano who proved herself capable of portraying an enormous range of emotions, from the feminine and the vulnerable to the heroic and the tragic (Blyth, 1973: 4).

Andrew Porter wrote in the Financial Times, 1964:

There would be little dispute that of all British singers, Janet Baker has the most beautiful voice or that she uses this voice, a mezzo-soprano that reaches easily in the soprano and contralto range, with taste, intelligence and innate musicianship (Blyth, 1973: 23).

Baker played Phedre in Rameau's *Hippolyte at Arice* in 1965. She had shown an understanding of the changing dramatic situations, particularly in her aria 'Cruelle mere des amours' in which she longs for Hippolytus. The role of Phedre lies high, but Baker had a large enough range to make the performance powerful and passionate (Blyth, 1973: 48).

Baker was privileged to have worked with Britten on more than one occasion. She had previously performed the role of 'Dido' with the English Opera Group in a performance which Britten conducted at Aldeburgh in 1962, and Drottingham, Sweden. Her first experience with the Aldeburgh Festival was singing Lennox Berkeley's *Poems of St Teresa* in Blythburgh Church in 1961. After that, she joined the English Opera Group. 1964 was the year of the English Opera Group's Russian tour on which Janet sang Lucretia for the first time (Blyth, 1973: 22).

Like Baker, many performers recognized that Britten was relentless, not only with others, but himself especially. He would become ill from fret and impatience if he was forced to

leave Aldeburgh without being able to finish a composition (Kendall, 1973: 71). He had great expectations about the importance of good technique: 'Obviously it is no use of [sic.] having a technique unless you have the ideas to use this technique' - Britten: broadcast talk *The Composer and the Listener* (1946) (White, 1954: 79).

When Janet Baker was asked about Britten's influence on her career, she answered, I think, above all, it was his high performancing [sic.] standards...Britten has a strange effect on people. It is like being drawn by a magnet to this fantastic personality...Because of this quality, and the great respect one has for him as one of the great human beings of our time, and as a musician - once you have done a work with him, you feel you cannot do it with anybody else (Blyth, 1973: 21).

As an interpreter, she tries to stand aside from her performance and watch herself: You split yourself up into two people - one bit is outside, watching the process. The other bit, inside the process, that is performing, is so engrossed that there is room for nothing else. This may sound like a contradiction, but I think any performer will know what I mean. You see, you must not actually get bogged down in emotion, or you cannot give anything out; one side of the personality controls that, while the other side works with the trained equipment plus something that is God-given, the magic moment when, say, a Schubert phrase, through you, is made alive. An audience of course affects you (Blyth, 1973: 39).

As a result of the work being written particularly for Baker, mezzo-sopranos can assume that her performance as captured on the accessible recording is a close reflection of Britten's intentions. Here she performs with the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Stuart Bedford. Although he never conducted the work himself, Baker's performance received his approval. This makes the recording an invaluable document which should be used as a model by any singer studying the role.

Another excellent portrayal of the work is by the mezzo-soprano, Lorraine Hunt, and the Hallé Orchestra, directed by Kent Nagano. Her portrayal of Phaedra is very similar to

Baker's. However, there are small differences in the interpretation, that either add to the dramatic effect, or lessen it, which I will expand upon<sup>18</sup>.

In performing *Phaedra*, both singers rely on certain techniques to pace themselves and to maintain a certain emotional restraint<sup>19</sup>. Although English in their emotional restraint, Baker and Hunt are extremely full-blooded at climaxes, or when it comes to showing the deepest, most intimate feelings.

To achieve this, one can rely on the emphasis of consonants in certain significant words, which helps to dramatize the line, without pushing the voice. In the Prologue, both Baker and Hunt roll the 'r' in the word 'brilliant' ('In May, in brilliant Athens...'), which lifts the word and accentuates the vividness of Phaedra's first memory of seeing Hippolytus.

At the beginning of the first recitative, Baker accents the 'w' and 't' in 'white' ('I saw his face turned white!'), through which she reveals Phaedra's panic as she begins to confess to Oenone of her adulteress feelings. In the second recitative, Baker and Hunt emphasize the hard consonants in the words 'thick' and 'rejected', the former suggesting lustful undertones and the latter enhancing her overwhelming self-pity ('How shall I hide my thick adulterous passions for this youth, who has rejected me and knows the truth').

Another way to emphasize a particular meaning is to change the pace of certain lines. Baker takes the line, '*my mother's murderer*', in the first recitative, deliberately at a slightly slower pace (which is not indicated in the score) than Hunt. The slower pace underlines the power of Aphrodite and Phaedra's opinion of her. Like all mortals in Greek mythology, Phaedra feared the gods and goddesses for the power they had over

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<sup>18</sup> There are two other recordings of *Phaedra* which are available overseas: one with Jean Rigby, accompanied by The Nash Ensemble and conducted by Lionel Friend (Naxos), and the other with Ann Murray, accompanied by The English Chamber Orchestra and conducted by Stuart Bedford.

<sup>19</sup> I watched a short excerpt of the original performance at Aldeburgh Festival on 16 June 1976, with Janet Baker and the English Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Stuart Bedford in the film documentary, *A Time There Was* (Palmer, 1980). The comments on verbal emphasis are based on the recording of *Phaedra* (Decca, 1990).

their fates. She has respect for Aphrodite, but there is an underlying hint of fear and resentment towards her because of the way Aphrodite has victimized her and her family.

The phrase, 'Phaedra in all her madness stands before you' in the second aria (*Presto*), is taken a little quicker by Hunt than by Baker, which lessens the majestic prominence that the repeated passage of descending fourth chords conveys. Baker's slightly slower pace shows a bigger contrast in Phaedra's character, in which her madness is temporarily replaced with the air of a proud, dignified queen. On the word 'look' in the phrase 'Look this monster ravenous for her execution' (second aria), Hunt could have taken more time and freedom as Baker did, (the score indicates 'freely'), which would have helped to accentuate the change from Phaedra's majestic dignity to her former frenzied madness.

In the second recitative, the harpsichord's dotted-rhythm accompaniment is more precise and distinctive in Nagano's version, than in Bedford's, and effectively portrays Phaedra's tense heartbeat as she begins to panic about Theseus' reaction to her truth. The performers take the liberty of quickening the tempo with each of her questions, which suggests the growing tension and the quickening of her pulse rate. The tempo then gradually slows down again on her line 'the very dust rises to disabuse my husband'.

Baker takes every opportunity to add to the expressiveness of poet and composer. Her hushed unaccompanied whisper on the words 'Medea's poison' and her triumphant fortissimo on her final word 'purity' possibly take Phaedra's character beyond Britten's initial expectations.

Hunt's well-controlled approach to the broad, mounting phrases of the cantata's most beautiful and heroic climaxes, is indeed moving and on a par with Baker's portrayal. As Phaedra fearlessly approaches her death, Hunt sensitively portrays the heroine's gradual restoration of dignity at the precise moment of the poison's lethal effects.

I conclude that both of these recordings can be highly recommended in preparing a performance. Hunt keeps very closely to the dynamics written in the score, where Baker is freer. However, this does not diminish Baker's performance in any way; she sustains

the drama through her dark timbre and through the particular intensity with which she expresses the text. At times I felt Baker's darker vocal colour better suited to Phaedra's character, in comparison to Hunt's lighter timbre, particularly on Phaedra's final word, 'purity'. The voice reaches its highest and most demanding range, where Phaedra is portrayed at the height of her eminence and strength.

## CONCLUSION

At the start of researching for my dissertation, I discovered there were many questions that needed to be answered, particularly concerning the origin and meaning of the texts used in *A Charm of Lullabies* and *Phaedra*. There was already an extensive amount of research available on *The Rape of Lucretia*, in books, journals, theses, dissertations, reviews and recordings of the work, but not on the other two works.

However, there are still some questions left answered. For instance, why is there no recording available of Nancy Evans performing the *A Charm of Lullabies*? Evans had recalled in her correspondence to Der-Shin Hwang (Hwang, 1988, 34), that she had performed the work on more than one occasion, so why was the opportunity of capturing her interpretation on record never taken?

The focal point of my dissertation was to understand how Britten captured the mood and character of the text through his vocal compositional style, and to explore how the voice was accompanied in each of the varying vocal genres, namely chamber opera, song cycle, and solo cantata. To achieve this, some of the stylistic aspects of Britten's music were explored, such as his use of unifying form, distinctive thematic material, motivic development and harmonic and instrumental colour. I also wanted to take these findings a step further by analyzing how performers have captured each work's character in their portrayals.

Extensive research was done to explore the consequences of Britten's life surrounding each work, and to understand the aims, inspirations and philosophy behind his work. One significant aspect was his endeavour to write music for human beings: 'I believe that an artist should be part of his community, should work for it, with it and be used by it' (Kendall, 1973: 97). Such inspiration gave him purpose in his work. His immense understanding of the voice originated in his family upbringing, where his close, loving relationship with his mother, a mezzo-soprano herself, helped him to develop an awareness and understanding of the mezzo-soprano's range and unique tone colour.

Each text's origin and each author's background and purpose in writing the text, was discussed. An analysis was made of the texts and the way Britten interpreted them. 'Words gave him a springboard to music' (Duncan, 1981: 45). He was able to capture the mood and character of each text through his music, and by characterizing them, he in turn illustrates his own understanding of the text, his reason for choosing it, and his philosophy in adapting it to music.

A performance analysis of each work was given, in which the background of the original performers for each work, namely Kathleen Ferrier, Nancy Evans and Janet Baker, was discussed. Their interpretations were compared with portrayals by mezzo-sopranos, such as Jean Rigby, Magdalena Kožená, Helen Watts and Lorraine Hunt. Differences were noted in the ways each performer portrays the respective works, whether expressing the differing states of mind and intensely felt emotions of Lucretia and Phaedra, or the five different characters found in *A Charm of Lullabies*.

The effective way in which Britten combined the mezzo-soprano voice with piano and orchestral accompaniment shows his immense understanding of the instruments for which he was composing. By understanding the range, power, subtlety and colour potentialities of the voice and accompanying instruments, Britten was able to exploit their innate possibilities and contribute to the development of the literature. We are indebted to him for his great enrichment of English vocal repertoire.

To Benjamin Britten, who, as a brilliant composer, performer, and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods and thoughts, has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny (Kendall, 1973, 85).

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