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3. MELANCHOLY IN THE MUSIC OF JOHN DOWLAND AND BENJAMIN BRITTEN

*Melancholie ve skladbách Johna Dowlanda a
Benjamina Brittena*

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Abstract

The study addresses melancholy as an aesthetic expression category and mood, the substance of which is thoughtfulness. The aim is to point out specific means of musical expression that can be found in pieces with melancholic connotation. The subject matter of the analytical study is the ayre *Come, Heavy Sleep* by John Dowland and the subsequent reflection of Benjamin Britten in his piece *Nocturnal after John Dowland* for guitar. The analysis resulted in an analogy between the textual and musical element of Dowland's piece, identification of musical symbolism. As for Britten, we are witnesses of the unique application of the form of reversed

variations and musical metamorphosis of the phenomenology of sleep as the symbol of death.

Studie se zabývá melancholií jako estetickou výrazovou kategorií a náladou, jejímž podstatným rysem je reflexivnost. Cíle je poukázat na specifické hudebně vyjadřovací prostředky, které se objevují ve skladbách s melancholickou konotací. Předmětem analytických sond je ayre Come, heavy sleep Johna Dowlanda a následná reflexe Benjaminem Brittenem ve skladbě Nocturnal after John Dowland pro kytaru. Výsledkem analýzy je nalezení analogií mezi textovou a hudební složkou Dowlandovy skladby, identifikace hudební symboliky. U Brittena jsme svědky jedinečného užití formy reverzních variací a hudební metamorfózy fenomenologie spánku jako symbolu smrti.

Keywords:

melancholy, John Dowland, Come, Heavy Sleep, Benjamin Britten, Nocturnal after John Dowland, death, musical symbol, Renaissance, guitar, musical analysis,

melancholie, John Dowland, Come, heavy sleep, Benjamin Britten, Nocturnal after John Dowland, smrt, hudební symbol, renesance, kytara, hudební analýza.

3.1. THE THOUGHTFUL NATURE OF MELANCHOLY

Contemplating about the possible forms of the relation between melancholy and music is such a general

issue that its concrete expression with a broader applicability to the erratic music phenomena is impossible. Therefore, when examining this relation, we start from original philosophical and medical characteristics of melancholy,¹⁹ however, being aware of the possibility of the existence of its specific musical forms. For example, Robert Burton (1577–1640) in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (BURTON 2001) suggested the indefinability of melancholy with words and terms from various positions. Melancholy is specific in that it is expressed in various forms as a state of mind; at the language level, it is namely a figurative expression, a metaphor or a symbol, and other methods can be found through various artistic media from the aesthetic point of view. On this basis, we consider the melancholic qualities or effects of a painting, a line, a gesture, an art scene and so on. The initial moment of the text is asking for an opportunity to express melancholy (by an internal analogy, functionality, the rising of sound, resonance...) in its various forms in relation to music – are there any common principles of the symbolic

¹⁹ The following are some of the detailed works on melancholy (KRISTEVA 1989; KLIBANSKY, PANOFSKY, SAXL 1964; FÖLDÉNYI 2013).

character of expressing melancholy in one's experience and in art at the same time? What are at least some of the parts of constituting a melancholic move towards music in its diversified and impossible-to-classify expressions and characteristics?

The art of music is able to express melancholy with its vehicles of expression. In a particular situation when we are in contact with music and we are "tuned into melancholy",²⁰ music acquires a dynamic-symbolic meaning in a non-verbal, non-conceptual way. We understand melancholy in music as an aesthetic expression quality adherent to the emotional, or mood charge of music during its aesthetic interpretation. When melancholic, one endures the experience of death and grief with transcendent reflection.²¹ This characteristic is also pointed out by Brady and Haapala (2003) who interpret melancholy as a multidimensional aesthetic emotion (or complex), where one of the components is the

²⁰ Walter Benjamin speaks of melancholy as "being tuned into sadness" when we are afraid of the idea of death and emptying of the world in the context of the interpretation of tragedy based on reformation theology (BENJAMIN 1979, 322).

²¹ I discuss the melancholic elements of the ancient music myth of Orpheus in the study *Orpheus Melancholic? Ancient Music Myth in Archetypal Interpretation* (KOZEL 2014).

contemplativeness of the loss of a loved one (memories of that person, the ever-present reminiscence), a place or an event in which, as a final consequence, factuality is lost to a more general and abstract (indefinite) level of the problem – that is how the shift to mediation, a melancholic mood is created. Zdeňka Kalnická (2007, 83, translated) views the difference between melancholy as a mood from nostalgia in the level of intensity and expressiveness: *“Nostalgia could be characterised by being aware of the fact that time flows without the possibility of return, which brings one a feeling of some sadness, but on the other hand, such sadness is not destructive.”* In music, the reflective dimension of melancholy is present, subject to pure musical laws and vehicles of expression. Melancholy in music acquires qualities and properties that are non-transferable and original.

3.2. JOHN DOWLAND

The work of John Dowland (1563–1626) emblematically presents melancholy in music. “Anglorum Orphei”, his piece of music closely connected to the period of Elizabethan Renaissance and humanism, represents

melancholy namely in his song-writing. As the connection of Dowland and melancholy is professionally reflected to a large extent (comp. e.g. SILBERT 1947; WELLS 1985; ROOLEY 1983), I will focus on the reflection of some of his works in Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), namely *Nocturnal after John Dowland: Reflections on ‘Come, heavy sleep’ for guitar*, op. 70 of 1963 (see ALCARAZ 2001; GOSS 2001; EVANS 1996, 330–333).

Renaissance melancholy is related to the awareness of the limits of human existence with regard to the newly discovered dimensions of the world. That is associated with an educated, social elite scientific contemplation of melancholy, artistic and other reflections of the feelings of solitude and vanity, created by empty efforts to rule the world with science or art, as well as in confrontation with the concurrent social and cultural changes of the new era. *Melancholia generosa* of Dowland’s works of music and the Elizabethan cult of melancholy is necessarily seen together with, for example, Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia* (1514), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) and other literary and dramatic works, such

as *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) by R. Burton,²² *A Treatise on Melancholie* (1586) by Timothy Bright (?1551–1615), as well as the earlier Florence Neoplatonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) in *De vita libri tres* (finished in 1489). Wells (1985, 514–515) points in the direction of the possible interpretation influence on inspirational effects and the creative power of music (and hermetic theories, gnosis and religious melancholy) that disengages from sense by its imitation of the harmony of spheres and leads to the spiritual sublimation of the world spirit.

As far as melancholy is concerned, it is mainly Dowland's songs that are relevant, namely the English ayres (specific vocally-instrumental pieces, often accompanied by lute) in relation to the long lyrical tradition of the country. There are three books of songs in total:²³ *The Firste Booke of Songes or Ayres of Fowre Parties* (1597), *The Second Booke of Songs or Ayres of 2, 4. and 5. parts* (1600), *The Third and Last Booke of Songs or Aires* (1603), and the collection *A Pilgrimes Solace* (1612).

²² Burton (2001) approaches music as means of treatment of melancholy, i.e. therapeutically. To interpret Dowland's work, take notice of his differentiation of religious melancholy and the melancholy of love.

²³ See further as *The Firste Booke of Songes*.

Dowland's ayres synthesise and define a new genre by using the elements of a ballad, the dance influences of pavane, galliard as well as consort songs and secular madrigals. After *The Firste Booke of Songes*, the ayres from *The Second Booke of Songes* are probably the most powerful expressions of melancholy in music, as there are more subjective lyrics, greater composition of accompanying voices, increased chromatisms, more frequent use of musical-rhetorical figures with regard to the content of the texts and the relevant affect, and symbolic intervals. In his ayres, Dowland processes the relation circle of the topic of loneliness, unrequited love, death, sadness, darkness, agony, tears as well as lost innocence.

The ayre *Flow, my tears* (see DOWLAND 1970) is the most influential of that time and it sets Dowland's characteristic vehicles of expression: i.e. slow tempo, minor key, descending four-tone motif (descending tetrachord), which is varied and rhythmically changed in the melody of the song. It is a rhetorical figure as well as a symbol (index) of weeping. Other symbolic intervals of the song include an ascending leading semitone (associated with death), the interval of minor sixth and minor third.

Originally, it was a lute pavane, *Lachrimae* (1596, also in a

The image shows a musical score for a piece with lyrics. The score is written on three staves: a vocal line (soprano), a lute line (treble clef), and a consort of violas line (bass clef). The lyrics are: "Come, hea - - - vy Sleep, the im - age of true Death,". The music is in a minor key and features a descending perfect fourth followed by a diatonic step up, as mentioned in the text.

version for lute and a consort of violas), later provided with a text. The fundamental cycle of consort pieces (viola, lute) *Lachrimae or Seaven Teares*²⁴ from 1604 contains an innovative connection of seven variation pavaues and the topic of melancholy. The outlined compositional context is accompanied with solo pieces for lute, whether it is the *Melancholy Galliard*, or *Semper Dowland semper dolens* with an autobiographic reflection, and also Dowland's self-irony as a "melancholic" composer.

Goss (2001, 55–58) refers to other idiomatic movements in Dowland's melancholic pieces in the form of a descending perfect fourth followed with a diatonic step up or down, movements in sixths and chromatic movements. Such movements are visible in a concentrated form in the

²⁴ The work is interpreted by Diane Poulton (1982) as an allegory of the Fall of the Man, or as a typical product of Elizabethan melancholy.

first beats of the vocal line of *Come, heavy sleep* (transcript of a manuscript source in the version for voice and lute, DOWLAND 1968): The ayre *Come, heavy sleep* is a strophic song with two stanzas, each containing six verses. The music form is two-part with repetition of the fifth and sixth verse of the second part. As for the text, the ayre works with the imaginative connection of sleep – a metaphor of death, typical for that time period. Sleep is invoked as the final deliverance of soul, suffering from grief and agony. Harmonically, the song is simple, with an interesting modulation sidestep of the second part from the main G major key and return. Also, the main vocal line includes Dowland's melodic idioms: descending perfect fourth on the word "heavy" and diatonic ascend to the word "sleep", ascending leading semitone in connection with "true Death" (see above). As for musical-rhetorical figures, we refer to Goss's text (2001, 58) that identifies them in the following form: ecphonesis, parrhesia, anabasis, aposiopesis, catabasis.

3.3. BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Dowland's ayre *Come, heavy sleep* is elaborated in Britten's piece *Nocturnal after John Dowland* (BRITTEN 1965), which is one of the fundamental pieces of the guitar repertoire in 20th century music. The piece was written for Julian Bream (1933), an English guitarist and lutenist. Dowland's works hold an important place in Britten's work, even though *Nocturnal* is not sufficiently considered in Britten-related literature. This is not only about the continuance of the tradition of English music with neoclassic features and relating to the value model of the past (reminiscence as an expression of nostalgia?), but also an obvious inspirational sign of melancholy in the music of both composers.

As for the form, *Nocturnal* has an unusual structure; it is a type of reversed variations where the main theme (Britten's transcription of Dowland's song in an instrumental version)²⁵ can be heard at the very end of the composition after the previous seven parts (variations) and the final Passacaglia.²⁶ Britten himself calls the variations

²⁵ Britten's transcription is in E major, not in the original G major.

²⁶ The use of passacaglia is one of the neoclassic signs of Britten's work.

“reflections”, with a free relation to the classic variation principle. Dowland’s music is an integral part of Britten’s own music structure at the melodic, harmonic or rhythmic level. Britten analyses Dowland’s music compositionally, breaks it down into motivic cells, confronts it and puts it all back together in a new way to finally bring it all together at the very end in the form of a direct citation.

Britten had already applied the principle of reversed variations in his first piece with Dowland’s reflection: *Lachrymae, reflections of a song of John Dowland, for viola and piano*, op. 48 of 1950 (version for viola and string orchestra of 1976). The piece is based on the music material of a part of Dowland’s song *If my complaints could passions move* and aforementioned *Flow, my tears*. Working with prepared (mostly melodic) models that the author subjects to creative work is typical of Britten. In this way, the melodic and harmonic elements of Dowland’s melancholic work are synthesised with the author’s own contribution (comp. EVANS 1996, 303–306). *Lachrymae* and *Nocturnal* can be understood as a sequence of imaginative pictures (variations, reflections) with reference to melancholy in Dowland’s lyrics.

Nocturnal is surrounded by a series of Britten's other compositions that indicate his inspirational tendency to a nocturnal circle as well as the symbols of death, sleep, dream, various states of dreaming and transition to wakefulness.²⁷ Those imaginative moments come together with Dowland's Renaissance melancholy and the (sensed) author's inner world. As outlined above, let's refer to Britten's following compositions: *Serenade* (for tenor and orchestra, 1943), *Billy Bud* (opera, 1950–1951), *Night Piece (Notturmo)* (for piano, 1963), *The Turn of the Screw* (opera, 1954), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (opera, 1959–1960), *Death in Venice* (opera, 1971–1973), etc.

Nocturnal contains an obvious trace of melancholy with its reference to Dowland and the metaphor of sleep as death. Britten newly interprets melancholy by emphasising the phenomenal essence of sleep (sleep phenomenology). The evidence is in the tectonic arc of the piece and the character of the individual variations that can evoke a musical resonance of the phases of sleep and falling asleep. The entirety of the composition opens

²⁷ Goss (2001, 54–55) summarises the observations of English musicologists, according to whom the piece represents the theme of sleep, insomnia and wakefulness with an inspirational composing impulse, as well as the processes of the unconscious.

into two arched peaks in the Passacaglia part by an anti-climax of the citations of Dowland's song, which sounds like deliverance and a final calming down by the coming oblivion, falling asleep – death. This interpretation is musically supported by the contrast of the clear major tonality of the citation as against the expanded tonality of the previous variations and passacaglia, which move away from the final tonal stability by their tonal vagueness, dissonances and chord specifics (bichords, quartal and compressed chords).²⁸

The individual variations are played *attacca*, their beginnings and ends are linked by the interval, key or rhythm, which is emphasised by the fluidity of the piece as well as the transitions between the individual states of sleep. Some variations are combined into higher complexes by their tempo and expression relation. Variation I and II bring an expression and tempo contrast in the form of the opening meditative monophonic line and the following virtuoso part of a toccata type in a fast tempo. Variation III is at a low dynamic level and it is

²⁸ The tonal vagueness and instability as a result of the collision of the melodic and chord (traditionally the third) layer and transposition of music ideas are analysed by Rupprecht (1996, 332–337).

based on the urgent repetition of the double-tone accompaniment with the melodic line in bass. Variation IV remains in this restless position with the rambling groups of tones and brisk dynamic contrasts. The two previous variations are completed with faster Variation V with marching rhythms. Variation VI returns to the expression of Variation I and reflected melody is composed in the homophone with changing dreamy chord passages and flageolets. Variation VII is an extension of the foregoing, anticipating the final song by the melodic line in the tremolo and the bass counter-voice. This is followed by Part VIII, Passacaglia (a variation form in variations). The composition is concluded with the citation of Dowland's song in pianissimo. The aforementioned theses are supported with diagrams of the individual parts: I. Musingly, II. Very agitated, III. Restless, IV. Uneasy, V. March-Like, VI. Dreaming, VII. Gently rocking, VIII. Passacaglia (Slow and quiet).

Britten's compositional approach to the ayre *Come, heavy sleep* is outlined with several analytical surveys. The example below presents a section of Britten's Variation I, in which the interval movement of Dowland's ayre in transposition is reflected by a monophonic line.

There are variation extensions with musical ornaments, rhythmic differentiation of triplets, dotted rhythm or sixteenth tonal groups. The symbolic intervals (minor second, perfect fourth) are preserved:



Another example is a section of the second part of Dowland's ayre in Britten's transcription (*Nocturnal*, bars 11–13), once again, it contains perfect fourth in the main melody and a new rhythmic formation of the accompaniment part with a marching character in the form of quarter, two sixteenth values and two eighths:



Britten elaborates the cited section specifically in Variation I (see below, bars 17–19). The melodic line of the top voice repeats the descending fourth by the fading marching rhythm in F. Opposite, there is a chord accompaniment in E major of the tertiary construction with the rhythmic support of the soprano movement (the rhythmic cell is developed independently as a march in Variation V):



In Passacaglia,²⁹ Britten turns to the accompanying voices of Dowland’s ayre. Another example shows the beginning of Part VIII (bars 1–2) where the ostinato line in the bass (ground bass) is analogic to the descending figure of the top voice of the lute part of Dowland’s ayre (comp. above), above which a variation using the melodic outline of

²⁹ Passacaglia is a separate variation inside a variation composition. The meanings of the typically ostinato movement of the ground bass in Britten’s work in relation to *Simple symphony* (1933–1934) and other compositions are discussed by Vladimír Fulka (2013).

Dowland's setting of the words *Come, heavy sleep* is performed:



The melancholic expression of Britten's *Nocturnal* is significantly based on the ever-present reference to *Come, heavy sleep* and the related symbolic meanings. The inclusion of Dowland's ideas and their continuous presence in Britten's music at various levels of audibility achieves a continual reference to the musical symbolic of intervals and other identifiable musical procedures. Sleep is a latently present metaphor of death in the composition and the music continuously refers to that, reminds us of it and the final citation of the ayre is present in the first tones of the composition. The variation principle (reflection) is linked to the permanent presence of death and tuning into death, tuning into sadness. The melancholic reference is visible in the work with musical time and the tectonics of the work. In his reflection of Dowland, Britten lends an enriching meaning level to melancholy by the musical

elaboration of the described states of dreaming and sleep imagination. The melancholic expression is achieved by emphasising the retrograde reminiscence of death which comes out into consciousness and is continuously reflected and visualised.

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