Britten – Six Metamorphoses After Ovid

Context and Precedent

Benjamin Britten's *Six Metamorphoses After Ovid* were premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1951, outside, on a boat in a river.[1] The decision to hold an open-air premier, and the decision to write these character pieces for the oboe, are both worth unpacking. The pre-eminent oboist George Caird, who has written on this work more thoroughly than perhaps anyone else to date, argues that Britten may have been drawn to the *aulos*, an Ancient Greek reeded wind instrument, appropriate given his Ancient Greek programmatic subject.[2] Linda Ardito writes that the *aulos* was associated with Dionysian hedonism and used particularly for rowdy, celebratory occasion.[3] Britten's choice of the oboe could also relate to the old medieval categorical distinction between *haut* and *bas* instruments. As noted by Bowles, the Middle Ages utilised a 'dual grouping' of musical instruments dependant on tone colour and volume; between 'those instruments with a loud, shrill tone colour (*haut*), and those whose sound was soft, or low (*bas*)'.[4] The grouping of these instruments was entirely determined by function, with the *haut* instruments being used for outdoor, often festive entertainment.[5] As such, the classical, pastoral programmes of the *Metarmophoses* provides a strong logic for choosing the oboe.

It is also briefly worth discussing Britten's own relationship to the oboe thus far in his career, and to the specific oboist – Joy Boughton – with whom he workshopped the *Metamorphoses*. Britten had up to this point, written several notable works for solo oboe – *Phantasy Quartet, Two Insect Pieces, Temporal Variations* – making him much more prolific for the instrument than almost any preceding composer. Caird notes that Britten had asked Boughton what was hardest on the oboe, and proceeded to incorporate her answers into his writing, actively seeking the limits of the instrument's capabilities.[6] The oboe at the time was generally regarded as possessing a limited range, and a sound reedier and freer than what is commonplace today.[7] What might have been pejoratively regarded as a brash, undesirable lower register, for example, Britten actively sought in the climactic low Bb of *Phaeton*; what is undoubtedly most idiomatic across Britten's oboe writing, is extremes of pitch and dynamic. Of course, part of the reason that this composition deals in such extremes, is because its programmatic impetus does as well; '[Ovid's] great work describes a vast range of human experience'.[8] The extramusical inspiration being classical Greek myths, with florid and fantastical situations, would more likely produce music of extremities than would music constructed entirely from formal principles and internal development.

[1] George Caird. (2006a) 'Benjamin Britten and his Metamorphoses', p. 73.
[2] Ibid, p.76.
[3] Linda Ardito (1999) 'The Aulos', p.67.
[4] Edmund A. Bowles. (1954) 'Haut and Bas', p.119.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Caird (2006a), p.78.
[7] Ibid.
[8] George Caird. (2006b) 'Benjamin Britten and Ovid's Metamorphoses', p.61.

Formal Analysis

Another significant precedent for the *Metamorphoses* was Debussy's *Syrinx,* which, as noted by Caird, Britten would have certainly been familiar with.[9] While solo works for single-line melody instruments have great precedent in the baroque period, there are few in the intervening years, making Debussy's work (on the same theme as *Pan*) a likely influence.

Analyses of both *Syrinx* and *Metamorphoses* can be done programmatically without too much difficulty – Britten even includes pithy summations of his classical programmatic material at the head of each piece, while his musical writing is typically precise in its depiction. Formal analyses are more obscure by comparison.

Formal analyses of *Syrinx* abound, a result of Debussy's relative prominence. Musicologist Gabriel Navia provides a compelling Schenkerian analysis of *Syrinx*, which argues that the piece is an example of 'directional tonality' where the opening tonic (Bbm) is not established as a homing beacon to be returned to, but merely the place from which we set off toward our goal harmony (Gb).[10] With single-line compositions, however, harmony is always a matter of interpretation of horizontal lines, the creation of a theoretical 'harmonic backcloth', in the words of Edwin Roxburgh, which we construct through our analysis.[11] Navia, for example, deciphers the primary harmony of Syrinx to be Bbm due to Bb's 'extended emphasis' at the start of each melodic fragment, and the outlining of the Bb-Db 6th descent in the primary motif.[12]

Navia's methodology with *Syrinx* gives us a good direction for our analysis of the *Metamorphoses*. In Nicholas Cook's analysis of *Pan* he argues for something akin to Navia's "directional tonality". For Cook, the final section of the ternary structure provides a tonic cadence, which is established as a goal at the opening of the piece.[13] Cook analyses the individual tones, as opposed to key centres, around which the work is oriented. He creates a diagram (see figure 1) of the tones which are "cadenced" upon in the opening A section of *Pan*, and uses them to demonstrate a cadential directionality through A-B-C#, tending toward a D which is arrived upon in the final bars of the piece.[14] Thinking in implied chordal harmony we arrive at a similar conclusion. The opening bars of *Pan* suggest most strongly an A key centre, with an opening gesture outlining a I-V movement, alike the opening of a classical period structure, while also using a clear Ionian mode. At the end of b.3,

[9] Caird (2006a), p.76.
[10] Gabriel Navia. (2017) *Tonal Infiltration and Directional Tonality in Debussy's Syrinx*.
[11] Caird (2006a), p.76.
[12] Navia (2017).
[13] Nicholas Cook. (1987) *A Guide To Music Analysis*, p.259.
[14] Ibid, p.256.

the climactic G# seems to take the function of a leading tone, embedding A as our implied key centre.

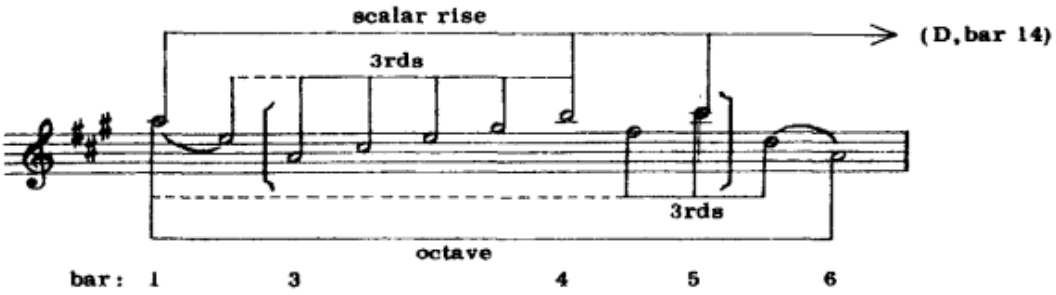

Figure 1 - Cook's cadential analysis of Pan, b.1-6[15]

However, as the movement continues, the repeated foregrounding of top C#s (see figure 2), the highest notes in the movement until its cadential final bars, imbues them with the power of a leading tone, suggesting D Lydian. Britten's choices over which notes to foreground alters our assumptions about the tonic. The piece as a whole outlines a directional movement from A-D, in the notes it uses and the keys it implies. Moreover, this analysis resonates strongly with Philip Rupprecht's observation that Britten's compositions make heavy use of 'tonal stratification'; '[t]he clarity of a single tonic is blurred,… by the presence within the texture of a second focal pitch'.[16] Rupprecht makes the observation specifically of Billy Budd, which Britten was composing at the same time as the *Metamorphoses*, and which Caird argues was a strong influence.[17, 18]

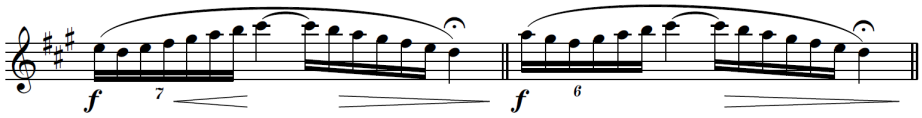

Figure 2 - C# foregrounding

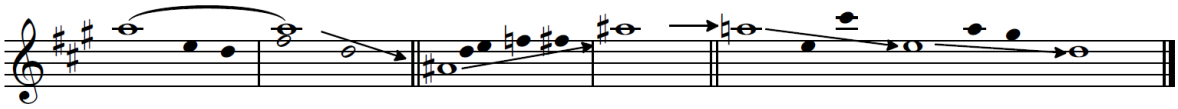

Figure 3 – Pan implied harmonic movement

Taking a broader scope, Caird makes the exciting observation that the six movements as a whole move from A (or D Lydian) to D, and thus mimic the outline of *Pan* alone, creating a sort of nested structure.[19] *Arethusa*, the final movement, begins, same as *Pan*, on a top A, but on the 2nd beat it makes its D ionian modality clear with a foregrounded G-natural. Its first phrase concludes on a top A, locally tonicized with the introduction of G#s, and thus creating that classical periodic I-V opening phrase structure, just as in *Pan*. Britten here is firmly centring the final movement in the work's tonic, in relation to the opening movement's dominant, all the while drawing subtle connections between

[15] Ibid.
[16] Philip Rupprecht. (1996) 'Tonal Stratification and Uncertainty in Britten's Music', p.311.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Caird (2006a), p.75.
[19] Ibid.

the two movements through common pitches and phrase structures. Britten is drawing his work to a close by returning to where we started, and this time firmly at home in the tonic (fig. 4).

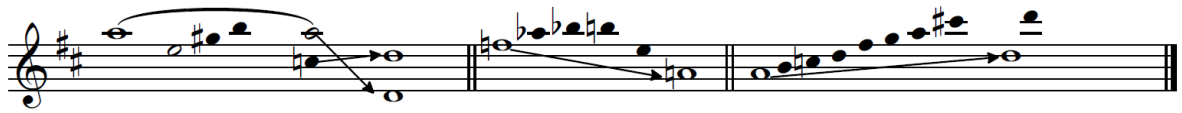

Figure 4 - Arethusa implied harmonic movement

The inner movements of the *Metamorphoses* draw upon similar themes. As noted by Stephen Hiramoto, each movement, *Bacchus* being the only exception, takes on a ternary structure, in which the B section is the point of metamorphosis, and the final A section is altered in hermeneutically meaningful ways to resolve some tonal tension.[20]

In *Phaeton* for example, the tension is between octatonic and diatonic harmonies. The movement opens with successive dominant 7th chords separated by minor thirds – C7, Eb7, A7. The character calms for the B section through an unexpected interruption of G7, followed by a middle section awash with diatonicism. At the return of the A section, however, the octatonicism outlined in the opening key centres is heightened through the direct use of octatonic scales (fig. 5).

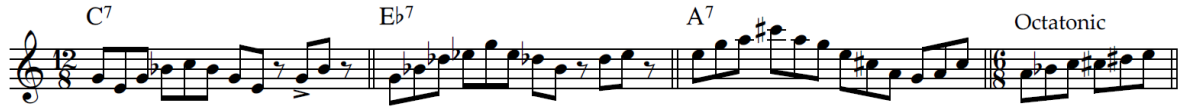

Figure 5 - Chord and scale outlines in Phaeton

In *Narcissus*, the two characters of Narcissus and his reflection are differentiated through the use of distinct key centres in distinct registers of the instrument, exactly what Rupprecht's 'tonal stratification' describes.[21] As the two characters become one, so the harmony and tessitura of the work converge, with formal and programmatical tensions being resolved in one motion. In *Niobe*, the opening music establishes slippage between key centres a major third apart – Db-F-A – another tension between tonal centres which is resolved in the reverent Db stasis in the closing bars (fig. 6). In *Bacchus* there is a tension between the tonic of F and dominant of C, which is made clear in the final bars, as the crushing fortissimo of the bottom Cs are contrasted with fleeting arpeggiations, the last of which outlines F major. The C is established as a tonic through its position at the bass of the tessitura, yet the music outlines F harmony, the opening harmony of the movement.

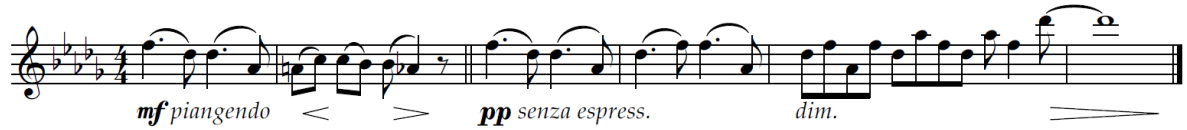

Figure 6 - Contrasting opening and ending of Niobe

Britten's *Metamorphoses* are defined by tensions between harmonic areas ("tonal stratification"); moreover, the music never returns to where it began, but instead, animated by these tensions, arrives somewhere new by the end ("directional tonality"). This general structure is programmatically

[20] Stephen Hiramoto. (1999) 'An Analysis of Britten's Six Metamorphoses after Ovid', p.23.
[21] Rupprecht (1996), p.312.

appropriate to the subject of metamorphosis, but also provides a coherent formal structure to the movements irrespective of their extramusical content.

Dranishnikova – Poem

In stark contrast to Britten, a famous composer whose works, even brief vignettes for solo wind, have received plentiful attention, there is near nothing written about Marina Dranishnikova, or her only recorded work, *Poem*. The piece was premiered in 1953 in Moscow, but the traction it had in the Soviet Union is completely unknown. It was rediscovered in the early 2000s by American oboist Marc Fink, and performed again in 2003 after years of obscurity. The work is dedicated to Vladimir Kurlin, solo oboist of the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom Dranishnikova reportedly had a 'tragic love affair'.[22]

Most biographical information to be gleaned around the piece is slightly fraught, given the severe lack of contemporary accounts of those involved. The work itself, however, is incredibly compelling, born out by its numerous recent performances and recordings by oboists around the world, and worthy of analysis on its own terms.

The title itself is revealing of Dranishnikova's approach to form. "Poem" seems to suggest a category of work, but one which does not come with formal requirements – like a "Fantasy" – and so permits great compositional freedom; the form *Poem* takes is of oscillations between two distinct sections – ABA'BA – the Bs being defined by fast, angular passagework. The moment-to-moment harmony of the music is lush and fast-moving, a sort of Rachmaninoff-esque post-Romanticism. The active left hand of the piano keeps even stable major triads awash with colouristic 6ths and 9ths; the music also makes heavy use of m6 chords as chromatic substitutions for dominant harmony (iv6-i/I), a notable musical feature throughout the work.

Ultimately the defining conflict of this piece comes, like the Britten, between two main key areas, Eb minor and E major. E major appears at the end of the opening A section, before being quickly eschewed for a return to Ebm/D#m (fig. 7). It reappears as we enter the middle A' section and becomes firmly established as a secondary key within the work. The second B section initiates an attempt to escape E major and re-establish our opening tonic. It appears to have failed when in b.114 E major returns in glory, but the apotheosis of the whole work in b.124 provides us with our solution; we climax on an Abm6 chord which permits us our final iv6-i cadence in Ebm (fig. 8). The pitch proximity – or voice leading economy – between E and Abm, with a single semitone separating the two chords, is the operative mechanism of this harmonic tension.

[22] Jillian Kouzel. (2023) *Three Programs of Oboe Music*.

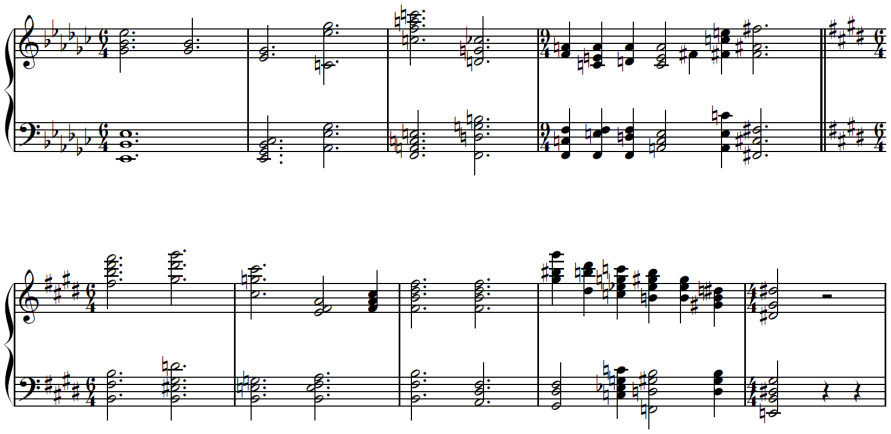

Figure 7 – Initial harmonic transition to E major (bars 20-28)

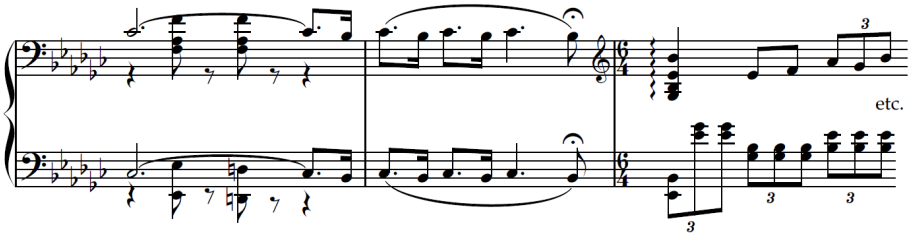

Figure 8 - transition back to E-flat minor (bars 126-128)

As such, Dranishnikova takes a more traditional approach to tonal relations than Britten, despite her free use of form. She establishes a primary and secondary key area, granted two that are quite remote, and finds a harmonic resolution which allows us closure in the tonic.

Researching the *Metamorphoses* had the most profound impact on the way I approached the works structurally. The observation that the ternary form is the structural means of demonstrating metamorphosis was at once obvious, and revolutionary, as it recasts all recapitulating material in a wholly new light. On the other hand, with *Poem*, a work I have played extensively, I had always thought of it as lacking coherence – I had never noticed the E major secondary key, or the ingenious way in which she resolves the harmonic tensions within the work; understanding quite how intentional and significant the harmonic choices are within this piece has completely reformed my approach. Going forward, there is something to be said, I believe, in finding a crux in every piece I encounter; a moment that seems to encapsulate or resolve the tensions which animate the music, and is key to a successful interpretation.

Word count: 2200

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