PICTORIAL AND POETIC INFLUENCES
IN BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S SEVEN SONNETS OF MICHELANGELO:
A MAGICAL JOURNEY THROUGH ASSOCIATIONS

D.M.A. DOCUMENT

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by

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Britten’s song cycle *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1940) was the first composition he expressly wrote for his lifetime companion Peter Pears, and as such, plays a pivotal role in both the personal and professional lives of the two artists. This composition heralded a renaissance in the lives of the two men and as a framework around which he could compose, Britten chose the poetry of the renaissance painter, sculpture and architect, Michelangelo Buonarotti. The specific poetry which Britten selected was written by Michelangelo for a young Roman nobleman, Tomasso Cavalieri. In addition to the poetry, Michelangelo drew sketches for Cavalieri of classical mythological characters. These *presentation drawings* were companion pieces to the poetry and in that context revealed deeply personal and secretive messages of homoerotic content. In composing songs which initiated his own romantic, personal, and musical association, Britten expanded upon Michelangelo’s artistic mythology and expressed similar messages for Peter Pears.
By examining the pictorial and poetic influences in the song cycle, this study documents a journey into a personal and artistic mythology for both the renaissance poet and the twentieth-century composer. It reveals amazing parallels between the two artists at the conclusion of their lives, a journey which began with the love sonnets of Michelangelo and the song cycle of Benjamin Britten.
To Kyle
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PREFACE

Before examining this document, it is important to establish certain criteria for what is, or is not, the intention of this paper. The focus of this study goes deeply into the emotional and subliminal expressions of the composer and the poet suggesting hidden, almost secret messages for the recipients of the art. In their truest context, these messages were extremely private, yet the composer and poet chose to put them in works which were to be displayed in public settings. The examination of this paradoxical situation, in some aspects, may seem intrusive into the private lives of the artists and especially in the case of Britten, something that he would have despised. Humphrey Carpenter quotes several sources on Britten’s resentment of analysis as “a kind of prying,” including Peter Pears and Graham Johnson.¹ Since I have the highest respect for these artists and especially for the composer, I have struggled with the dilemma of whether or not I am actually prying into the personal life of the man, or simply trying to understand the total scope of the music he composed. It is my conclusion that the music of Benjamin Britten is the most personal part
of the man, and in order to understand and perform his music with the
expression and appreciation that all good music deserves, the performer
must do his/her research and analysis, which leads directly to the
intentions of the composer. In a speech given in 1964, Britten stated:

Musical experience needs at least three human beings. It
requires a composer, a performer and a listener; and unless
these three take part together there is no musical experience.
The experience will be that much more intense and rewarding
if the circumstances correspond to what the composer
intended: if the St. Matthew Passion is performed on Good
Friday in a church to a congregation of Christians; if the
Winterreise is performed in a room, or in a small hall of truly
intimate character to a circle of friends; if Don Giovanni is
played to an audience which understands the text and
appreciates the musical allusions. The further one departs
from these circumstances, the less true and more diluted is the
experience likely to be.²

As a part of my inquiry into Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, I have
listened to several recordings of the work: the first recording of the work
by the composer and Peter Pears; the commercial recordings by
Britten/Pears, Graham Johnson/Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Michael Sells/Evan
Soloman; and non commercial recordings by Britten/Pears. I believe that
each time I listened, I was, as Britten outlined, partaking in a “musical
experience.” I have had the pleasure of performing the work, and again, I
felt it was a “musical experience.” Although I am not sure if those
circumstances corresponded exactly with what the composer intended, the
experience continues to become much more rewarding the more I learn about the composer and the circumstances of this composition. Britten stated that one needs to “understand the text and musical allusions” of Mozart’s music in order to avoid dilution of the musical experience. I would posture that the same is true of his music.

I believe that if the intention of the researching performer is to add his/her own contribution to the music through searching for those musical allusions and the circumstances of not only the text, but the musical setting, then Britten would certainly approve.

The speech referred to earlier, was given by Britten to the Aspen Institute for the Humanities on July 31, 1964, upon being chosen the first recipient of the Robert O. Anderson Aspen Award for the Humanities. In that speech, he also stated the following:

I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds and personal relationships.³

The roots, associations, backgrounds and personal relationships which had brought Britten to the point in his career where he was given the Aspen Award, were strong, plentiful, deep and rewarding. In the speech, however, he preceded these words with a description of one specific experience in California which had taken place over twenty-five years earlier with Peter Pears. In 1941, Britten and Pears were in a Los Angeles
bookstore where Britten found a copy of the *Poetical Works of George Crabbe* and first read the poem which would later serve as the story for his opera, *Peter Grimes*. Having read the poem and an article about the work by E. M. Forster, he realized that the roots he was lacking were in his native England. He returned to England and soon placed his roots in Aldeburgh, where he composed and lived until his death in 1976. He concluded this portion of his speech with this statement: “My music now has its roots, in where I live and work.”

The implication here is that the *roots* are the physical location of Aldeburgh, that is certainly where he lived, but anyone who has ever studied the music of Benjamin Britten knows as a composer, the work, although influenced by the physical surroundings, went on almost completely in his mind.

According to biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, Britten stated the following in an interview in the early sixties.

> Usually, I have the music complete in my mind before putting pencil to paper. That doesn’t mean that every note has been composed, perhaps not one has, but I have worked out question of form, texture, character, and so forth in a very precise way so that I know exactly what effects I want and how I am going to achieve them.

Therefore, in order to understand the true roots and associations of a specific composition, one must be able to somehow journey into the mind of the composer. Of course, this is impossible to do and creates a problem
for the scholar. But, what is possible to do is to examine all of the elements which are a physical part of the composition of a specific work and draw conclusions on what could have been going on in the composer’s mind. These elements include the background and creation of the poetry, the circumstances leading to the creation of the composition, and the music itself. In addition, one can piece together the non-physical conditions under which the composer wrote, the societal influences and psychological perspective, including emotions and stated beliefs, and draw additional conclusions as to the composer’s state of mind.

It is interesting to note that the wording of the citation on the Aspen Award refers to Britten as a “brilliant composer, performer and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods, and thoughts” as well as someone who “inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.” I believe that the roots Britten discovered while in America in 1941 are the awakening of the human feelings, moods and thoughts to which the Aspen Institute is referring, and perhaps no composition from that period offers greater insight into or understanding of the composer’s nature, purpose and destiny more than the Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo.
The intent of this document is to provide future performers of Benjamin Britten’s *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* with the results of my personal exploration which began with a performance of the composition in 1994. The investigation has been exciting and varied taking me from the concert stage in Ohio to the Royal Print Room at Windsor Castle and the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh, England. It has led me through the worlds of ancient Greek mythology and the Italian Renaissance to the Second World War in England and America. It has brought me to a greater understanding of the humanity and depth of expression which can come from true works of art.

This document is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the song cycle, and certainly not the definitive interpretation of the music. It is not intended as a treatise on the history of Michelangelo’s poetry or drawings. It is not intended as an definitive study of classical mythology. It is simply intended to entice performers to explore the wealth and depth of expression which are contained not only within this song cycle, but throughout the whole of Britten’s creative output.

The seven sonnets of Michelangelo are love poems. The seven songs of Benjamin Britten are love songs. They are personal expressions of emotions felt for another person, in both cases, another man. However, the
focus of this paper is not homosexuality, although it will center on the circumstances leading the poet and composer to create their personal artistic expressions, which, may be homoerotic in nature. The focus is art, specifically Benjamin Britten’s composition Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, and the roots, background, associations and personal relationships which provided its inspiration and make it unique.


3 Ibid., p. 21.

4 Ibid., p. 22.


INTRODUCTION

This document will explore the influence that pictorial and poetic elements of Michelangelo's art had on the musical composition of Benjamin Britten's song cycle, *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*. The document will examine Michelangelo's poetry and companion drawings in the context of his personal relationship with Tommaso Cavalieri, for whom the poetry was written. Since the subject matter of the drawings is rooted in classical mythology, the exploration will investigate the iconographic meanings of the drawings and their symbolic references to the poetry. The study of the poetry will be limited primarily to those poems which are a part of the musical composition.

Since the focus of this document is to discuss the influences of poetry and graphic art in Britten's composition, the document will include an examination of the formative environment which preceded the actual composition and the personalities dominating that environment, especially those of composer Frank Bridge and poet W. H. Auden. Although musical
influences will be discussed, the musical discussion will center on the setting of text rather than extensive theoretical analysis.

The song cycle was specifically composed for a young tenor named Peter Pears, and was the genesis of a lifelong union between the two musicians. Therefore, the discussion will explore the personal relationship between Britten and Pears and the magical link of this song cycle in the scope of their relationship. An analysis of the composition will illustrate the convergence of Michelangelo and Britten’s art. Conclusions will be drawn based on the musical analysis in consideration of the personal context in which the poetry, drawings, and music were created.

Inspired by Michelangelo’s poetry, Benjamin Britten used his aural palate to paint musical pictures for his companion Peter Pears, much in the same way Michelangelo combined his poetry with drawings to convey specific concepts of love for and commitment to Tommaso Cavalieri. These Platonic concepts expressed by Michelangelo and Britten are rooted in ancient mythology, their association provides the artists with a background on which their personal relationships could be founded, offering credence in a non-accepting society. Britten’s musical composition for Pears, like Michelangelo’s poetry and drawings for Cavalieri, was created during the infancy of their relationship, marking the
beginning of a magical journey through artistic and personal associations.

It stands now, not only as a masterful work of art, but also as a beautiful and powerful icon of their lifelong association.
CHAPTER 1

MICHELANGELO AND CAVALIERI

One of the most dominant figures of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) is perhaps best known for his prolific visual artistry and influence in the mediums of painting, sculpture and architecture. This master of the visual art also composed over three hundred sonnets and other poems during the course of his long life. This chapter will focus on selected sonnets and their companion drawings in the context of Michelangelo’s relationship with a young roman gentleman by the name of Tommaso Cavalieri. The relationship between the poetry, drawings and classical mythology will also be explored.

MICHELANGELO’S POETRY

In an examination of poetry written over four hundred years ago, one must begin with the filters through which the poetry has traveled to reach the modern editions. The edition Britten used was an 1878 translation
of the poetry into English by John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), which is now housed in the Britten-Pears Library in Aldeburgh. The texts and translations of the sonnets Britten selected for composition are found in the appendix at the end of this document.

In the publication, *The Sonnets of Michel Angelo Buonarroti and Tommaso Campanella* the translation of Michelangelo’s sonnets, according to Symonds, was:

Made from Signor Cesare Guasti’s edition of the autograph, first given to the world in 1863.¹ This masterpiece of laborious and minute scholarship is based upon a collection of the various manuscripts preserved in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence with the Vatican and other Codices. It adheres to the original orthography of Michel Angelo and omits no fragment of his indubitable compositions.²

Symonds acknowledges the scholarship of Signor Guasti, who, although he did paraphrase in spots, included on the same page, prints from the *Rime* published in 1623 by Michelangelo’s grandnephew, Michelangelo the Younger. According to James Saslow in *The Poetry of Michelangelo*:

The younger Buonarroti implicitly criticized his uncle in matters of both form and content by emending, sometimes extensively, what appeared to his orthodox academic taste as defects of style and by altering numerous phrases and pronouns, even whole lines, to make the poems’ content conform more closely to stringent Counter-Reformation values regarding faith and passion.³
Guasti's translations relied upon autographs when possible and as evidenced in Symonds translation, the pronouns and phrases have been corrected and the values regarding faith and passion occur in their original context.

Saslow suggests that the themes of these poems while being very grand and universal, also had very personal and particular motives and were taken quite seriously by Michelangelo. He sought critical advice from the most noted literary scholars of the day and revised them several times. During his life, they were well known and highly regarded. The Florentine humanist, Benedetto Varchi delivered two public lectures, the "Lezziioni," on artistic theory, using Michelangelo's poetic works, specifically Sonnet XXX,5 as highly praised examples of superior artistry.6 Saslow also suggests that the poet Michelangelo was not interested in the traditional matters of poetic form, but in the new, individualistic consciousness of the Renaissance era, which he exemplified: that of self expression. He states that Michelangelo's most significant contributions to the literature of the century were the new elements of:

  openness and complexity of form that are often praised for embodying the aesthetic principles of contemporary mannerisms as well as an intensity and directness of emotional expression that prefigure the baroque.7

Michelangelo's poetry was most often written for specific people. Among them, a young Roman nobleman, Tommaso Cavalieri (ca.1509-87).
Included in the many sonnets expressly written for Cavalieri are six which were chosen by Britten for his composition: XVI, XXX, XXXI, XXXII, XXXVIII, LV. The self expression of intense emotions for this younger man was a part of the material in these sonnets which was thought objectionable by Michelangelo the Younger because it depicted elements of what would in modern terminology be defined as homoeroticism.

In an article published in *Genders* magazine, James Saslow states:

During his (Michelangelo’s) lifetime, many important elements of the modern conception of homosexuality—as a distinct psychological construct and social status, requiring its own expressive vocabulary even if it sometimes had to be concealed—were beginning to emerge. He may not have thought of himself as “a homosexual,” but he was aware that there were such people, that many of his passionate declarations were taken as indication that he was one of them, that the objects of his affection required a language that violated gender norms, and it was both safer and less guilt-inducing to forgo action and conceal emotion.

The expressive vocabulary which Michelangelo chose, both to convey and conceal his emotions, was a combination of poetry and a specific genre of drawings which have come to be referred to as “presentation drawings.”
PRESENTATION DRAWINGS

In an article in *Studies in Iconography*, Judith Testa defines this "new" category in the graphic arts as:

Independent, highly finished works of art in themselves, complex and allusive in subject matter, they were never intended as preliminary sketches for projects in other media.\(^\text{16}\)

She states that these drawings are unique not only among Michelangelo's other drawings, but among Renaissance drawings in general. She concludes that they had both overt and covert levels of meaning and that:

These presentation drawings served as "love gifts," as expressions and even extensions of the artist's private sentiments and reactions. In order to perceive this meaning one must realize that the drawings were most likely created for a single recipient, one who already knew Michelangelo's emotional state from his letters and poems. Thus the same classical imagery and ideas that served to disguise the deeper meaning from the casual viewer would reveal that meaning to the informed viewer.\(^\text{11}\)

The imagery to which she refers is that of themes and subject matter found in Classical Greco-Roman mythology, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The single recipient of these "love gifts" to which Testa refers was specifically Tommaso Cavalieri (ca.1509-87). It should be stated that Cavalieri was not the only person to be the recipient of Michelangelo's drawings or even poetic expressions. Vittoria Colonna, the only woman
of great import to the life of Michelangelo also received drawings as gifts, but her role was always seen as a spiritual advisor and friend, and since the subject matter of those poems and drawings reflect that unique relationship, they will not be discussed at length in this essay.

Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), Michelangelo’s friend and a fellow artist turned art historian wrote a series of essays on the *Lives of Artists* (1550), one of which was about Michelangelo. It should be noted that Vasari’s account, although that of a good friend, was an “unofficial” biography. According to Saslow, Michelangelo officially “commissioned one of his disciples, Ascanio Condivi (ca: 1520) to prepare a biography, published in 1553, which was all but dictated by the artist.” In addition to the translations of Michelangelo’s poetry, John Addington Symonds also completed a biography of the poet in 1893, which in the context of this study provides especially valuable information. In Symonds biography, he quotes (in English translation) from Vasari’s work of 1550, in which he stated the following:

*Immeasurably, more than all of the rest, he (Michelangelo) loved Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a Roman gentleman, for whom, as he was young and devoted to the arts, Michelangelo made many stupendous drawings of superb heads in black and red chalk, wishing him to learn the method of design. Moreover, he drew for him a Ganymede carried up to heaven by Jove’s eagle, a Tityus with a vulture feeding on his heart, the fall of Phaethon with the sun’s chariot into the river Po, and a*
Bacchanal of Children; all of them things of the rarest quality, and drawings the like of which were never seen.\textsuperscript{13}

Michelangelo and Cavalieri met in Florence in 1532 when Michelangelo was fifty seven years old and Cavalieri was twenty-three. The difference between the two men's age is portrayed in several of Michelangelo's non-literary works created following their meeting, especially the above mentioned drawings which Michelangelo sent from Florence to Cavalieri who was living in Rome. The four specific drawings, referred to in several letters to and from Michelangelo and Cavalieri, are: the \textit{Rape of Ganymede}, the \textit{Punishment of Tityus}, the \textit{Fall of Phaethon}, and the \textit{Children's Bacchanal}.

These \textit{presentation drawings} are currently housed in the Royal Print Room at Windsor Castle. According to A. E. Popham and Johannes Wilde in their catalogue of the Windsor collection, all four drawings were probably created during the first year of Michelangelo's relationship with Cavalieri, which would date them between 1532-33.\textsuperscript{14} These drawings contain visual images which are alluded to in several of the sonnets, and the mythological characters presented have strong correlation to the two men.
MYTHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In the book, *Michelangelo, A Psychoanalytic Study of his Life and Images*, Robert Liebert gives detailed examples which indicate that Michelangelo had a lifelong infatuation for the beauty of young men. This infatuation manifests itself through the choice of Greek mythological figures as subject matter and offers great insight into the complex sub-text of Michelangelo’s sonnets as well as the hidden meanings of the drawings.15

GANYMEDE

The first drawing to which Vasari refers, and perhaps the most important of the group, *The Rape of Ganymede* (Figure 1.1) is based on the myth of Ganymede, son of the king of Troy, who was the most beautiful of youths. Zeus, desiring him as his cup bearer and bed companion, swooped down disguised as an eagle and abducted Ganymede. To console Ganymede’s father, Zeus assured him that his son would have immortality in the role of servant to the most powerful of the gods in addition to eternal beauty. Liebert concludes that the reason the myth gained immense popularity in Greece and Rome was because it afforded
religious justification for a grown man's passionate love of a boy. Testa
gives a different view and cites references by Plato in the Symposium as
expressing the idea of "the development of a love for absolute beauty, freed
from allegiance to objects, as a rising up from earth to more rarefied
regions," and, Dante in Canto IX of the Purgatorio in the "vision of being
born aloft by an eagle to the experience of Ganymede."

In his book Ganymede in the Renaissance, James Saslow states that
from medieval times well into the seventeenth century, the term
"ganymede" simply meant an object of homosexual desire, of course, in
some contexts it referred to pederasty, misogyny, conventions of marriage
and gender roles. It was also used as a derogatory term for a passive
partner, someone whose gender could not be determined, such as an
hermaphrodite. Saslow capsulizes the variety of meanings which the
myth symbolized and the way it was represented visually with the
following statement:

In 1435, Alberti, the first renaissance theoretician to discuss
suitable visualizations of the myth, implied that Ganymede
should be idealized with a smooth brow and soft beautiful
thighs. Exactly two centuries later Rembrandt's painting of
the Rape of Ganymede reduced the exquisite ephbe of
classical tradition to a crying incontinent baby who appears
vigorously to protest his abduction.
During the Renaissance, the neoplatonic concept of the myth was much more widely accepted and known in which Ganymede represented the more spiritual realm of the Christian soul, the mind, leaving behind earthly elements to ascend to a state of ecstatic contemplation. Testa quotes the Neo-Platonist Cristoforo Landino’s declaration that “Ganymede is the human mind, beloved of God, which is carried to the heaven by means of an eagle, there to contemplate divine mysteries.” Therefore, the result of a spiritual love between two men was the highest possible level of being, and according to Saslow, Michelangelo implied that it was “anagogic to the higher love of the (male) godhead.” Michelangelo would certainly have understood the myth in this particular spiritual context based on the influence of his spiritual advisor, Vittoria Colonna. In the Italian studies series entitled *Ficino and Renaissance Neoplatonism*, Dennis J. McAuliffe’s article *Neoplatonism in Vittoria Colonna’s Poetry: From the Secular to the Divine*, discusses the way she used this symbolism in her own poetry to express the desire to leave the earthly confines and be able to join it’s “winged soul” in the heavenly sphere.

Liebert suggests that the contemporary, neoplatonic version of the myth gave Michelangelo freedom to exploit publicly, the theme on a spiritual level while privately expressing his feelings and fantasies to
Cavalieri in the originally erotic, homosexual Platonic context which was a part of the myth’s roots.

It is important at this point in the examination to state that no evidence exists that the two men ever had sexual/physical relations. Cavalieri was later married and had two sons. In the context of their writings and correspondences, though, direct evidence exists that their relationship on a spiritual/psychological level went far beyond friendship and entered deeply into the realm of homoeroticism and love.

In examining the intent of Michelangelo’s sketch of *Ganymede*, Liebert gives the following detailed analysis of the work:

Michelangelo’s Ganymede, with eyes closed and right arm limply draped over the eagle’s wing, is enraptured as the eagle spreads his legs and buttocks. The figure of this athletic youth is a masterful rendering of the ecstasy of passive yielding to anal eroticism and the embrace of a more powerful being...Ganymede’s scrotum appears to have a vaginal cleft from which the eagle’s penis emerges. It is as though the penis were the eagle’s and had passed through the youth’s anal-vaginal canal. However, the fundamental element in Michelangelo’s choice of the myth of Ganymede is, I believe, the rewards given this mortal youth for his sexual surrendering to Zeus—immortality and eternal youth.22

In Michelangelo’s poetry, the myth is directly referred to in Sonnet XXX, which was written in 1534 and was addressed to Cavalieri. In the second strophe of the sonnet, (line 3), the poetry states that “with your wings, I wingless fly; with your spirit I move forever heavenward.” In Sonnet

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XXXII, which was written in 1532, just after their meeting and in the same year the sketch was sent to Cavalieri, the second strophe (line 4) again makes direct reference to the myth in the words “if in two bodies one soul is made eternal, rising to heaven on the same wings.” The elements of both surrender and the merger of two bodies rising to higher levels of consciousness are present in the subtext and clearly refer to this drawing.\textsuperscript{23}

Sonnet XXIV, the only sonnet which is included in the Britten composition that can not be documented as being specifically written for Cavalieri, refers indirectly to the Ganymede myth with the words “Love takes me captive and Beauty binds me” (line 7). Some authorities say it was written as much as two years before Michelangelo and Cavalieri became acquainted, but the connection of the mythological character and story of Ganymede to this sonnet presents a strong argument for Britten’s inclusion of Sonnet XXIV in his song opus. Saslow suggests this line of the poetry is an image which anticipates the second drawing for Cavalieri, the \textit{Punishment of Tityus} (1533).\textsuperscript{24} Liebert also suggests strong textual relations between this sonnet and the \textit{Tityus} sketch (Figure 1.2).
TITYUS

In his psychoanalysis of the artist/poet, Liebert draws several conclusions which provide a deeper understanding of the poetry and sketches, since Michelangelo's works represent, as indicated by Saslow earlier in this examination, "an individualistic consciousness of the Renaissance era: that of self expression."

The first conclusion is that Michelangelo's view of homoerotic love was as stated earlier, Neoplatonic, one which gave it the highest spiritual value and consciousness, contrasting sharply with his view of the degrading consequences of heterosexual love. The second is that of a somewhat masochistic tendency in finding pleasure in being bound or held captive, not ever having freedom, but in willing submission to a greater power. Liebert clarifies his points by suggesting that the Ganymede drawing cannot be considered apart from its companion drawing of Tityus (Figure 1.2). He concludes that the two sketches represent Michelangelo's vision of a "Sacred and Profane Love." He explains the myth of Tityus as follows:

The giant Tityus, a mortal son of Zeus, was one of the four notorious sinners tortured in Hades. His sin had been trying to rape Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis, as she performed a sacred devotion. Apollo and Artemis slew him with a volley of arrows. Tityus was then further punished by being stretched out over nine acres in Hades with his arms and legs

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pegged to the ground while two vultures perpetually devoured his liver—the seat of carnal desire. Thus Tityus symbolized the agony that debasement of the soul through sexual overindulgence was thought to deserve.25

Liebert suggests that in this context, the gift of the sketch of Tityus was intended to outwardly assure Cavalieri that Michelangelo understood that the love he felt, and the fantasies he enjoyed could not and would not move out of the precinct of the mind. That the consummation of these spiritual desires would move them to the realm of the debase mortal. In his examination of the Tityus work, Liebert suggests that Michelangelo took liberties with the tradition of the myth and in doing so programmed a well intended statement with the two drawings, revealing his innermost fantasies.

The fantasies revealed can be clearly seen in examining the drawing (Figure 1.2). The two vultures in the myth which devour the liver have been transformed by Michelangelo into one eagle, the same bird seen in the Ganymede sketch. Tityus’ right arm and right foot are tied to the rock, but his left leg is free from bonds and is relaxed. There are no scars from the bird’s pecking and the face is very ambiguous rather than fearful or full of pain. Liebert concludes that the relative freedom from external restraints has been interpreted as signifying spiritual rather than physical enslavement and with the facial expression given, the question arises that even though
Tityus is held captive, is he suffering at all? Liebert asserts that in both sketches, the body rotation of the human is at a 90 degree angle and is in a position of submission to the eagle in a passive and receptive pose. The conclusion is easily supported, with the additional elements in both sketches of the legs being spread and the frontal presentation of the genitals, that there is an underlying fantasy of sexual yielding to a disguised form. Testa suggests that:

The lack of genuine physical bondage undoubtedly signifies that Tityus's bondage is spiritual and emotional rather than physical. But we may go even farther than this. His sufferings are undergone voluntarily; he offers himself to the eagle in a pose of receptivity and passivity. He appears to watch the eagle's attack on him with intense interest, a visual counterpart to the passionate introspection of the poem quoted above.

The right arm is the only limb which is actually bound. A close examination reveals that Tityus appears to be extending his left arm up under the wing of the eagle, and rather than pushing it away, seems to be secretly reaching out to it.

The poetry again reflects these sentiments directly as in Sonnet XXX with the words "My will is in your will alone, at your wish, I blush or turn pale; turn cold in the sunshine or hot in the coldest midwinter" (lines 4-8). The previous reference to Sonnet XXIV referred to "being held captive by
beauty and bound by love.” Sonnet XXXI gives the strongest reference with the words:

If, therefore, I cannot avoid these blows, nay even seek them, since it is my fate, who is the one that stands always between joy and grief? If to be happy I must be conquered and held captive, no wonder then that I, unarmed and alone, remain the prisoner of a Cavalier in arms.29

This quote even makes direct reference to the “Cavalier”, Tommaso Cavalieri! Testa concludes that Tityus symbolizes, “The agonies of sensual passion, in contrast to the ecstasy of Platonic love symbolized by Ganymede.”30

PHAETHON

The third drawing in the series is the Fall of Phaethon. The drawing exists in three renderings, with the third, (Figure 1.3) being the most complete. Erwin Panofsky, in his article The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo, states that there is only one possible allegorical explanation of the myth of Phaethon:

The fate of the daring mortal who had tried to defy human limitations was held to symbolize the fate of every temerarius, presumptuous enough to overstep the bounds of his allotted “state and situation.”31
Figure 1.3: Fall of Phaethon
This temerity or presumptuousness is often referred to as *hubris* in myth and always includes suffering for any mortal foolish enough to assume that they can be god-like in any way.

The story of *Phaethon*, comes from Ovid and is the tale of the mortal son of the sun god, Phoebus. The legend describes Phoebus riding through the sky in his chariot of fire drawn by four horses from the east to the west in order to provide light for the day. Phaethon does not believe his mortal mother when she tells him that Phoebus is his father and goes to Phoebus’ palace to ask him whether or not he truly is his son. Phoebus confirms the genealogy and in an effort to prove that he is being truthful, offers to grant his son any wish that he may have. The bold boy asks to drive his father’s chariot of fire. Phoebus, knows that the powerful horses, which are firmly under the god’s control, are far too powerful for the boy to dominate and therefore pleads with him to ask for anything else. The boy insists on this wish and since the father has pledged by the river Styx, he must keep the promise.

The next morning Phaethon boldly begins his ride across the sky and immediately looses control of the wild stallions. The chariot being out of control and off the regular course, dips too close to the earth, and therefore, burns people, the land, and dries up the water. Earth pleads
with Jove (Zeus) to intervene and save her. He does so by hurling a thunderbolt at the youth thus killing him. The chariot, horses and youth are sent plummeting to the earth and into the river Eridanus. The boy's mother and mourning sisters, as well as his cousin (Cygnus the swan) watch from the banks.

Testa suggests that for Michelangelo, this drawing represents "the fall of a presumptuous lover." She states that in several of the letters between the two men, Michelangelo referred to himself as "presumptuous." Panofsky summarizes that Michelangelo could:

Compare his imaginary presumptuousness with the temerity of Phaethon and at the same time, could liken the deadly fire of his passion to the flaming thunderbolts by which Phaethon had perished.

In Ovid's account of the story, the epitaph on Phaethon's burial stone reads:

Here Phaethon lies, who drove his father's chariot: If he did not hold it, at least he fell in splendid daring.

Liebert suggests that this drawing is symbolic of the presumptuousness of expressing the forbidden sentiments of the Ganymede drawings and that he has perhaps overstepped the boundaries of his own state and situation.

The drawing is divided into three distinct planes, the highest level being that in which the god passes judgment. The middle level is the state in which the presumptuous Phaethon suffers his fall, and the lowest level is
the final resting place of the proud mortal, which is full of suffering.

Testa suggests that this three dimensional form is interrelated to the previous drawings:

*Zeus sits astride an eagle that is a worthy companion to the eagles of the Tityus and Ganymede drawings. And most significantly, Phaethon's pose has become yet another variation on the poses of Tityus and Ganymede: the same twist to the torso and again the nearly identical position of the legs.*

I would add that a variation of the pose is also represented in Zeus astride the eagle and in Eridanus, at the bottom of the sketch. Michelangelo's poetry certainly eludes to this symbolism in Sonnet XVI, which was written in 1534 and also addressed to Cavalieri. It states:

*Just as there is a high, a low, and a middle style in pen and ink, and as within the marble are images rich and poor, according as our fancy knows how to draw them forth:*

*so within your heart, dear love, there are perhaps, as well as pride, some humble feelings: but I draw thence only what is my desert and like to what I show outside on my face.*

*Whoever sows sighs, tears and lamentation (Heaven's moisture on earth, simple and pure, adapts itself differently to different seeds) reaps and gathers grief and sadness:*

*Whoever looks on high beauty with so great a grief reaps doubtful hopes and sure and bitter pain.*

The figure represented here is on all three levels: one in the heavenly sphere, much like Ganymede; another like Tityus bound to the earth; and
the third, Phaethon, is caught in the middle, "reaping" that which he has sown.

Liebert suggests that Cygnus, as a swan, receives prominent treatment on the lower level of this drawings because he represents the metamorphic result of a paralyzing grief. According to myth, Cygnus was Phaethon’s cousin and spiritual brother, who abandoned his kingdom to lament his lost kinsman at the river bank. For this abandonment, he was turned into a swan and remained on the water, forever distrusting the skies from which Jove (Zeus) had unjustly hurled his thunderbolt.38 This drawing, when considered in the context of Ganymede and Tityus, is a statement of choices and the rewards or punishments based on those choices. Although Phaethon was presumptuous enough to attempt to drive the chariot of a god, he at least, "fell in splendid daring." Perhaps Michelangelo’s intent was to state that on all levels of love, there are consequences for the actions taken and that the choices must be made carefully, since the individual has to endure those consequences.
CHILDREN'S BACCHANAL

The final drawing in this series is the *Children's Bacchanal* (Figure 1.4). This picture depicts numerous young boys commonly referred to as *putti* in Renaissance art, taking part in a variety of activities. In the bottom left hand corner of the picture, one putto sucks on the breast of an old satyr while the other appears to be offering himself to the satyr. In the bottom right hand corner, several putti interact with a male figure which appears to be in a drunken state. In the upper left hand corner, the putti are tending a large cauldron in which an animal is cooking and in the upper right hand side, they are working a grape press. As the wine flows from the press, one putto captures it in a bowl while another urinates into the same bowl. In the center of the drawing are several putti carrying a horse. One of the putti seems to be fondling the horse’s penis.

The inclusion of this drawing is perplexing for most writers on the subject. Testa does not even include it in her discussion. Saslow describes it as an “encounter with the artist’s fantasies about sexual desire and a glimpse of more obvious expression of his feelings of disapproval and guilt.” He explains that the children “descend from a long tradition in which the nude putto, a miniature Cupid (Eros), stood for unconscious
Liebert suggests that this drawing has no mythological source. However, one could argue that it is in fact based on the Dionysiac rituals found in Euripides’ play, *The Bacchae*.

In Greek tragedy, Dionysus was the patron god. He was the son of Zeus, and symbolized the liquids of human life: water, blood, and semen. He is also referred to as Bacchus, the god of wine. The ritual of the Bacchae, the followers of Dionysus, was misinterpreted by some to symbolize nothing more than a drunken orgy. Perhaps the most convincing argument in the context of this discussion is that Dionysus was actually non sexual. In its purest context, Euripides paints the Bacchae’s ritual as a communion with the god in which moral judgments, such as those which were made about the proper activities of sex, were not even considered a factor. The purpose of the ritual was not sex, it was sharing in a part of the god. Through this interaction, the Bacchae were lost to themselves and were one with the god, thus, having the wisdom of the god. This wisdom was available only to those who “died”. Therefore, in this Greek tragedy, Dionysus symbolized eternal life. The tragic figure in the story was Pentheus. Driven by lust, he denied the will of the god, and was destroyed as a result. One of the characters, Tiresias makes the argument that self-control is a question of one’s own nature and character. During
the play, Dionysus is bound and imprisoned by Pentheus, but since he cannot be bound by mortals, he is transformed into an animal and escapes, specifically a bull, the symbol of virility. As a result of this metamorphosis, Dionysus is often portrayed in the image of an animal.

In Michelangelo’s drawing several elements of the Dionysiac ritual can be found. One element of the story is the presence of the satyrs, who stood for sexual freedom and the erotic drive of life. The scene with the wine is a perfect example of the way the fluid of life flows into and out of mortals. Perhaps the most focal point of the drawing, the horse in the center, is the presence of the god himself in a disguised form. Compare this horse in the Children’s Bacchanal, with the center horse in the Phaethon drawing. It is a mirror image of that horse. This certainly would connect the drawing with the others. If it were the disguised form of a god, then it could also be the disguised form of Ganymede or Tityus. A close examination reveals that the front right leg, like that of Tityus’ right arm, is bound. All other limbs are free. This horse figure also has the hoof of the satyr or a goat, which gives it the symbolism of sexual freedom.

Therefore, once again, the drawing contains the neoplatonic concept that the spiritual communion was more important than the physical
fulfillment, but at the same time, gives justification for willfully giving oneself to the ecstasy of physical abandonment and pleasure.

Liebert suggests that for Michelangelo, the content of the Bacchanal is a personal narrative, it is a form of his own mythology.\textsuperscript{4} One can conclude that the same is true for all four drawings. Michelangelo used the vehicle of myth to escape his own societal and emotional constraints and freely express to Tommaso Cavalieri, feelings which he could not express with the words alone. Through the combination of prose and visual representation, he created his own distinctive mythology, connecting himself and Cavalieri to the ancient Greek society, metaphorically articulating his desires for their relationship. Allegorically stating emotions which society would not allow him to express literally.

The next chapter will examine a similar use of personal mythology in the world of Benjamin Britten and his friend W. H. Auden four hundred years later, and the resulting effect upon the creative output of Britten.

\textsuperscript{1} John Addington Symonds, \textit{The Sonnets of Michel Angelo Buonarroti and Tommaso Camparella}. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1878), p. 3. The publication is footnoted in Symonds translation as "Le Rime di Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pittore. Scultore e Architetto, cavate dagli Autografe e pubblicate da Cesare Guati, Accademico della Crusca. In Firenze, per Felice le Monnier. MDCCCLXIII".

\textsuperscript{2} Ibid.

4 Symonds notes these as "Lezione di Benedetto Varchi sopra il sottoscritto Sonetti di Michelangelo Buonarroti, fatta da lui pubblicament nella Accademia Fiorentina la Seconda Domenica di Quaresima l'anno MDXLVI." p. 5.

5 The numerical indicators given to the poetry varies between the many authorities on the subject and for the sake of clarity, the numerical references used in this essay will be that of John Addington Symonds.

6 Op. Cit., Saslow, p. 121. The lectures of Varchi were published in 1550.

7 Ibid., p. 7.

8 According to Saslow: Sonnets XXXII and LV were included in a letter sent to Cavalieri dated August 5, 1532; Sonnet XXXI, containing direct reference to Cavalieri in the text was probably written in 1533; Sonnets XXX, XVI, and XXXVIII, are all addressed to Cavalieri and believed to have been written in 1534. The seventh sonnet Britten chose, XXIV, is believed to have been written in 1529-30 according to Saslow. He also notes on page 121 of his translations, that it anticipates Michelangelo's drawing for Cavalieri of The Punishment of Titus (1532-3). This would offer a strong argument for Britten's inclusion of the poem in his composition.


11 Ibid., p. 65.


23 The scholar who is referred to most often when associating the words of Michelangelo's poetry to iconographic representations is Edwin Panofsky. Liebert, Saslow and Testa all refer to his writings on the subject.


26 Ibid., p. 279.

27 Ibid., p. 283.


29 Translations, poem XXXI lines 7-12.


37 Translation by Peter Pears.


CHAPTER 2

INFLUENCES IN BRITTEN’S LIFE

Benjamin Britten completed the song cycle *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* while he was in Amityville, New York on October 30, 1940. He was only twenty-six years old and was enjoying moderate success as a composer and performer. Although he was in America when the composition was completed, the personalities and environmental factors which were most influential in his creative process were English.

This chapter will focus on the formative environment which preceded Britten’s composition of the song cycle. The examination will discuss the early musical influences in Britten’s life including those of his mother and composer Frank Bridge. The discussion will also explore the influence of poet W. H. Auden on Britten’s understanding of poetry and sexuality. In addition, this chapter will investigate Britten’s abilities as a young “visual” artist and the effect visual conceptualization had on his early musical compositions.
EARLY INFLUENCES

Edward Benjamin Britten was born on November 22, 1913 in Lowestoft, England, the festival day for the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia. His father, Robert (1877-1934) was by trade a dentist. His mother, Edith (1872-1937) was an amateur singer, who was the first musical influence in the boy’s life. Britten’s sister Beth recalls that while pregnant with each of her children their mother had particular cravings, for her it was sewing and Beth later became a seamstress. With Benjamin, she craved music.¹

Britten’s mother was the honorary secretary of the Lowestoft Choral Society and she hosted musical evenings in her drawing-room where she sang the music of Mozart, Bach, Handel, Schubert and Schumann in addition to works by English composers such as Bridge, Ireland and Quilter. She also served as host for several professional soloists who would journey to Lowestoft for performances of large oratorios, such as Messiah.²

From a very early age, Britten was naturally attracted to the piano. His brother, Robert recalls that it was difficult to get any time at the piano alone with the young boy around, “We used to fight for the piano, and

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mother used to come in and say, ‘let Beni have it, he’s the little one,’ so he usually got it.” Many times, he would be able to pry his way to the keyboard by stating that he “had a thought” and needed to “try it out.”³ His mother first began to teach him the piano, but at age seven he was sent to Southoime, a school where Ms. Ethel Astles was the music teacher. While he continued his piano studies with Ms. Astles, he also began to study viola with his mother’s friend, Audrey Alston in Norwich.⁴

Britten also began composing at a very early age, from “trying out a thought” on the piano to actually writing down compositions. At age five, he handed his mother a composition and was upset by the look of “horror” on her face when he asked her to play it. Britten recalled this early attempt at composition as being visual rather than musical in concept:

I remember the first time I tried, the result looked rather like the Forth Bridge, in other words hundreds of dots all over the page connected by long lines all joined together in beautiful curves. I am afraid it was the pattern on the paper which I was interested in.⁵

Although composition was to become his expressive art of choice, he was also talented as a visual artist. His sister Beth stated that “everyone thought he would be an artist” and she includes one of his early works in her book, My Brother Benjamin.⁶ It is a drawing of The Flying Scotsman, which demonstrates that the six-year old boy possessed perceptive abilities which
allowed him to recreate this passenger train in great detail and with fluid motion.

At age eight, he was enrolled at the South Lodge Preparatory School, near the Britten’s home. Since they lived so close, he was allowed to live at home, although most of the boys boarded at the school. He was a good student and did well in most subjects, especially mathematics. He was also active in the usual athletic events such as cricket and was even named vice-captain of the team.⁷

According to Imogen Holst, Britten’s musical assistant for many years, no matter how involved he was at school, he always made time to compose. From the volumes of music he wrote during these years, there were vocal settings of poetry by Tennyson, Longfellow, Shelley, Shakespeare and Kipling as well as pieces for piano and strings.⁸ These compositions were not at all the work of an average child. One such piece, *Beware!*, with text by Longfellow was completed at age 8. Although it is only 12 measures long, the work shows incredible detail in rhythm and dynamics, ranging from the opening marking of *piano* to a climactic double *forte* in measure 10 to the closing triple *piano* in measure 12. Each phrase is given the expressive marks of *crescendo* and *decrescendo*. The
tempo is clearly indicated in Italian, “Allegro ma non troppo”, and in the final phrase the vocal line is given the marking “sotto voce”.9

This work demonstrates that as a young composer, Britten was fully aware of the multitude of details which were a necessary part of the communicative relationship between the composer and performer. It demonstrates that he was determined to give the performer all of the necessary details to perform the piece in the manner in which it had been conceived. Britten displayed the same creative detail in his music that had been demonstrated earlier in his drawing of The Flying Scotsman.

The composer, Frank Bridge, a friend of Britten’s viola teacher Audrey Alston, was in Norwich in 1924 to conduct a performance of his work, The Sea at the Norwich Triennial Festival. Britten heard the performance and was “knocked sideways.”10 This was indeed an important and revelatory occasion for the young Britten who rarely was able to hear “modern” music.

By age ten, Britten had produced what he called “reams and reams”11 of musical compositions, but he had received no formal training in composition. When Bridge returned for the next Norwich festival in 1927, Alston insisted that her friend should meet the young boy and help his mother determine the proper direction for the boy’s studies.12 Bridge was
hesitant at first, but graciously agreed to honor his friend's wishes. Once Bridge had met the boy, he resolved that he should instruct him in composition and that Harold Samuel should teach Britten piano. It was determined that Britten should continue his studies at home and travel to London to work with Bridge and Samuel.

LESSONS WITH FRANK BRIDGE

Britten's first lesson with Frank Bridge was on January 12, 1928 at Bridge's home in London. In his diary, Britten wrote that the lesson was "absolutely wonderful." Although Britten's first diary entry about the lessons is cheerful, he considered the lessons challenging and very serious, requiring intensive and sometimes exhaustive concentration. Bridge would send Britten to the other side of the room and then sit down and play compositions the boy had been working on since their last session. Bridge would then question the boy on whether or not what he had written was "what I really meant." Britten stated that Bridge performed "terrible operations" on his music, which he had so confidently showed him. He explained the process as follows:

He would play every passage slowly on the piano and say, "Now listen to this—is this what you meant?" And of course I
would start by defending it, but then one would realize... as he went on playing this passage over and over again—that one hadn’t really thought enough about it. And he really taught me to take as much trouble as I possibly could over every passage, over every progression, over every line.\textsuperscript{14}

Britten distilled from these grueling experiences what he called the “two cardinal principles” of Bridge’s teaching:

One is that you should always find yourself and be true to what you have found. The other - obviously connected with the first - was his scrupulous attention to good technique, and the business of saying clearly what was in one’s mind.\textsuperscript{15}

As a result of this focused approach to composition, the “reams and reams” of compositions which had preceded his studies with Bridge began to decrease both in number and magnitude. However, they began to increase in emotional intensity and depth of expression as can be witnessed by the \textit{Quatre Chansons Français}, which are amazingly mature settings of French texts by Paul Verlaine and Victor Hugo. These songs, completed at age 14, less than a year after he began his lessons with Bridge, also demonstrate an advanced technique for orchestration. Britten adapted quickly to Bridges disciplined way of writing, and it became the standard by which he would continue to compose for the rest of his life.

In an article in \textit{Composer}, “Early Influences: a tribute to Frank Bridge,” Britten stated:
...it was not only in musical things that I learned much from Bridge. It was of course, the first time I had seen how an artist lived. I heard conversations which centered around the arts; I heard the latest poems discussed, and the latest trends in painting and sculpture. Bridge was not intellectually oversophisticated, perhaps, although well-read and full of curiosity, but he had a circle of highly cultured friends, many of whom were artists and musicians.  

In September of 1928, Britten began his school at Gresham's Public School, which was located about fifty miles from Lowestoft. It was a different atmosphere from South Lodge where he was the head boy and well known. At Gresham's he felt terribly lost and small. Although the experience was punctuated with trips to London for his studies with Bridge and Samuel, it was not overly positive. It would, however, later prove to be a common bond with a very influential person in his life, a poet by the name of W. H. Auden, who had attended the school several years earlier.

AUDEN AND THE GPO FILM UNIT

In April of 1935, Britten was hired by the Film Unit of the General Post Office in London to write music for a new documentary film. He continued writing the music for several GPO projects including a film entitled Coal Face for which W. H. Auden, a prominent literary figure of the decade, had also been hired to contribute words to the soundtrack.
Composing for film, would prove to be an important creative process for it required Britten to further discipline his creative powers. Equally important and long lasting, however, was Britten’s association with Auden, the person with the strongest effect on the composer’s understanding of poetry and perhaps his own sexuality.

While at the GPO unit, Britten was required to compose and conduct music which was dictated by, and would succinctly fit with, the films. Sometimes this process required unusually creative means to produce sounds that imitated and suggested a specific environment or machine. In an audio tape presentation entitled *Benjamin Britten: The Early Years*, Donald Mitchell stated the following about Britten’s work at the GPO Film Unit:

> His inventive and peculiarly “graphic” ear enabled him to produce remarkable sonorities to match any given visual image.

In specific reference to the original sound track for the film *Night Mail*, he concluded that:

> Sight and sound, visual and aural images, words and music have become indivisible. The ability to match a scenario to its precisely appropriate musical form, sonority or musical gesture, *this* was the essential skill that Britten would need when the time came to move out of the film studio and into the opera house.\textsuperscript{17}
According to Colin Graham, the set designer for *Noyes Fludde*, Britten did not project a visual idea when explaining his musical ideas and the character of one of his new operas. However, he states that "it was important for the composer to know before composition what the original [visual] concept [from the designers] was likely to be." Graham continued that "As soon as something visually stimulating was in front of him, Britten started thinking about it in terms of the opera" and that once the set had been devised, "Britten kept it before him while he was writing."\(^{18}\) Graham stated that towards the end of his life, Britten confessed that he "had the sight and sound of the first production embedded in him and anything that clashed with that was an aggravation."\(^{19}\)

The refined fusion of "visual and aural, words and music, sight and sound" from the period prior to going to America would prove invaluable in the operatic compositions which were to follow. This fusion was also influential in his more intimate compositions, especially the song cycle *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*.

In the same audio presentation, Mitchell states that "Auden opened up many new horizons for the young composer: politics, psychology, and above all, English and European poetry."\(^{20}\) During the period of the 1930's Auden was extremely influential in Britten's professional and
private life. He was the librettist for several of Britten’s compositions and provided the young composer with an insider’s view of poetry, love and sexuality. Although as a child, Britten had written many poems, it was under Auden’s influence that Britten came to understand the powerful expression of poetry, especially in a personal context.

In his book Reading the Thirties, Bernard Bergonzi describes Auden as:

the leader of a group of poets who dominated English poetry in the 1930’s, who were socially and politically conscious in a left-wing way, were influenced by Marx and Freud, and wrote about public themes.\(^2\)

This group of writers included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, John Betjeman, John Lehmann, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, George Orwell, and Anthony Powell among others. Bergonzi states that the most strikingly homogeneous formative element for this group was that they were all educated in public schools and with only one exception went either to Oxford or Cambridge. The exception was George Orwell who joined the Imperial Police after leaving public school.

Donald Mitchell, in his book entitled Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936, suggests that out of their school experiences, Auden and the other thirties writers created in their writings:
A world which could effectively symbolize the repressive, tyrannical and narrow authoritarianism which stalked the corridors and infiltrated the classroom and even the dorm. It was a world, a set of values, that young radicals were determined to subvert; and the instrument of subversion was a corrosive satire - a by no means ineffectual means of demolition, especially of the bogus, the callous and the pompous...this school mythology was very much a private world, an in-world, the keys to which were possessed only by those sharing the same background.22

The utilization of such a mythology was serious and functioned as a method of questioning the values which had been dictated to them by society, especially those of the public school system. It became a vehicle of exploration for new values in a rebellion against the old, especially in the realm of sexuality. Due to his association with Auden, Britten was certainly close to that group and their private mythological worlds. According to Mitchell, he was “vigorously engaged as a composer in many of those theatrical projects in which anti-authoritarianism was a leading theme.”23

Mitchell distinguishes that although Britten had access to this private mythological world, he was not really a part of it. He participated in composing for other’s theatrical projects and seemed to enjoy the frivolity of the “inside-joke,” but was not as inspired as others were to use the satirical attacks for his own creative output.
Auden’s satirical viewpoint in this setting might appear to be that of a rebellious schoolboy, but in actuality, he was employed as a schoolmaster. Bergonzi suggests that Auden was well aware that “the schoolmaster could have an uncomfortably close relation with, even dependence upon, those he taught.” He states that although Auden was to become one of the pervasive literary figures of the period, he was considered “a boy among men, a man among boys.”

In a figurative sense, perhaps this schoolboy/master association best describes the relationship between Britten and Auden. It certainly would seem appropriate in the context of sexuality. In Auden’s *Letters from Iceland* (1936), he concludes with his “Last Will and Testament” which includes the following:

To my friend Benjamin Britten, composer, I beg
That fortune send him soon a passionate affair.

Auden was known as being extremely open about his sexuality and during the time Britten was in London, he spent much time with Auden in predominantly homosexual areas such as Soho. Auden encouraged Britten to come to terms with his sexuality which can be seen in a poem he wrote for Britten in 1936. The poem includes the following lines:
All that lives may love; why longer
Bow to loss
With arms across?
Strike and you shall conquer.
Geese in flocks above you flying
Their direction know;
Brooks beneath the thin ice flowing
To their ocean go;
Coldest love will warm to action,
Walk then, come
No longer numb,
Into your satisfaction.26

Auden’s request that fortune bring Britten a passionate affair was
soon answered and Britten did “come into his satisfaction,” with a man who
would become his companion for the remainder of his life, Peter Pears.
Although Britten would become comfortable with his sexuality, it would be
on a different level from that of Auden. It would not be flamboyant and
overtly promiscuous, but instead it would be subtle, honest, private, giving
and most of all, loving.

The personal mythology to which he had been exposed by Auden and
the other literary figures in London would serve as an invaluable example
of the way one could create a language of ones own, to express thoughts
metaphorically to those who understand its unique vocabulary.

It is my opinion that Britten also created his own mythology, not
from the language of the Audenesque writers, but from his experiences at
the GPO Film unit of fusing sight and sound, visual and aural images,
words and music, with the musical language and technique that Frank Bridge had helped him define and refine, that which was truly “in his mind.”

In the next chapter, the discussion will explore in greater detail, the personal and professional relationship of Britten and Pears, and the mythological language which would become manifest in the Michelangelo song cycle.


7 Ibid., p. 54.


9 Ibid., p. 15.


11 Ibid., p. 12.


14 Ibid., p. 17.

15 Ibid.
16 Benjamin Britten, "Early Influences: A Tribute to Frank Bridge (1878-1941)", *Composer*, #19, Spring, 1966, p. 3.


19 Ibid., p. 119.


23 Ibid., p. 105.


26 Ibid., p. 78.
CHAPTER 3

BRITTEN AND PEARLS

Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears (1910-1986) probably met during the time when Pears was singing with the BBC Singers in the mid-thirties. It was not until after the death of a mutual friend, Peter Burra in 1937, that their personal relationship began to develop into what would become a lifelong union. During this amazing association, Pears would become the voice for whom much of Britten’s vocal music would be written and the mouthpiece by which most of it would be heard. In this chapter, the discussion will focus on the formation of their personal relationship leading to the foundation of their professional/musical relationship which began with the composition, *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*.

One would not assume that death would play so important a role in the formation of a romantic relationship but in the case of Britten and Pears, it’s role is almost the catalyst. For Britten, the year 1937 started off
with the enormous loss of his mother in January. Although Britten’s grief was tremendous, his friend Basil Reeve stated that: “There was a sense of release. I mean, Ben’s personal life started.”¹ In March of that year, he had lunch with a friend who was homosexual. Britten recorded that “he emphasizes the point (very truly) that now is the time for me to decide something about my sexual life. O, for a little courage.”² The next day, he had lunch with Pears, Basil Douglas and Trevor Harvey, following a rehearsal of his compositions Lift-Boy and I loved a lass by the BBC Singers.³ The next month, Britten and Pears would meet again at the funeral of their mutual friend, Peter Burra, who had been killed in a tragic plane crash. From that moment on the relationship would intensify. It appears almost as if, with the death of Britten’s mother and later Burra, a process similar to pruning had occurred, and Britten’s life took a shape that it could not have without the painful loss.

The day following Burra’s funeral, Britten and Pears met with Basil Douglas in London for dinner. They discussed what was to be done with Burra’s belongings. It was decided that Britten and Pears would go to his home in Bucklebury and sort them. The trip seems to have been especially memorable for both Britten and Pears. They took the train from London to Reading and had to travel the rest of the way on Pears’ motorcycle. It
was a night of torrential rains and they were soaked by the time they reached Burra’s home. Britten recorded the following day that “Peter Pears is a dear & a very sympathetic person - tho’ I’ll admit I am not too keen on traveling on his motor bike!” ⁴ Pears recalled:

The nightingales were singing all night, and I couldn’t get to sleep because of it and one’s sorrow... that was when I got to know Ben. That was the occasion of my real meeting with Ben.⁵

By September of 1937, the two had decided that they would live together as recorded in Britten’s diary entry of September 8. In an entry on October 15, in response to Pears singing some of Britten’s compositions, he stated “Peter sings them well - if he studies he will be a very good singer.” ⁶ Mitchell makes the observation that in retrospect, this may seem like an amusing comment given the overwhelmingly successful career Pears was to enjoy. Perhaps it has greater meaning in the context of a comment made by Trevor Hardy in an interview with Mitchell in 1980:

In those days I could never conceivably have imagined Peter as an opera singer, or even as a lieder singer or anything, because he had a quite small voice. He was frankly pretty lazy and I very seldom ever heard him practicing or anything like that at home, and he didn’t seem to have any great ambition, and I think - I’m sure - obviously all what happened must have been due to Ben.⁷

The first letter in existence by Britten to Pears was written on October 24, 1937. It preceded Pears departure for America where he was
to tour with the New English Singers. In that letter, Britten states, “Yes - you’re lucky my boy. Next year must be the beginning of grand things. Singing & life in general...la vie grande in every sense.”

In March of 1938, they rented a flat together in London, while Britten was working on a mill at Snape. At this point in time, it seems that their relationship was loving, but Platonic. In a 1980 documentary film entitled A Time There Was, Pears stated:

It was established very early that we were passionately devoted and close. The word gay was not in his vocabulary...Ben thought that decent behavior, decent manners were part of a fine life. Gracious living, if you like. But “the gay life,” he resented that...He was more interested in the beauty and therefore the danger, that existed in any relationship between human beings - man and woman, man and man; the sex didn’t really matter."

By this time in their relationship, they had begun to work together musically. Their first recital appears to have been on February 17, 1939 in Oxford. Shortly afterwards, they would embark on a journey to America. Pears recalls that they went to America as pacifists, trying to escape an inevitable war:

Somehow things weren’t working awfully well in England, at least Ben didn’t think they were. And we were both pacifists, and we didn’t much see what we were going to do. Short of going to prison or something for a long time, which didn’t terribly appeal ...and so we decided as Auden had earlier - that the only thing to was to go to America."
Mitchell suggests that for Britten, perhaps the strongest influence in his decision to go abroad was Auden. In an 1960 interview with his friend, Lord Harwood, Britten stated:

I was very much influenced by Auden, not only in poetry but in life too, and politics of course, came very strongly into our lives in the late thirties. He went to America, I think it was in ‘38, early ‘39 and I went soon after. I think it wouldn’t be too much oversimplifying the situation to say that many of us young people at the time felt that Europe was more or less finished. There was this great Nazi fascist cloud about to break at any moment and one felt that Europe didn’t - nor did it have the will to resist that. I went to America and felt that I would make my future there.\textsuperscript{12}

They crossed the Atlantic ocean on the Ausonia which took them to Quebec. On a trip to Toronto in early June, the two stayed at a hotel on University Avenue. According to Pears, this is where he and Britten realized that they were in love with each other. Less than a week later, they crossed the border into Grand Rapids, Michigan where the two consummated their relationship.\textsuperscript{13}

By August, they were in Amityville, New York where they were staying at the home of the Dr. William and Elizabeth Mayer. Pears had met Elizabeth while on his tour in 1936. She was traveling with her two children to meet her Jewish husband who had already fled from Germany. It was in their home that Britten would complete his first composition for Pears, \textit{Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo}. 
Elizabeth Mayer would prove to be an invaluable association for the two young men. She had studied music as a young girl and had wanted to be a concert pianist. Unable to realize her own artistic dreams, she adopted Britten and Pears and supported them in realizing theirs. Britten stated the following about Mrs. Mayer:

She - is one of those grand people who have been essential through the ages for the production of art; really sympathetic & enthusiastic, with instinctive good taste (in all the arts) & a great friend of thousands of those poor fish - artists. She is never happy unless she has them all round her - living here or round about at the moment are lots of them.14

Included among the weekend guests was Auden. Among other attributes she possessed, Elizabeth Mayer was able to speak seven languages. Her facility with languages proved to be a valuable resource for Pears. Mrs. Mayer helped Pears prepare an English translation of the Michelangelo Sonnets. These translations were utilized in recital programs and included in the publication of the music. A copy of these translations can be found in the Appendix to this document (p. 138).

The genesis for this composition is somewhat uncertain. The first song was completed April 5, 1940 and the last October 30, 1940. The earliest mention of the subject is nothing more than that of a biography “Holroyd - Michelangelo, Life of-Duckworth,” written in Britten’s hand across the top of a letter from Auden dated November 1937. According to
Carpenter, Wulff Scherchen had a memory from the late thirties of “Ben complaining of a ‘mental block’ over a Michel Angelo Sonnet & putting it away. I’m sure I saw the Italian text.”

The biography to which Britten referred is by Sir Charles Holroyd, entitled *Michel Angelo Buonarroti* (1903). At the time the book was published, Holroyd was the director of the National Gallery. The book is an English translation of *The Life of Michelangelo* by scholar Ascanio Condivi. One passage in chapter ten states:

Michel Angelo wrote a number of sonnets and made many drawings for his friends, especially for the Marchioness of Pescara and Messer Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a noble Roman gentleman. For him they were generally subjects from Greek and Roman mythology, but for the Marchioness the drawings always represented episodes from the story of the Passion of our Lord. There are several drawings in the Print Room of the British Museum and the Windsor and Oxford Collections of this character and period. Some of the drawings made by Michael Angelo from his friend, Tommaso Cavalieri, are mentioned in one of Tommaso’s letters, dated 1533.

The letter apparently was from the Buonarroti Archives. It reads:

Unique my lord, -- Some days ago I received a letter from you, which was very welcome, both because I learned by it that you are well, and also because I can now be sure that you will soon return. I was very sorry not to answer at once...On that day your letter reached me, I was very sick, and in such a high fever that I was at the point of death, and verily would have died if it had not revived me. Messer Bartolomei has now brought me a sonnet by you, which has made it my duty to write. Some three days since I have received my drawing of Phaethon, which is exceedingly well done. The Pope, the
Cardinal de’ Medici, and everyone, have seen it. I do not know what made them want to do so. The Cardinal expressed a wish to see all of your drawings, and they pleased him so much that he said he should like to have a Tityos and Ganymede done in crystal. I could not prevent him from using the Tityos and it is now being executed by Master Giovanni. I struggled hard to save the Ganymede.  

If Britten did have access to Holroyd’s biography which contained this letter, then he certainly would of had knowledge of the drawings and the mythological characters which are a part of their subject matter. However, this biography does not contain copies of the drawings.

As has already been stated, Britten used John Addington Symonds translation of Michelangelo’s sonnets. Mitchell suggests that the copy he used had originally belonged to Marjorie Fass (1884-1968). Fass, a friend and neighbor of the Bridge’s was also an amateur artist who had studied singing in Italy. She must have given Britten the Symonds book before he left for America in 1939. Although there is no evidence to support such an assumption, she might also have been in possession of Symond’s biography of Michelangelo which does contain copies of the drawings mentioned by Holroyd and would link Britten with the drawings.

In examining the overall chronology of the work: the indication of the Holroyd biography on a letter dated Nov. 1937; the Symonds
translations being in Britten's possession prior to departing for America in 1939; and the completion of the song cycle in 1940; one can conclude that even at this early stage of his career, the creative process required a lengthy period of assimilation in Britten's mind. He digested Michelangelo's poetry long before putting it down on paper.

During their stay in New York, Pears had been taking voice lessons and had made such progress that by April 1940 Britten noted that he was "singing 100% better." In an interview in 1985 Pears stated:

He wanted to write a cycle for me. With my various teachings and learnings, I had I think improved a good deal and I dare say he was aware of that, and wanted to write something that would test me out. And I think he chose the Michelangelo Sonnets, not because of their easiness or understandability, because they were complicated poems, very intense, they're like the Shakespeare sonnets in that way...And I think they did suit me very well. I certainly enjoyed singing them very much and we performed them in private at Amityville, but we never performed them in public in New York.\(^{21}\)

The feeling that these were "private" rather than "public" pieces was also stated by Britten in a letter to Enid Slater, dated June 17, 1941:

I wish you could hear my Michael Angelo Sonnets - but there is no chance for things like that these days, either with you or over here. One only does them for one's own pleasure, and only occasionally can they be aired in public, I'm afraid. Still - one day....\(^{22}\)

By the time they had returned to England, Britten's attitude appears to have changed. In June, 1942 he wrote the following in a letter to Pears:
What a lovely person you are to know - I don’t know what I have done to deserve you! I talked about you to Margot the other night for hours - I don’t know what she thought of it! But I don’t care neither - I don’t care who knows. I am just going to write off to Basil to tell him I’ve done the songs for you.23

On September 23, 1942, the composition was performed at Wigmore Hall in their first public presentation, with Britten at the piano and Pears singing. The performance was an enormous success and the critics raved. The Times critic said:

The idiom contains nothing to perplex the listener and nothing to incommode the singer. They are, in fact, true songs, ‘fine songs for singing’ - or so Mr. Pears, who returns with his pleasing voice grown more robust and his skill consolidated by experience, easily persuaded us. For though they are big songs they made a singularly direct appeal.24

The critic from the Daily Telegraph wrote:

Britten’s sonnets made a much deeper impression, for even at this first hearing some rare and valuable aspects of the work were evident. The writing is lyrical and, at the same time, utterly unconventional. Every sonnet has an essentially musical core which is yet a true reflection of the poet’s emotion.25

In the New Statesman and Nation, Edward Sackville-West wrote:

I suggest that these are the finest chamber songs England has had to show since the seventeenth century, and the best any country has produced since the death of Wolf...One could take a phrase from one of these sonnets and refer it to Puccini...by sheer sense of style, working in close harmony with profound emotion, Britten has revived a whole tradition in these songs. The experience was indescribably moving - the more so as the
means are extremely economical. To have attempted to set these sonnets, which equal Shakespeare's in subtlety of thought and feeling, was a courageous act; it could only succeed supremely or fail completely.\textsuperscript{26}

By November of 1942 the Sonnets were recorded and released on a His Master's Voice label. Pears reported the success of the release to Elizabeth Mayer in a letter dated February 13, 1943.

We have recorded the Michelangelo for HMV and they have sold enormously. It is remarkable (or isn't it remarkable, Elizabeth) how much everyone loves the Sonnets. We do them to very simple audiences & they all say it is what they have been waiting for. They have made a tremendously deep impression.\textsuperscript{27}

Britten and Pears began to perform in concerts around the country, and on most of those recitals, the sonnets were included. Pears told Elizabeth Mayer in a letter dated August 6, 1944:

It's been a wonderful experience...people love Ben's & my work so much that it's always refreshing work - one receives, while one is giving. We have done the Sonnets everywhere, and always people take to them as if they had been waiting for just that very experience.\textsuperscript{28}

Perhaps Britten and Pears had also been waiting for just that experience. Lord Harwood stated: "Ben wanted, and found imagination and sensitivity in Peter's singing and approach, and from this he conjured what he wanted for his music."\textsuperscript{29}
With the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, Britten invoked and established a creative union which was bound not only by the expressive language of music, but by a private language of love. A union in which two extremely reserved men, passionately in love with each other, could openly express their hearts to the world and the world not only accepted, but applauded and marveled at the depth of the human emotion. The creation of these songs heralded the dawning of a new era of inspired artistry, a renaissance in the lives of two men.

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2 Ibid., p. 98.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 104.


7 Ibid., p. 520.

8 Ibid., p. 518.


11 Ibid., p. 127.


In the Britten/Pears Library in Aldeburgh, there is no existing copy of the Symonds biography or any other publication containing the presentation drawings. The staff at Windsor Castle was not able to find any records indicating that Britten had ever viewed the drawings in that location. The London papers indicate no exhibition of Michelangelo's drawings during the 1930's which is the most probable time Britten could have viewed them in London. A similar survey of exhibitions in New York during the period Britten and Pears were in America also revealed no exhibitions of the drawings. The most logical connection to the drawings then is that of Marjorie Fass, since she is believed to have been the source of the poetry. It is possible that Auden had knowledge of the drawings but a preliminary investigation into that prospect yielded no results. In addition, an attempt was made to connect the source of the drawings with Elizabeth Mayer. This investigation also yielded no results.
CHAPTER 4

BRITTEN AND WORDS

In a philosophical book entitled Feeling and Form (1953) Susanne Langer writes:

When words and music come together in song, music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry. Song is not a compromise between poetry and music, though the text taken by itself be a great poem; song is music.¹

Langer also states that “eminent aestheticians have repeatedly declared that the highest form of song composition is a fusion of perfect poetry with perfect music.”² In the music of Benjamin Britten, poetry is not simply an element with which music can fuse, but is the foundation for its creation, its genesis. This chapter will examine the ways Britten uses poetry and specific words in a poem as a framework around which he builds his music.

For Britten, creation began with the ingestion of the poetry. He did not simply read poetry, he internalized it. He selected poetry which expressed feelings which were parallel to his own. He investigated the historical context of the poem, for whom it was written, and what was the poet’s frame of mind. In the biography of Britten by Humphrey
Carpenter, the author includes parts of a conversation between BBC producer, Richard Butt and tenor Peter Pears. In the discussion which centered on Britten’s wide-ranging knowledge of poetry, Pears stated that it was largely a result of the composer’s habit, that when experiencing difficulties in his work, he would get up and wander about the house, picking books from the shelves at random. Long afterwards he would remember the poems encountered by chance on these occasions. It is my supposition that the long periods of “living” with the poems is what allowed him great ease in setting the poetry to music. As mentioned in chapter three, this long period from initial contact to musical setting is certainly true for the Michelangelo sonnets.

In continuing her synthesis of song, Langer writes:

What all good composers do with language is neither to ignore its character nor to obey poetic laws, but to transform the entire verbal material—sound, meaning and all—into musical elements....When words enter into music they are elements of the music.³

For Britten, assimilation of the poetry was not instantaneous, it sometimes took years for the musical concepts to formulate. The process was almost totally cerebral, it did not occur in the process of writing the music down. Instead, notation was documentation of an almost complete composition. The process was considered complete only when he could
hear the music conveyed through the intended medium, whether piano or voice, and appropriate changes, if necessary, were then made.

According to Carpenter, Britten stated the following in an interview in the early sixties.

Usually, I have the music complete in my mind before putting pencil to paper. That doesn't mean that every note has been composed, perhaps not one has, but I have worked out question of form, texture, character, and so forth in a very precise way so that I know exactly what effects I want and how I am going to achieve them.⁴

Eric Crozier observed the importance of form in this planning stage of Britten's work:

All I knew of him suggested that he thought first of each new composition in terms of forms, that these notions of form gradually became clearer in his mind, and that it was prolonged consideration of the formal units and relationships among them that finally gave rise to the melodies and harmonies that would express them most vividly.⁵

Crozier suggests that this formal planning went on partly while Britten was asleep: "He had considerable faith in the ability of his subconscious mind to solve daytime problems while he slept: perhaps partly for that reason his favorite reading before going to sleep was poetry." If as Crozier suggests, the formal planning was partly a subconscious activity, it would explain why Britten never liked technical analysis of his works. Crozier is also quick to point out that Britten did not
simply "wait around for the inspiration." Instead, he states that "writing music in his [Britten's] view was a process of hard, regular sustained work."\textsuperscript{6} Britten outlined his method of composition as follows:

I like working to an exact timetable. I often thank my stars that I had a rather conventional upbringing, that I went to a rather strict school, where one was made to work, and I can, without much difficulty, sit down at nine o'clock in the morning and work straight through the morning until lunch time. I don't say I always enjoy the work at that time, but it isn't a great struggle... In the afternoon... I go for a walk, where I plan out what I am going to write in the next period at my desk.\textsuperscript{7}

It might be appropriate at this time to state that Britten composed at a desk and not at a piano. He only played through a composition to make necessary corrections. Carpenter quotes another interview during the late sixties in which Britten stated: "I do the bulk of my work away from the paper, when traveling around, when walking, when driving cars, in trains. I actually go to the paper at a very late stage in the creation."

In reference to writing down the actual notes, Britten states: "My great aim as a composer is to find exactly the right notes to say what I have to say... to express what is... in my mind." Britten claimed to be detached from his subject matter when composing: "One is curiously uninvolved...It's all the result of previous experiences digested."\textsuperscript{8}
It is in this statement that I feel Britten offers the greatest insight into a true understanding of what gives his music such a soulful, and in my opinion, expressive quality: he chose specific notes to convey a specific message, one which was a product of his personal experiences. The results were assimilated in his mind into musical form. The element of poetry and specifically, the words contained in the poetry were certainly a large part of his experience. Poetry offered a solid framework, a form around which Britten could assimilate his notes, conveying his personal message with the inspirational and expressive words of someone whom he felt had effectively expressed their own thoughts.

In the forward of the book, *The Rape of Lucretia* which is a published symposium by the original collaborators for the operatic production, Britten expresses his ideas on the relationship between poetry and music, specifically in song and opera:

Many people think that composers can set any old kind of poetry to music; that any pattern of words may start his imagination working. In many cases that is true. Some of the greatest composers have found inspiration in very poor verse (see Schubert in many places), although not many have gone as far as Darius Milhaud in his "Machines Agricoles"--which is a setting of a catalogue. But I believe that if the words of a song match the subtlety of thought and clarity of expression it results in a greater amount of artistic satisfaction for the listener.9
Britten continues by describing the developmental process for the libretto of an opera. His criteria for suitability of text offers insight to his method of assimilation:

To be suitable for music, poetry must be simple, succinct and crystal clear; for many poets this must be a great effort, and the psychological epic poem to be read (or not read) in the quiet of the study is more attractive. I think they are wrong. Opera makes similar demands of conciseness on the composer. He must be able to paint a mood or an atmosphere in a single phrase and must search unceasingly for the apt one. But this is everlastingly fascinating and stimulating, as it must be to the poet. Similarly fascinating to him should be the problem of continuity, or degrees of intensity, development of character and situation.\(^\text{10}\)

It is therefore possible to conclude from these remarks, that poetry which is suitable for music, has form, definite structure which clearly conveys a specific meaning. Britten uses the term “simple,” which should not be defined as lacking depth of meaning or intellect, but more appropriately as unassuming or unpretentious. It should also be noted that for Britten, form did not necessarily mean adherence to the establishment, quite the opposite, it was self-expression. Britten stated: “My struggle all the time was to develop a consciously controlled professional technique.”\(^\text{11}\)

In a “Musico-Dramatic Analysis” contained in the book *The Rape of Lucretia*, Henry Boys suggests that “Britten’s technique in the setting of words reaffirms in both rhythm and melody, certain very important
principles which date back to the Baroque period.”¹² George Buelow describes these Baroque principles in an article on “Rhetoric and Music” in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. He explains:

Beginning in the 17th century, analogies between rhetoric and music permeated every level of musical thought, whether involving definitions of styles, forms, expression and compositional methods, or various questions of performing practice. Baroque music in general aimed for a musical expression of words comparable to impassioned rhetoric or a musica pathetica. The union of music with rhetorical principles is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Baroque musical rationalism and gave shape to the progressive elements in the music theory and aesthetics of the period. Since the preponderantly rhetorical orientation of Baroque music evolved out of the Renaissance preoccupation with the impact of musical styles on the meaning and intelligibility of words, nearly all elements of music that can be considered typically Baroque, are tied either directly or indirectly to rhetorical concepts.¹³

Boys suggests that Britten’s treatment of text follows these principles, and that melody and rhythm are not necessarily determined by the bar line, but by the shape and meaning, movement and repose, of the poetry. This brings both “emotional and logical values to the words.”¹⁴

In a compilation of essays on Henry Purcell, Imogen Holst, the daughter of composer Gustav Holst, included an essay written by Britten entitled “On realizing the continuo in Purcell’s songs.” In that essay, Britten defines Purcell’s form and elements of composition, which, although directed to the music of Purcell, can, for the sake of this
discussion also provide insight to the music of Benjamin Britten. He states the following:

In the form which Purcell perfected--the continuous movement made up of independent, short sections mysteriously linked by subtle contrasts of key, mood, and rhythm--the accompaniment must follow and emphasize these contrasts.¹⁵

One can conclude that since he is describing the realization of a continuo part, it is the melody which gives the accompaniment material for its figuration. He continues this thought and offers what might be called his concept of word painting by analyzing the well known song by Purcell, “Sweeter than Roses.”

Each miniature section of “Sweeter than Roses” has its own figuration; the cool arpeggios of the ‘roses’--in the short interlude, echoing the singer’s first melting phrase--the growing intensity of ‘warm’ and the firm cadential ‘kiss’; the ‘trembling’ is in oscillating sixths; high shivering chords ‘freeze’; ‘fire’ has lively crackling chords; trumpets accompany the victorious ‘love’, and dizzy whirling quavers ‘all, all, all is love,’ this perhaps sounds naïve, but Purcell has himself suggested some such musical pictures in the voice and bass parts, and besides he has provided in these given parts a firm and secure musical structure which can safely hold together and make sense of one’s wildest fantasies.¹⁶

When Britten refers to the figuration of Purcell’s music it is always described by the corresponding word, such as the “roses” arpeggios, or the cadential “kiss”. The same compositional use of this word painting is found
in the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* and will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

Before examining the music of this composition, some comments are in order about Britten’s preparation for setting these texts. Since the text of the sonnets is in Italian, Britten examined that text carefully for proper emphasis and stress of the natural poetic line, something which would not have been required if he were setting his native English language. In Britten’s copy of Symonds translations, he performed a scansion of the Italian text on six of the seven sonnets he set to music. The exception is Sonnet XXXVIII, which has absolutely no markings in the poetry. This is the fifth song, set as a serenade in which the piano part imitates a guitar. There is no indication why this sonnet was omitted from the scansion process.

The other sonnets all contain markings which designate the stress of each metrical foot above the poetry. There is nothing unusual about any of these markings for the remaining sonnets with the exception of Sonnet XXIV. Musically, this sonnet is set with sections of the vocal part unaccompanied and Britten’s treatment of the scansion is more detailed. (Figure 4.1) In the first four lines of the scansion, Britten designates an
unstressed syllable on the words *specchia, no', suo*. In context of the poetic rhyme, these words would normally have been stressed.

\[ \text{Spirto ben nato, in cui si specchia e vede} \]
\[ \text{Nelle tuo belle membre oneste e care} \]
\[ \text{Quante natura e 'l ciel tra no' può fare,} \]
\[ \text{Quand' a null' altra suo bell' opra cede:} \]

= this symbol indicates un-stress in markings

**Figure 4.1: Text of Sonnet XXIV lines 1-4**

When compared with the way he set the text musically, (Figure 4.2) it is clear that Britten’s scanion dictated the way he set these particular syllables. For example, the first syllable of both *spirto* and *nato* are accented in the poetic scanion and set on the strong beats of the musical measure, beats one and three respectively. In the next phrase, the word *specchia*, meaning to be reflected in as if in a mirror, and *vede* meaning to be seen, although similar in meaning have a distinctly different musical setting. From the scanion, Britten signifies a greater emphasis on the more direct word *vede* or *seen* and de-emphasizes the indirect word *specchia* or *reflected* (Figure 4.2).
Britten also distinguishes these two words rhythmically so that *specchia* is on the weak musical beat of two and gives it a shorter duration of only a dotted eight note while he sets *vede* on the stronger beat of 3 and divides the duration of the word into two whole beats.

Although this is one small example of the distinctive decisions Britten makes when setting text, it demonstrates that he had great facility in painting the subtle contrasts in meaning and rhythm which he so admired in the music of Henry Purcell. It also demonstrates as Britten stated in his preface to *The Rape of Lucretia*, that he took care to insure that the words of the song did match the subtlety of thought and clarity of expression,
even in a foreign language, so the results would bring a greater amount of artistic satisfaction for the listener.²⁰

2 Ibid., p. 153.
3 Ibid., p. 150.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., p. 200.
10 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 An excellent and detailed analysis of the poetic form of the Michelangelo Sonnets is available in Vicki Pierce Strother's 1994 dissertation from the University of North Texas. It is entitled: *Form and Meaning in Benjamin Britten's Sonnet Cycles*.
18 Britten's copy of the Symonds translation is currently housed in the Britten/Pears Library. Examination of that book in preparation for this discussion, revealed very few markings other than the scansion. The first exception is found on the inside cover at the back of the book which bears the marking of XXII and XXIV. This is interesting that of these two sonnets, Britten chose to set XXIV, and not
XXII, especially since it is the only sonnet in the song cycle not expressly written for Cavalieri. Sonnet XXII contains much stronger wording about the physical embrace of the beloved, words whose meanings may have been too direct for the composer (See Appendix: Supplementary Sonnets). The second exception to markings other than the scansion is found on the word *membre* of Sonnet XXIV. Britten apparently struck through the letter “e” in the word *membre* and replaced it with the letter “a” in the margin. (See note #19). The only other sonnet Britten considered for the composition is Sonnet LIX. The first three words of this sonnet are barely visible on a discarded sketch of a song. The Britten/Pears library has this sketch on microfilm. The text of this sonnet is also included in this document in the Appendix.

19 This scansion is taken from Britten’s copy of the Symonds translations. The second line of the example contains the words “nelle tuo belle membre.” Britten struck out the letter “e” in the word, *membre* and replaced it with an “a”. The resulting word *membra* is the feminine plural of the collective noun, *limbs*. In other copies of the poetry, the word is also *membra* (see Saslow: *Poetry of Michelangelo*, p. 121). The “e” is clearly a typographical error. Britten’s correction of this could indicate that he had another copy of the poetry available from an alternate source. It is more likely that when Pears and Elizabeth Mayer were preparing their translation of the poetry, they discovered the error, especially given Mayer’s facility with languages. However, the possessive pronoun in Symonds’ and Saslow’s editions of Michelangelo’s poetry is masculine singular form of *tuo*, meaning *your*. It is this pronoun which Pears sings in the Britten/Pears recording of the Sonnets. In the fair copy of the manuscript, the pronoun used is also the masculine form *tuo*. It is interesting that in the published score, the pronoun used is *tue*, the feminine plural form of the pronoun.

CHAPTER 5

THE MUSICAL COMPOSITION

In the musical composition, *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, Benjamin Britten used the subtlety of thought and complexity of character contained in Michelangelo’s poetry to create a moving set of songs which communicate one complete Platonic concept: the union of two souls. The choice of a renaissance poet writing on homosexual themes with references going back to the Greeks, provided not only the words, but a structure for the composer to express himself most effectively. This chapter will discuss specific elements of the musical composition including the arrangement of the different texts which comprise this thought.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Henry Boys suggests that Britten’s treatment of text follows principles that are typically Baroque and are tied either directly or indirectly to rhetorical concepts. He stated that melody and rhythm are not determined by the bar line, but by the shape
and meaning, movement and repose of the poetry, bringing both
"emotional and logical values to the words." ¹

In the book Feeling and Form, Suzanne Langer defines a universal
problem which must be addressed when a composer deals with text:

This above all is what the text must do in all music that is
based on words. [It must] motivate entirely new expressive
forms, musical instead of poetic.²

Especially in Britten’s setting of these sonnets, the text not only motivates
new expressive forms which are musical, but almost magical, and
coincidentally much like the uniquely expressive form of drawing which
Michelangelo used as his new self-expressive form. For the artists, it is the
form which brings both emotional and logical values to the words,
expressing a specifically programmed meaning.

TEXTUAL ARRANGEMENT

Britten’s arrangement of the texts does not follow any type of
chronological guideline, in fact the last sonnet (XXIV) is believed by some
to have been written in 1530, two years before any of the others. Instead,
his organization of the poetry seems to suggest a journey through a
romantic relationship. Each sonnet guides the traveler from one
experience to the next much like the stages of initiation into a sacred order or secretive fraternity.

The first sonnet (XVI) details the levels of accomplishment which the initiate can achieve. It states that “just as there is a high, a low, and a middle style in pen,” love also evokes multiple levels of feeling, according to a person’s ability to seek them out and accept them. It describes the relativity of pride and humility, and advises that tears and pains can accomplish many different things. However, the sonnet warns that whoever approaches this “high beauty” (the successful union of two souls) with a lack of conviction and doubt, will find “sure and bitter pain” rather than their soul’s bliss.

As the proverbial journey begins, the second sonnet (XXXI) confronts the acceptance of the fate which binds one soul to another, especially the death of individuality. The poet argues “why should I long for death since all must die?” Death can have many meanings, but in this context is probably an indication of surrender to the love felt for the other soul, the fate that these two should be together. The poem concludes with: “if to be happy, I must be conquered, no wonder I, naked and alone (defenseless) remain the prisoner of a Cavalier in arms.” In the Platonic sense, the souls must be joined in order to find the true happiness.
The third sonnet (XXX) continues this thought and carries a theme of total surrender to beauty, the beauty found in trust and acceptance. Confidence in this trust transports the one who accepts it to a higher level of being, a level which can only be attained by loving and being loved by another, uniting two souls so they take the same path through life. The poem states that it is only “with your spirit I move forever heavenward.” With this poem, the initiate has surrendered to or accepted the fate described in the second sonnet. The initiate reconciles that “my will is your will alone.”

The fourth sonnet (LV) continues the ritual and brings the initiate to the point of self-acceptance and doubt, which could be interpreted as the middle style of love referred to in the first poem. On this plane, the initiate, having come to terms with surrendering himself to the beloved, does not understand why there are still barriers between them, and questions why there are still unknown elements in the relationship. It is at this point, the initiate realizes that before he can reach the highest level, he must also have the commitment of the other soul. The statement which follows expresses, on many levels, one of the most powerful messages of the selected poetry:
That which in thy lovely face, I yearn for and seek to grasp, is but ill understood by human kind, and he that would see it, first must die.

This passage describes for Michelangelo, Britten, the initiate, and the other soul, the struggle one experiences when faced with accepting one’s own homosexuality. At the point of acceptance, a symbolic death occurs; a death which transports one into an unknown world of physical and emotional dimensions. Once the choice is made to enter that realm, there is no way of returning to the innocence of the previous world. For the initiate, it is the blissful world he experienced in the third sonnet.

In the context of a relationship, death is the surrender to the other individual and the sanctity of that relationship. It is ill understood by human kind because they are not a part of it, it is highly personal and only the two individuals involved can partake in the experience. However, before the union of the two souls is complete, both parties must first accept their own sexuality and secondly, totally surrender to the other soul, and, commit to the relationship.

The initiate realizes that he has reached this point of no return, that he can not go back and now, must convince the other soul to join him. For Britten, it is certainly the turning point of this cycle. The next sonnet shows a totally different bearing for the initiate.
In the fifth sonnet (XXXVIII) the initiate confronts fear. After he has committed to this relationship and exposed himself, he becomes insecure about the other soul’s acceptance and commitment of the relationship. He realizes emotionally that he has crossed the point of no return, yet he pleads with nature to give him back all that has led him to this point in this love, the sighs, the glances, the tears, and any sounds he has made, (all things which can never be returned). He wants these emotions back so that he may love another, since the other soul’s commitment is in question.

The sixth sonnet (XXXII) is the initiate’s realization that it is now he who must provide strength and support for the other soul. He must convince the other soul to commit to the relationship. By itemizing the rewards of the relationship: “one spirit ruling two hearts,” “two bodies made eternal in one soul,” “mutual pleasure and delight,” and the strength of the bond itself; he presents his argument in such a strong way for the success of the union, that even the cruelest of emotions, anger, is powerless to break or dissolve the bond they have.

The seventh sonnet (XXIV) is the achievement of the goal, through the surrender of self by both souls, the impenetrable union of the two soul’s has been achieved. It describes the fulfillment of all that can
naturally be achieved within the union of two people. Once that plane or level of love is reached, the “paragon” of their works, nothing, including “laws, earthly governments or any form of cruelty can prevent death from sparing such beauty.” Surely this refers to the immortality of beauty (love) that was guarantied by Zeus in the story of Ganymede.

The discussion will continue this analogy of a ritualistic initiation, giving specific musical examples of the way Britten sets the text to convey his unifying message. Since the poetry is expressed in the vocal line, the vocal music will represent the initiate.

SONETTO XVI

In the first song, the text is introduced by a fanfare, as if to announce a journey. The piano begins with a descending three note figure which rises to an accented chord on the first beat of the first full measure. This rhythmic figure is common in trumpet fanfares. The text in measure 5, states that “Si come nella penna e nell’inchiostro, E l’alto e l basso e l mediocre stile” or “There comes from pen and ink, a high, a low and middle style” (Figure 5.1). Melodically, Britten paints the text by beginning the vocal line on a relatively low note for the tenor, F-sharp, and
extending the melody through the middle range before the line jumps to the highest pitch in the phrase, A-natural.

Figure 5.1: Sonetto XVI, mm. 1-7.

It is possible to suggest that the highest note, the A-natural, is intended to be the pinnacle of the Phaethon drawing (Figure 1.3), symbolizing Zeus astride the eagle. This note confidently maintains its position above the descending vocal line. The poet's caution of looking on the high beauty with tears and lamentations is underscored in the piano with the fanfare-
like figure (Figure 5.2). The text is “Chi mira altà belta con si gran
duolo” or “Whoever looks on high beauty with so great a grief.”

![Musical notation]

Figure 5.2: Sonetto XVI, mm. 41-42.

The first song ends with the vocal part repeating the words found in
measure 18, “Signor, mie car” or “Signor, my dear one” (Figure 5.3).
This is the only text of the sonnet which Britten repeats.
He uses the same melodic figure for these words as he did for describing the low high and middle styles in pen (Figure 5.1). The specific notes for this textual repetition are the same ones he used in describing the "high" style that comes from the pen (Figure 5.4, m. 47).
The song concludes with the piano playing a descending melodic figure which finishes on the lowest note on the keyboard, an A-natural. This is a symbolic gesture that the journey on which the vocalist is beginning starts at the bottom, the lowest level, from which one must rise above. This falling melodic figure could also be a musical representation of Phaethon’s fall (Figure 1.3).

SONETTO XXXI

The second song begins in the key of C-minor, a minor third higher than where the first song ended. The voice begins without the support of the piano, a gesture which can be incorporated into the journey of the initiate analogy, that the journey always begins alone. The piano enters on the next beat and with a syncopated rhythm, helps to propel the motion of the singer or the initiate on his journey (Figure 5.5).
Figure 5.5: Sonetto XXXI, mm. 1-4.

The four measure phrases of the vocal line rise and fall melodically and explore chromatic passages as if asking the question of “why one should accept this fate?” The lines of the poem offer an explanation with the words “Dunque per queste Luci l’ore del fin fian men moleste” or “So to these eyes the final hour will be less painful.” The voice at this point sings firmly in E-major, alternating between G-sharp and B-natural. The piano, however alternates between the G-sharp and G-natural (Figure 5.6) which changes the harmony of the chord from major to minor. The effect is similar to the sigh of someone who can not make up their mind.

The dotted rhythm in the vocal part which begins in measure one (Figure 5.5) and continues throughout the song could be a musical representation of the Michelangelo’s eagle, perpetually devouring Tityus’ liver (Figure 1.2). This perpetual dotted rhythm “pecks” throughout the entire song.
SONETTO XXX

In the third song, the journey continues with the acceptance of total dependence upon the beloved. Britten conveys this ingeniously by using the piano to give the vocal line its total support. The marking is pianissimo, and "always sustained." When the vocal line states that "veggioco' bei vosti occhi un dolce lume" or "with your eyes I see a light," the piano in its sustaining part, sings a rising figure that illumines the melody.

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Figure 5.7: Sonetto XXX, mm. 1-16.
When the vocal line continues the thought with “che co’ miei ciechi gia veder non posso” or “that with my blind one’s I can not yet see,” the piano part returns the same melodic figure to the depths from which it began (Figure 5.7).

For the first eighteen measures of the song, the left hand of the piano plays a root position major chord on both strong beats (1, 4) of the measure in a pedal fashion, while the right hand offers the upward and downward movements just described. In measure 19, on the fourth beat, the harmony changes from A-major to A-minor and in measure 20, the chord in the left hand of the piano changes to a second inversion position (Figure 5.8). The words during this harmonic transition are “che de’ mie’ zoppi non è già costume” or “that because of my crippled legs, you are already accustomed to carrying.” The transition occurs specifically on the word “già” or “already” (Figure 5.8, measure 19).
Figure 5.8: Sonetto XXX, mm. 17-24.

The piano seems to be tritely painting text in measure 20, with an ascending melodic passage leading to the words of “Volo con le vost’ale senza piume” or “on your wings, I wingless fly,” but, Britten displays his genius here by showing that the ascending figure seen in measure 5 (Figure 5.9), is actually the flight referred to in measure 20. The dependent flight on the wings of the other soul was “already” happening, it was the melodic basis for the entire composition.
Figure 5.9: Sonnet XXX, mm. 5-8.

The symbolism found in the change of the chord position referred to in measure 20, indicates that something else was also "already" happening. The harmonic journey representing the weight being carried first makes its presence known in the second half of measure 14 (Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10: Sonetto XXX, mm. 14-16.
It is not complete until it has traveled through the A-minor chord of measure 19, “redistributing” its weight by changing to a second inversion chord position in measure 20 (Figure 5.11).

![Music notation](image)

**Figure 5.11**: Sonnet XXX, mm. 19-20.

When the harmony first changes on the word “pondo” or “weight”, it draws attention to the fact that, without realizing it, the weight has been sitting there in the form of the same G-major chord which had not changed for the first thirteen measures (Figure 5.7). The initiate was so taken by the freedom of flight in the melody that he didn’t even realize that the weight was also being carried.
To insure that the weight didn’t go totally un-noticed, Britten draws attention to the word “pondo” or “weight” by repeating it. It is the word repetition in measure 15 (Figure 5.10), which is the impetus for the harmonic journey leading to the chord’s (weight’s) redistribution in measure 20 (Figure 5.11).

In measure 25, the words “Col vosstr’ingegnoal ciel sempre son mosso” or “with your spirit I move forever heavenward,” give Britten the impetus to change the chord position once again, this time to a first inversion position (Figure 5.12, m. 27).

Figure 5.12: Sonetto XXX, mm. 25-32.
The voice is literally suspended on the third of the e-minor chord, a ‘G’, floating in the center of the harmony. The words which have caused this painful suspension are “Dal vostr’ arbitrio” or “at your wish” (m. 28). At the wish of the accompaniment (Figure 5.12, m. 31), the suspension is released and the harmony moves to an E-flat major tonality.

On the second beat of measure 39 (Figure 5.13), the flight seems to have stopped and the harmony becomes firmly grounded or possibly “weighed down” with solid B-major chords in both the right and left hand. The left-hand of the accompaniment plays an open fifth and the right hand now plays the full chord. Once again, the vocalist is trapped in the middle of the chord, this time singing a d-sharp, and in a major harmony almost as if in submission. The words reflect this sentiment, “nel voler vostro e sol la voglia mia” or “only in your will can my will be found.” Musically, this is symbolic of the Platonic concept that strength and depth of love come from surrendering one’s own will and trusting in the will of the other.
Figure 5.13: Sonetto XXX, mm. 37-45.

The vocal line at this time for the only point in the entire cycle has the dynamic markings of triple piano (Figure 5:13, m. 39). A strong argument can be made that Britten is trying to make the vocal line almost imperceptible within the strong foundational chord structure of the piano, further expressing the total surrender of one will to the other. It also illuminates Britten’s subtle shading of meaning in the text.
The vocal line in measure 39 begins on the third beat of this 6/4 measure (Figure 5.13). Compare this to the vocal line in measures 2 and 7 (Figures 5.14 and 5.15) where the vocal line begins on beat 4.

Figure 5.14: Sonetto XXX, m. 2.

Figure 5.15: Sonetto XXX, mm. 7-8.
In measure 7 (Figure 5.15), Britten delays a complete G-major tonality by suspending the pitch “F” in the right hand over the first two beats, resolving to “G” on the weak third beat. The vocalist then sings on beat four. The piano part uses the non-harmonic figure of an “anticipation” preceding the entrance of the vocal line. This is accomplished by the piano playing a “G” on beat 3 of the measure, which the vocalist then sings on beat 4. Musically, the piano is literally helping the vocalist find his note, which comes from the rising line of the piano’s melody. Therefore, the vocalist has figuratively “seen a sweet light” through the piano’s eyes that, “with his blind one’s he could not have otherwise seen.”

However, in measure 39 (Figure 5.13), it is the vocalist who “anticipates” the piano’s entrance. On beat 3 of the measure, the vocal line humbly begins (triple piano) on the note of D-sharp, which is the third of the piano’s chordal harmony. The piano does not play that note in it’s chord until beat 4 of the measure. Although still in his place, suspended on the third of the chord, the vocalist takes the initiative to anticipate the direction of the flight. The initiate realizes that “nel voler vostro è sol la voglia mia” or “In your will alone, is mine found,” rather than simply being carried, he actively joins the flight. For the remainder of the song, the piano never again anticipates the vocalist’s entrance.
Britten’s musical description in Sonetto XXX is the exact same description found pictorially in Michelangelo’s sketch of *The Rape of Ganymede* (Figure 1.1). Like Michelangelo’s drawing, the picture Britten paints contains elements of pain, but is also one of surrender, serenity, acceptance and flawless beauty.

SONETTO LV

If the traveler’s analogy is continued into the fourth sonnet, one can see that the vocal line is very awkward in its coordination with the accompaniment, that something is a little off. Britten achieves this by the accented syncopation in the piano and the strongly consistent beat of the vocal line. He also makes it difficult for the vocal line by giving the singer many words to sing on very short notes (Figure 5.16).
There is also almost a sense of bi-tonality between the two parts, possibly insinuating that even though they are joined, they have differences. The E-natural is a non-harmonic tone in B-flat major which also adds to the tonal instability. In fact, the E-natural is the tone farthest from the B-flat tonic, the tritone. This is a relationship that Britten commonly used to represent distance. The non-harmonic E-natural is also constantly resolving in the piano to the consonant “D,” the third of the chord. This is the same resolution found on the word “caro” or “dear one” in measure 20 (Figure 5.17). The mood changes in measure 19 when a single key center emerges on the words “S’i ‘amo soldite signor mie caro, Quel che di te più ami, non ti sdegni” or “If I love only in you, my beloved what you love most, don’t be angry with me” the explanation is then given that “that is how to one spirit the other is enamored.”
At this point (Figure 5.18, m. 25), the right hand of the piano has a wonderful ascending line which almost detaches itself from the left hand’s rhythmic pattern and flies to both a literal and figurative new height when the line ends on a high ‘C’, the highest note played so far in the cycle.
It is at this point that the rhythmic agitation stops and the vocal line and piano part are in harmony. The text is what was described earlier as the turning point in the organization of the cycle, "Quel che nel tuo bel volto bramo e 'mparo, E mal compres' è degli umani in gengni" or "That which in your lovely face, I seek to embrace and grasp, is ill understood by human kind" (Figure 5.19).

![Musical notation]

Figure 5.19: Sonetto LV, mm. 27-28.

Britten uses a very declamatory style of recitative to give the vocalist all of the control in asserting this idea. He also uses the expressive markings of "piu lento e tranquillo" or "slower and tranquil," but in the final words of the phrase (m. 30), "Chi'l vuol veder, convien che prima mora" or "He that would see it, first must die," he returns to the agitation and unsettled feeling of the beginning of the song (Figure 5.20).
The sudden return to the agitation could represent the initiate chastising the other soul for not making the commitment which he has already made.
SONETTO XXXVIII

Sonnet XXXVIII was referred to earlier as being beyond the point of no return in Britten’s organization of the text, when the initiate realized that although he might want to go back, he can not. I believe that the analogy holds true in the musical setting of the sonnet and that Britten creates the mood of a serenade to represent a time when the love was more inviting, and perhaps less painful. Musically, the piano figure represents the strumming of a guitar (Figure 5:21).

Figure 5.21: Sonetto XXXVIII, mm. 5-8.

Britten gives instructions to the pianist to play it without any sustaining pedal, and always with the soft pedal. Although the text certainly indicates a longing to take back the emotions and feelings, it is presented musically with an almost comfortable feeling of the serenade. Perhaps Britten is
representing the same perpetual pecking that Michelangelo presented in Tityus in the musical form of an inviting serenade. In the piano part, there is a constant sounding of the eighth-note rhythm (Figure 5.21). This musical pecking occurs on every beat of every measure of the song until six measures from the end (Figure 5.22, m. 60).

Figure 5.22: Sonetto XXXVIII, mm. 57-65.

The pecking becomes most forceful in measure 59 as the words of the text convey the message of “di me non ti contenti” or “with me you are not content.” The specific word is “ti” a pronoun for “you”. The vocal line
sustains this word and the pitch while the piano stops its pecking for the
first time in measure 60. The vocal line falls in measure 61 to find that it
is totally alone and without support until it moves to the word contentment
(contenti) in measure 62 and the piano resumes its serenade. The song ends
with the piano part quoting the ending of the first song (Figure 5.4) which
has an arpeggiated figure that ends on the lowest possible note on the
keyboard (Figure 5.22, m. 65).

The closing of this song is a reminder that even though the other soul
is “not content” with the initiate, that the other alternative is to be all alone,
represented musically in measures 61, with the fall of the vocal line. As if
to further punctuate this point, the piano ends at the bottom of the
keyboard, a musical representation of Phaethon’s fall (Figure 1.3).

SONETTO XXXII

It is not at all surprising that the sixth song, Sonetto XXXII has quite
a different mood and seems almost frantic, as if the other soul, represented
by the piano is trying to avoid this fatal fall, perhaps this is a musical
representation of the wild ride Phaethon experienced while driving the sun
god's chariot (Figure 1.3). The vocal line always seems to be one step ahead of the piano and offers an argumentative dialogue.

The active piano solo begins with a syncopated rhythm, as if trying to escape from something (Figure 5.23).

Figure 5.23: Sonetto XXXII, mm. 1-4.

But, the vocal line enters in measure 5, and takes control by starting on the downbeat of the measure, ever so slightly before the piano (Figure 5.24).
Figure 5.24: Sonetto XXXII, mm. 5-6.

The vocal line presents its case, stating all sorts of arguments and suddenly the piano part comes to a halt in measure 8 (Figure 5.25).

Figure 5.25: Sonetto XXXII, mm. 7-8.

Keeping the initiate analogy in mind, one can observe that, at the point when the vocal line assumes total control of the piece and the piano is silent, the text reads: "S’un spirto, s’un voler duo cor governa" or "one spirit, one will rules two hearts" (Figure 5.25, m. 8).
In measure 9 (Figure 5.26), the piano rushes away again but the repetition of the four measure phrase which was heard at the beginning is now confined to two measures and does not have the chance to slow down before the vocal line unexpectedly takes control, and once again silences the piano on the words “le viscerdi duo petti arda e discierna” or “love burns and pierces two hearts to the core” (Figure 5.27).
Harmonically, the accented chord in measure 14 of the piano part (Figure 5:27) has risen a whole step from the one which brought the piano to a halt in measure 8 (Figure 5.25). The tension is literally and musically rising. The song continues as if a compromise is being struck. The vocal line has made some headway in persuasion and the piano is beginning to agree (Figure 5:28).

![Musical notation]

Figure 5.28: Sonetto XXXII, mm. 17-18.

Britten accomplishes this by having the vocal line begin sympathetically with a syncopated rhythm (Figure 5.28, m. 17) which is more agreeable with the accompaniment, but still begins on the strong first beat. He also indicates a dynamic marking which is “meno forte” or “less loud.” The accompaniment concedes by playing during measure 18 where it rested
during measures 8 (Figure 5:25) and 14 (Figure 5:27). The piece is moving towards a compromise.

In measure 22 (Figure 5.29), the vocal line changes from a one measure phrase, which to this point has been consistent, to the extension of that phrase over the piano’s two measure phrase, which, as stated earlier is a truncation of the four measure phrase at the beginning (Figure 5.26), while the vocalist is augmenting the piano’s rhythm.

![Musical notation](image)

Figure 5.29: Sonetto XXXII, mm. 22-23.

The result is a much more legato vocal line which fits better with the acompañiment. For the vocal line, Britten indicates both the meaning of the song and the magic of the phrase with the marking of *espr.* on the words “se mille e mille non sarien centesmo” or “If thousands and thousands do not make one hundredth (of a part of this love’s bond).”
Musically, he has painted a floating vocal line which is reminiscent of the line in Sonetto XXX which referred to flight (Figure 5.30).

![Musical notation for Sonetto XXX, mm. 21-24.](image)

Figure 5.30: Sonetto XXX, mm. 21-24.

Britten paints an expressive line in which, the beauty of the flight felt in the third song is returned to the focus of the journey, and delivers this expressive metaphor as the closing statement in the argumentative conversation. This sensuous, floating melodic line delivers the message of Michelangelo’s *Ganymede* drawing: in surrendering to the love of the god or the other soul, one achieves immortality.

All that is left for the initiate to do is to quietly ask, “E sol l’isdegnio il può rompere e sciorre?” or “Can then, mere anger break or dissolve it?” (Figure 5.31). The piano line finishes as if it has run out of steam and no longer has an argument.
SONETTO XXIV

The final song brings to a close the journey of the initiate. Unlike the fanfare or declamatory nature of the first song which marked the commencement of the journey, the close is ceremonial in nature. As stated earlier, Michelangelo’s poetry describes the fulfillment of all that can naturally be achieved within the union of two people, that once that high plane or level of love is reached, the “paragon” of their works, nothing,
including laws, earthly governments or any form of cruelty can prevent death from sparing such beauty. Britten’s music elegantly conveys the same emotions.

Figure 5.32: Sonetto XXIV, mm. 1-9.
Britten sets this song beautifully with a slow, noble and refined piano introduction, which literally travels from the bottom of the keyboard to the top, in a musical recapitulation of the prosaic idea of a low middle and high style of love (Figure 5.32). The piano part surrenders to the vocal part at the highest point of the musical line, and the voice proclaims devotion and dedication to the “spirit ben nato” or “Noble spirit, in whose embodiment is reflected all that nature and heaven can achieve within us.” The term us indicates that the two have now totally joined, and through this union, they “are seen in the perfection of their works.” The same union seen in the Ganymede and Tityus sketches.

The high note for the vocal phrase is once again ‘A’. This is the same note in the first song which was symbolic of the high form of art: the pen; giving life to the poetry, the drawings, and the songs (Figure 5.1).

Britten allows the two character elements, piano and voice, to function independently. However, in the initiate analogy, perfection is only possible through the union of the two souls. One could conclude that because of the comfort felt in the total union, each individual has total freedom to express themselves without fear of loosing the other. For the first time in the composition, the voice has complete control and freedom to express itself, which is not bound by any sense of time or pianistic
intervention. Not only does the voice have this freedom, but the piano has the same liberty. Britten allows each to express levels of meaning which extend beyond the boundaries of words or presupposed convention. Michelangelo’s drawings expressed this same feeling, because in this confidence, one gives flight to the other.

Figure 5.33: Sonetto XXIV, mm. 27-31.

In measure 28 (Figure 5.33) the two performers join together for the first time in this song. The vocalist states that “L’amor mi prende, e la
bélta ni lega” or “Love takes me captive, and beauty binds me.” These two statements represent the central themes of Ganymede and Tityus and Britten’s music figuratively captivates the vocal line in the piano’s phrases. Britten uses these words to unite himself as a pianist, to Peter Pears as a vocalist, both literally, emotionally and metaphorically. He was bound by love for the person the artist, and most importantly, the soul.

On the first recording of Britten and Pears performing this song, one hears a young tenor proclaim the opening lines of this song, the only hesitancy is concern for the technical demands of the melody. In a recording housed in the Britten-Pears Library of a 1967 concert the two performed in Colon, one hears something much different. Britten’s piano solo gracefully leads to Pears entrance, but rather than the bold declaration of a young singer, Pears voice seems to literally “take flight” from the piano’s introduction; refined, mature and totally secure in the continuation of Britten’s musical thought. The two entities truly function musically as one.
Figure 5.34: Sonetto XXIV, mm. 40-46.

The song and the cycle end with the piano playing an ascending pattern which is similar to the opening of the song (Figure 5.34). But, before that final phrase begins, the initiate, captivated by love and bound by beauty, and most importantly, armed with hope, asks a question:

Qual uso o qual governo al mondo niega, Qual crudeltá per tempo, o qual più tardi, cà si bel viso morte non perdoni?

What law or earthly government, what cruelty now or to come, could forbid Death to spare such a lovely face?
The piano’s answer is the closing phrase, which, not bound by these physical limitations, ascends towards its spiritual goal.

\(^1\text{Op. Cit., Boys, p. 77.}\)

\(^2\text{Ibid., p. 155.}\)
CONCLUSION

In contemplating the role of pictorial and poetic influences in Benjamin Britten’s *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*, one realizes that these elements provided a cohesive structure around which Britten constructed a very personal and revelatory song cycle, a ceremonial gift that he presented to tenor, Peter Pears.

Given the historical facts of Britten and Pears’ lifelong devotion to each other, the particular choice in 1940 of the Michelangelo sonnets is amazingly prophetic. The parallels are astounding between a Renaissance artist writing poetry and drawing pictures in the sixteenth century for his new male companion and a twentieth century musician composing songs using the same text for his companion. Especially given the facts that both were in the infancy of their relationships when the masterpieces were created, and that both relationships continued until the death of the artists. Pears was by Britten’s bedside when he died just as Cavalieri was at Michelangelo’s bedside when he died. These coincidences are in themselves almost of mythical proportions.
In contemplating the role of mythology in the context of pictures, words, and music, and, the influence of these elements in Benjamin Britten’s compositional artistry; one must realize that for Michelangelo, the submissive Ganymede is not meant solely to represent the younger Cavalieri, but also Michelangelo himself, seen in this mythological representation as a beautiful and innocent figure ascending towards heaven on the wings of a much more powerful, established, omnipotent being.

I suggest that in the context of this study, the drawings represent not only Cavalieri, Michelangelo, Britten, and Pears, but on yet another, perhaps deeper level, the existence of homoeroticism for as long as time has existed, a continuum in which they were all willfully suspended.

Judith Testa concluded her article on Michelangelo’s drawings with the following statement:

These presentation drawings are at once a public display of intellect and artistic virtuosity, and a private labor or self-revelation and love: an accomplishment as complex as the man who created them.

Testa’s conclusion could be stated word for word in application to Britten, with the substitution of the single word, “composition” for “drawing,” isolating one of the few differences between these two legendary creative artists.
To my knowledge, there is no material evidence in existence which indicates that Benjamin Britten ever saw Michelangelo’s *presentation drawings.* However, the musical evidence is overwhelmingly supportive of the conclusion that he not only saw them, but understood their complex and secretive message. Inspired by these pictorial as well as poetical works of Michelangelo, Britten used his aural palate to paint a set of musical pictures for Peter Pears, similar to the drawings Michelangelo created for Tommaso Cavalieri.

In a letter dated Nov. 17, 1974, from Britten in Germany recovering from open heart surgery, to Pears who was making his Metropolitan Opera debut in New York in Britten’s *Death in Venice,* Britten expressed his feelings on hearing a rebroadcast on the BBC of one of the last concerts the two performed together. Consider the following phrases from Michelangelo’s poetry in the context of Britten, and in return, Pear’s words: “On your wings, I wingless fly; I see a sweet light with your eyes that with my blind ones I can not; my words are on your breath; my thoughts are born in your heart.”

My darling heart (perhaps an unfortunate phrase - but I can’t use any other) I feel I must write a squiggle which I couldn’t say on the telephone without bursting into those silly tears. I love you so terribly, not only glorious you, but your singing. I’ve just listened to a re-broadcast of Winter Words and honestly you are the greatest artist that ever was—every
nuance, subtle and never over-done--those Great words, so sad & wise, painted for one, that heavenly sound you make, full but always colored for words and music. What have I done to deserve such an artist and man to write for? I had to switch off before the folk songs because I couldn’t bear to hear anything after “how long, how long.”

Pear’s reply was sent just three days later:

No one has ever ever had a lovelier letter than the one which came from you today - You say things which turn my heart over with love and pride, and I love you for every single word you write. But you know, Love is blind - and what your dear eyes do not see is that it is you who have given me everything, right from the beginning, from yourself in Grand Rapids! through Grimes & Serenade & Michelangelo and Canticles - one thing after another, right up to this great Aschenbach - I am here as your mouthpiece and I live in your music - And I can never be thankful enough to you and to fate for all the heavenly joy we have had together for 35 years.

It is profoundly moving that thirty four years after Britten wrote the Michelangelo Sonnets for Pears, the same words appear mythologically in letters full of love between the two men. Britten describes words that he painted receiving their color, nuance, subtlety, and music in “that heavenly sound,” Pears’ singing. Britten’s words were sounded “on Pears’ breath,” his musical thoughts “born in Pears’ heart.” Pears saw that, which Britten, with his “dear blind eyes” could not see: that it was Britten who had “given him everything,” himself and his musical works of art.
Pears’ voice truly did live in Britten’s music, and Britten’s music lived in Pears’ singing. They were “two bodies made eternal in one soul, rising both to heaven on the same wings.”

In the preface to this document, it was stated that Britten received the Robert O. Anderson Aspen Award for the Humanities in 1964, and in his acceptance speech he stated the following:

I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds and personal relationships.⁵

Throughout the process of compiling this document, these words have been haunting. The form of the statement is strong; it is the only instance in the speech when Britten stated his beliefs. The itemization of these four specific entities is perplexing because they are somewhat similar. It was the distinction of their differences which provided the path to discovery.

A root is the part of the body from which all nourishment originates, it functions as a support network through which food is ingested and stored. It is the part by which a body is attached to something else.

An association is the union of partners, friends or companions closely related in the mind. It is an organization of persons having a common interest, a society. It can also be the process of forming mental connections or bonds between similar sensations, ideas or memories.

Background is an inconspicuous position; the conditions that form
the setting within which something is experienced: the circumstances or events antecedent to a phenomenon or development. It can also be the total of a person’s knowledge and experience.

A personal relationship is that which is carried on directly between two individuals; an aspect or quality that connects two or more parts as being or belonging to the same kind; a romantic or passionate attachment between two individuals.

Britten itemized these four beliefs because they are the most important elements of his music. For the Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo, this statement could not hold greater meaning. These songs are rooted in classical mythology, the metaphorical language of the emotions. Mythology provides the supportive roots which connect both Britten and Michelangelo to their emotions of love for another man. Britten and Michelangelo are certainly associated in the sense that they shared this common interest, and for Britten this association provided him a society in which he could form his mental connections between his sensations, ideas and imagination. Michelangelo’s poetry and drawings provided him a vehicle with which to explore the magical journey that occurs when two different souls join in association. His inconspicuous position of a young performer experimenting with the setting of Italian text for the first time,
formed the background setting within which a true phenomenon would occur. His personal relationship with Peter Pears was a romantic and passionate attachment between two individuals which would be the inspiration for and a testament of a lifetime in artistic mastery.

In his speech in Aspen, Britten described what he thought was important about art. At the conclusion of this discussion of the amazing parallels between Michelangelo and Britten it seems profoundly appropriate:

What is important in the Arts is not the scientific part, the analysable part of music, but the something which emerges from it but transcends it, which cannot be analysed because it is not in it, but of it. It is the quality which cannot be acquired by simply the exercise of a technique or a system: it is something to do with personality, with gift, with spirit. I quite simply call it magic, a quality which I value more than any other part of music...The magic comes only with the sounding of the music, with the turning of the written note into sound and it only comes (or comes most intensely) when the listener is one with the composer, either as a performer himself, or as a listener in active sympathy.⁶

Benjamin Britten’s *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* are songs about the union of two souls. Their personal and private message was inspired by Michelangelo’s artistry in combining words and drawings to express his own personal feelings. The magic in Benjamin Britten’s music comes from it because in it he shares his feelings; human feelings which allow the composer and performer to be born aloft on the same wings, to experience
a magical journey through association, two bodies made eternal in one soul through the music of human feelings, moods and thoughts. One inspiring the other to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.


2 See Note 20 in Chapter 3.


4 Ibid., p. 61, Note: Italicized mine, underlining by Pears.


6 Ibid., p. 17.
APPENDIX

DEGREE PERFORMANCES

DOUGLAS W. BOLIN, TENOR

Performance One:  Recital
                 November 30, 1994
                 Weigel Hall Auditorium
                 The Ohio State University

Performance Two:  Don Giovanni
                 Performing the Role of Don Ottavio
                 May 7, 1995
                 Weigel Hall Auditorium
                 The Ohio State University

Performance Three: Lecture Recital
                  Britten and Words:
A Framework for Musical Composition
                 January 16, 1996
                 Weigel Hall Auditorium
                 The Ohio State University

Performance Four: Chamber Recital
                 June 30, 1996
                 Weigel Hall Auditorium
                 The Ohio State University

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APPENDIX

SUPPLEMENTARY SONNETS
CONSIDERED BY BRITTEN BUT NOT INCLUDED
IN SEVEN SONNETS OF MICHELANGELO

SONETTO XXII

Se nel volto per gli occhi il cor si vede,
altro segno non ho più manifesto
della mie fiamma; addunche basti or questo,
signor mie caro, a domandar mercede.
Forse lo spirto tuo, con maggior fede
ch’i’ non credo, che sguarda il foco onesto
che m’arde, fie di me pietoso e presto,
come grazia c’abbonda a chi ben chiede.
O felice quel dì, se questo è certo!
Fermisi in un momento il tempo e l’ore,
il giorno e ‘l sol nella su’ antica traccia;
acciò ch’i’ abbi, e non già per mie merto,
il desiato mie dolce signore
per sempre nell’indegne e protre braccia.

SONNET XXII

If through the eyes the heart speaks clear and true,
I have no stronger sureties than these eyes
For my pure love. Prithee let them suffice,
Lord of my soul, pity to gain from you.
More tenderly perchance than is my due,
Your spirit sees into my heart, where rise
The flames of holy worship, nor denies
The grace reserved for those who humbly sue.
Oh Blessed day when you at last are mine!
Let time stand still, and let noon’s chariot stay;
Fixed be that moment on the dial of heaven!
That I may clasp and keep, by grace divine,
Clasp in these yearning arms and keep for aye
My heart’s loved lord to me desertless given!
SONETTO LIX

Sol pur col foco il fabbro il ferro stende
al concetto suo caro e bel lavoro,
né senza foco alcuno artista l’oro
al sommo grado suo raffina e rende;

né lunica fenice sé riprende
se non prim’arsa; ond’io s’ardendo moro,
spero più chiar resurger tra coloro
che morte accresce e ’l tempo non offende.

Del foco, di ch’i’ parlo, ho gran ventura
c’ancore per rinnovarmi abbi in me loco,
sendo già quasi nel numer de’ morti.

O ver, s’al cielo asende per natura,
al suo elemento, e ch’io converso in foco
sie, come tie che seco non mi porti?

SONNET LIX

It is with fire that blacksmiths iron subdue
unto fair form, the image of their thought:
Nor without fire hath any artist wrought
Gold to its utmost purity of hue.

Nay, nor the unmatched phoenix lives anew,
Unless she burn: if then I am distraught
By Fire, I may to better life be brought
Like those whom death restores nor years undo.

The fire whereof I speak, is my great cheer;
Such power it hath to renovate and raise
Me who was almost numbered with the dead;

And since by nature fire doth find is sphere
Soaring alight, and I am all ablaze,
Heavenward with it my flight must needs be sped.\(^{\text{ii}}\)

\(^{\text{i}}\) Translation by Symonds, p. 53.

\(^{\text{ii}}\) Transalation by Symonds, p. 95. Saslow suggests this poem was written for Cavalieri (p. 157).
APPENDIX

TEXT OF MICHELANGELO’S SONNETS USED IN BRITTEN’S
SEVEN SONNETS OF MICHELANGELO

English Translation by Peter Pears and Elizabeth Mayer

SONETTO XVI

Si come nella penna e nell’inchiostro
è l’alto e ‘l basso e ‘l mediocre stile,
E ne’ marmi l’immagin ricca e vile,
secondo che ‘l sa trar l’ingegno nostro;
Così signor mie car, nel petto vostro,
quante l’orgoglio è forse ogni atto umile;
Ma io sol quel c’a me proprio è e simile
ne traggo, come fuor nel viso mostro.

Chi semina sospir, lacrime e doglie,
(l’umor dal ciel terrestre, schietto e solo,
a vari semi vario si converte),
però pianto e dolor ne miete e coglie;
Chi mira alta beltà con sì gran duolo,
dubbie speranze, e pene acerbe e certe.

SONNET XVI

Just as there is a high, a low, and a middle style in pen
and ink, and as within the marble are images rich and poor,
according as our fancy knows how to draw them forth:
so within your heart, dear love, there are perhaps, as well as
pride, some humble feelings: but I draw thence only what is my
desert and like to what I show outside on my face.

Whoever sows sighs, tears and lamentations (Heaven’s moisture
on earth, simple and pure, adapts itself differently to different
seeds) reaps and gathers grief and sadness:
whoever looks on high beauty with so great a grief reaps
doubtful hopes and sure and bitter pain.
SONETTO XXXI

A che più debb’i’ omai l’intensa voglie
sfo gar con piaati o con parole meste,
se di tal sorte ‘l ciel, che l’alma veste,
tard’ o per tempo alcun mai non ne spoglia?

A che ‘l cor lass’a più morir m’invoglia,
s’altri pur dee morir? Dunque per queste
Luci l’ore del fin fian men moleste
Ch’ogn’ altro ben val men ch’ogni mia doglia.

Però se’l colpo, ch’io ne rub’ e’n volo,
Schifar no poss’ almen, s’è destinato
Chi entreran fra la dolcezza e’l duolo?

Se vint’ e pres’ i’ debb’ esser beato
Maraviglia non è se’ nud’ e solo,
Resto prigion d’un Cavalier armato.

SONNET XXXI

Why must I go on venting my ardent desire in tears and
melancholy words, if Heaven that dresses the soul in grief,
ever, never or late, allows relief?

Why should my weary heart long for death since all must die?
So to these eyes my last hours will be less painful, all my
grief being greater than any joy.

If, therefore, I cannot avoid these blows, nay even seek them,
since it is my fate, who is the one that stands always between
joy and grief?

If to be happy I must be conquered and held captive, no wonder
then that I, unarmmed and alone, remain the prisoner of a Cavalier
in arms.
SONETTO XXX

Veggio co' bei vostri occhì un dolce lume
Che co' miei ciechi già veder non posso;
Porto co' vostri piedi un pondo a dosso,
Che de' mie' zoppi non è già costume;

Volo con le vostr'ale senza piume;
Col vostr' ingegno al ciel sempre son mosso;
Dal vostr' arbitrio son pallido e rosso;
freddo al sol, caldo alle più fredde brume.

Nel voler vostro è sol la veglia mia,
I miei pensier nel vostro cor si fanno,
Nel vostro fiato son le mie parole.

Come luna da sè sol par chi' io sia;
Chè gli occhi nostri in ciel veder non sanno
Se non quel tanto che n'accende il sole.

SONNET XXX

With your lovely eyes I see a sweet light that yet with my blind
ones I cannot see; With your feet I carry a weight on my back which with my lame ones I
cannot; with your wings I, wingless,
fly; with your spirit I move forever heavenward; at your wish
I blush or turn pale, cold in the sunshine, or hot in the
coldest midwinter.

My will is in your will alone, my thoughts are born in your
heart, my words are on your breath.

Alone, I am like the moon in the sky which our eyes cannot see
save that part which the sun illumines.
SONETTO LV

Tu sa' ch'io so, signior mie, che tu sai
ch' i venni per goderti più da presso;
E sai ch' i so, che tu sa' ch' i son desso:
a che più indugio a salutarci omai?

Se vera è la speranza che mi dai,
se vero è 'l buon desio che m' è concesso,
rompasi il mur fra l' uno e l' altro messo,
ché doppio forza hann' i celati guai.

S' i' amo sol di te, signor mie caro,
quel che di te più ami, non ti sdegni,
ché l' un dell' altro spirto s' innamora.

Quel che nel tuo bel volto bramo e 'mparo,
e mal compres' è degli umani ingegni,
Chi'l vuol veder, convien che prima mora.

SONNET LV

Thou know' st, beloved, that I know thou know' st that I am
come nearer to enjoy thee more; and thou know' st that I know
thou know' st that I am still the same. Why, then, do I
hesitate to greet thee?

If the hope thou givest me is true, if true the strong desire
that is granted me, the wall between us crumbles, for secret
grievances have double force.

If I love in thee, beloved, only what thou lovest most, do not
be angry; for so one spirit is enamoured of another.

That which in thy lovely face I yearn for and seek to grasp,
is but ill understood by human kind, and he that would see it,
first must die.
SONETTO XXXVIII

Rendetegli occhi miei, o fonte o fiume,
L’onde della non vostra e salda vena,
che più v’innalza e cresce, e con più lena
che non è ‘l vostro naturale costume.

E tu, folt’air, che ’l celeste lume
tempi a tristi occhi, de’ sospir miei piena,
rendigli al cor mio lasso, e rasserenatua scura faccia al mio visivo acume.

Renda la terra I passi alle mie piante,
Ch’ancor l’erba germogli che gli è tolta;
E’l suono Ecco, già sorda a’ miei lamenti;

Gli sguardi a gli occhi miei tuo luce sante,
Ch’io possa altra bellezza un’ altra volta,
Amar, po’ che di me non ti contenti.

SONNET XXXVIII

Give back to my eyes, you fountains and rivers, the waves of these strong currents that are not yours, which make you swell and grow with greater power than is your natural way.

And thou, heavy air, that dims the heavenly light to my sad eyes, so full of my sighs art thou, give them back to my weary heart and lighten thy dark face to my eye’s keen sight.

Earth, give me back my footsteps that the grass may sprout again where it was trod; and Echo, yet deaf to my laments, give back thy sound; and you blest pupils give back to my eyes their glances;

that I another time may love another beauty, since with me you are not satisfied.
SONETTO XXXII

S’un caso amor, s’una pictà superna,
s’una fortuna infra dua amanti equale,
s’un’ aspra sorte all’un dell’altro cale,
s’un spirto, s’un voler duo cor governa;

S’un anima in duo corpi è fatta eterna,
ambo levando al cielo e con pari ale;
s’Amor d’un colpo e d’un dorato strale
le viscer di duo petti arda e discerna;

S’amar l’un l’altro e nessun se medesmo,
d’un gusto e d’un diletto, a tal mercede
c’a un fin voglia l’uno e l’altro porre:

Se mille e mille, non sarien centesmo
a tal nodo d’amore, a tanta fede;
e sol l’isdegno il può rompere sciorre.

SONNET XXXII

If love be chaste, if pity heavenly, if fortune equal
between two lovers; if a bitter fate is shared by both, and
if one spirit, one will rules two hearts;

if in two bodies one soul is made eternal, rising both to
heaven on the same wings; if at one stroke and with a gilded
arrow love burns and pierces two hearts to the core;

if in loving one another, forgetting one’s self, with one
pleasure and one delight there is such reward that both wills
strive for the same end;

if thousands and thousands do not make one hundredth part
to such a bond of love, to such constancy, can then, mere anger break and dissolve it?
SONETTO XXIV

Spirto ben nato, in cui si specchia e vede
Nelle tue belle membra oneste e care
Quante natura e 'l ciel tra no' può fare,
Quand' a null' altra suo bell' opra cede:

Spirto leggiadro, in cui si spera e crede
Dentro, come di fuor nel viso appare,
Amor, pietà, mercè; così si rare
Che ma' furn' in bella contanta fede:

L'amor mi prende, e la beltà mi lega;
La pietà, la mercè con dolci sguardi
Ferma speranz' al cor par che ne doni.

Qual uso o qual governo al mondo nèga,
Qual crudeltà per tempo, o qual più tardi,
ca sì bel viso morte non perdoni?

SONNET XXIV

Noble soul, in whose chaste and dear limbs are reflected all
that nature and heaven can achieve with us, the paragon of their
works:

graceful soul within whom one hopes and believes Love, Pity
and Mercy are dwelling, as they appear in your face; things so rare and never found in
beauty so truly:

Love takes me captive, and Beauty binds me; Pity and Mercy with
sweet glances fill my heart with a strong hope.

What law or earthly government, what cruelty now or to come,
could forbid Death to spare such a lovely face?


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